

“Strangely Familiar: Marvin Cone and the Circus.”¹

Andrea Kann

“Art’s qualities must be sought beneath the surface appearances,” Marvin Cone often told his students at Coe College.² The hidden complexity these words suggest might describe Cone himself. On the surface, he appeared to be the painter next door. Cone lived most of his life in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, graduating from Coe College and later teaching there for more than 40 years.³ As an artist, Cone is often labeled a Regionalist, yet only a small portion of his oeuvre might be categorized as such. The public demanded barns and landscapes from Marvin Cone—awards, requests, and praise in reviews, newspaper accounts, and letters reveal that these paintings were among Cone’s most popular throughout his career.⁴ Cone’s work, however, encompasses more than these rural Midwestern scenes.

In fact, Cone’s career trajectory may be characterized by a series of distinct subjects. His impressionistic views of France in the 1920s were inspired by his early travels there, including journeys with the military and his friend Grant Wood. “When I began teaching at Coe,” Cone said, “I became interested in still life, then came clouds, circus and carnival pictures, old barns—and the last few years I’ve been monkeying around with material that people speak of

¹ My thanks to Sean Ulmer for his assistance and insightful feedback, and to the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art for their support of this project. I also am grateful to Sara Pitcher of the Coe College Archives, who, like Sean, is always willing to pull out another box. Robert Kocher generously shared his reminiscences of Cone and the Coe Art Department, for which I am very grateful. Thanks also are due to Jennifer Rogers, Cynthia Bland, Annette Lermack, and Sharon Kann who are always ready to read and listen.

² From a 1940s lecture titled “Art and Personality, reprinted in: Joseph Czestochowski, *Marvin D. Cone: Art As Self-Portrait* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, 1989) 217.

³ Cone began teaching French in 1919, but almost immediately started offering drawing classes. See: *Coe College Courier*, Centennial Edition, Vol. 52:2 (December 1951) 35.

⁴ Witness this letter from Mary Jessop of Jackson Heights, NY from March 13, 1946: “Dear Mr. Marvin Cone, Kindly send me 1/12th of a dozen red barns... There is a place in my home that is crying for a red barn, to say nothing of the place in my heart. And it would have to have chickens, one straying away from the others—as in Jane’s picture.”(CRMA Archives).

as haunted houses.”⁵ By the end of Cone’s career, the haunted houses had begun to share space with intriguing abstracts—seemingly quite different, but beneath the surface, structurally similar to what had come before. Paintings like *Housing Problem No. 3* demonstrate this transition, straddling the liminal zone between representation and abstraction as stairs and doors are absorbed into pure form.



Marvin Cone, *Housing Problem No. 3*, 1959-1960

This essay, however, takes a deeper look at one particular phase of Cone’s career—his circus and sideshow images, created between 1934 and 1945. Though Cone was a longtime fan of the circus,⁶ these renderings go beyond mere description of the world of the Big Top. Indeed, the circus images both reveal and conceal a far more intimate glimpse of the artist than is evident in many of his other works. In exploring the topsy-turvy world of the circus, Cone could work

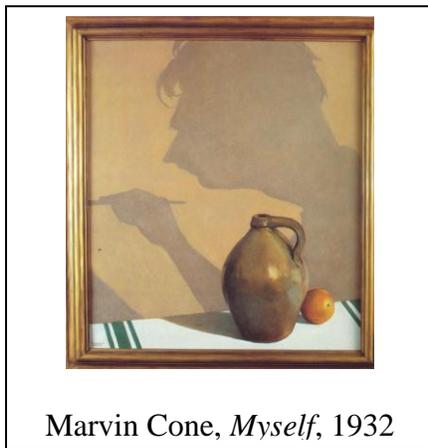
⁵ John Zug, “Marvin Cone,” *Iowan Magazine* (Spring 1970): 9.

⁶Czestochowski, 10, 29. Also, see: Hazel Brown, *Grant Wood and Marvin Cone: Artists of an Era* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1972) 128. Cone’s personal papers in the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art contain a number of clippings from magazines and newspapers that feature images of circus and sideshow life.

out the complex frustrations of life after the Depression and at the financially troubled college that featured in so much of his life. Furthermore, the complex compositional elements of these images allowed him to experiment with the slippage between representation and abstraction, making the circus images an important step in his development as an artist.

The circus was a popular subject for artists of the period, and not just because of its freakish denizens and colorful, dramatic scenery.⁷ In many ways, the circus offered a respite from pervasive social, political, and economic uncertainties of the time. When the circus came to town, the everyday lives and problems of Americans were suspended the moment they stepped into the Big Top or wandered past the sideshow stage. This 'world turned upside down' provided a safety valve for temporary relief from the pressures of life, allowing spectators to interact with performing "others" in new and unexpected ways.⁸ The circus, in effect, became a charged space where the normal order was set aside and the strange became familiar.

The seeds of Cone's circus paintings were sown before he ever put brush to Big Tops or clowns. Before Cone created the caricatures in paintings like *Educational Exhibit* or *Freaks*, he



looked into the mirror for 1932's *Myself*. Here, a simple still life occupies the foreground of the image, while behind looms a shadow portrait of the artist, brush in hand. The craggy brow, tumbling forelock of hair, and pointed nose are all slightly overemphasized while the chin seems to recede into the distorted line of the throat, yet all are

⁷ See, among many, the work of John Steuart Curry, Walt Kuhn, Everett Shinn, and Guy Pène du Bois. See, too, the catalog for *Circus in Paint*, a 1929 exhibit at the Whitney Studio Galleries, New York, and also: Donna Gustafson, *Images from the World Between: The Circus in 20th-Century American Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

⁸ The 'world turned upside down' of the circus has been compared to the medieval carnival which temporarily subverted normative expectations and hierarchies. This carnivalesque inversion of social roles was described by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984). For a discussion of these cultural interactions at the American circus, see: Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 25-36.

features which can be associated with Cone himself. It is the artist, and yet not—a blurring of lines between life and caricature, and a reminder that what is seen is by the eye is not always what is rendered by the artist. Indeed, Cone’s writings from the 1930s as well as newspaper interviews constantly emphasize his belief that “most people have the erroneous impression that art is mere reproduction of nature, while in truth it is the artist’s interpretation of some phase of life.”⁹ Here, then, a shadow self-portrait reveals a side of the artist that we may not otherwise know.



Marvin Cone, *Freaks*, 1935

⁹ “Mr. Cone Believes Art is Inspired By Surroundings,” *Coe College Cosmos*, April 16, 1931. See also Cone’s lecture “A Painter Thinks About Painting,” a speech given to the Arché Club in Chicago on March 12, 1937. He presented the same lecture at the Fifty-Sixth Commencement Exercises at Coe College, June 5, 1937. The lecture is reprinted in its entirety in: Czestochowski, 208-215. It also can be found on Microfilm Reel 1 of the Marvin Cone papers, 1908-1977, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The circus images also show us the unexpected, featuring the audience as part of the show. In paintings like *Freaks* and *The Snake Charmer*, the performers are clearly “Others” with their misshapen bodies, mask-like faces and exotic animals. More curious than the freaks onstage, however, are Cone’s depictions of the audience. Many in the crowd have facial features



Marvin Cone, Detail of Cone’s self-portrait in *Freaks*, 1935

distorted even more than those onstage, making them caricatures rather than representations of ordinary people. A curious addition to both paintings is the appearance of the artist’s visage on the lower left, sporting a clown-like reddened nose and looking out the corner of his eye as if torn between viewing the show or the world beyond the canvas. These self-portraits lead the viewer to

question where, exactly, the show is taking place. Because who are the real freaks here? The performers on stage? The audience with their distorted physiognomies? The self-image of a clown-like artist? Or is it really us, the viewers? Because some of these people look directly at us—as if we, too, are freaks to be stared at.



Marvin Cone, *Snake Charmer*, 1935



Marvin Cone, *Educational Exhibit*, 1936

One of the circus images, *Educational Exhibit*,¹⁰ may have resonated more deeply with Cone's personal situation at the time, as well as displaying his understated, yet characteristic sense of humor. At face value, this is a sideshow populated by a clown, snake charmer, and barker. Despite their role as entertainers, this trio seems more somber than joyful. The snake charmer is remarkably casual, her reptile calmly draped over her shoulders like a mink stole. The barker appears almost clownish with his oddly shadowed face and the suggestive placement of his hand between the legs of the Fat Lady in the hanging banner. In contrast with the barker's active pose, the clown on the far left rests awkwardly on a stool, his long arms and lanky hands dangling over spindly knees. Oddly, he is all in white, from face to clothing to the flesh stretched over his bony hands. As *Cedar Rapids Gazette and Republican* reporter Adeline Taylor noted in a 1936 exhibition review, "one visitor calls the white wraith-like clown...the

¹⁰ There has been some confusion about the dating of *Educational Exhibit*. In a card catalog of Cone's work in the CRMA archives (seemingly compiled later in his life) the painting is dated 1939. The wall label at Coe College also uses this date. However, exhibition records indicate the painting was shown in Chicago and at Coe as early as 1936.

most tragic figure she has ever seen.”¹¹ Curiously, all of the performers seem to have closed their eyes, unable or unwilling to see the masses that have come to view them.

This topsy-turvy world of the circus may have been an appealing subject for a man who was undergoing both personal and professional changes in addition to living through the turbulent Great Depression years. In 1934, Cone finally became a full professor of art at Coe College after years of sharing his instruction time between French, drawing, and painting.¹² Yet at the same time Cone reached this great professional accomplishment, his employer was struggling financially. Led by social science professor and school booster Charles Hickok, the faculty agreed to return growing percentages of their salaries to make up shortcomings in Coe’s operating budget.¹³ According to Hickok’s daughter, “he and Marvin Cone would laugh together when the college couldn’t even pay half a salary.”¹⁴ What could be more topsy-turvy than a college in which the faculty paid the Board of Trustees, rather than the other way around?

This period of financial strain must have had an impact on the day-to-day life of the college as well. One senses the pathos beneath the smile in 1932 when Coe president Henry Morehouse Gage writes in the yearbook: “It is now time for my annual joke, but I have none.”¹⁵ Only a few years later, Gage suggested that “our depression pains are as severe as any. But we

¹¹ Adeline Taylor, “Artistic Caricatures Attract Attention in Marvin Cone’s Show of Seventeen Paintings” *Cedar Rapids Gazette and Republican* (May 3, 1936) Section 2: 7.

¹² “Board of Trustees Re-elects Officers; Cone is Given Professorship of Painting and Drawing.” *Coe College Cosmos*, October 11, 1934. Cone initially was hired to teach French at Coe in 1919, but almost immediately began instruction in drawing.

¹³ At a special meeting of the Coe College Faculty on September 24, 1931, the faculty advisory budget committee noted: “It has been suggested that the faculty and all other employees of the college be requested to make substantial contributions out of their salary and earnings for current operating expenses of the college. We believe the loyalty of all employees is such that they would come to the aid of the college in this emergency.” (Minutes of the Meetings of the Coe College Faculty, September 24, 1931, Coe College Archives).

¹⁴ Roby Kessler’s memoir of her father Charles T. Hickok also notes that: “It was C.T.H. in 1933, when times were bad, who suggested that the faculty members take only half their salary.” Eliza Merrill “Roby” Hickok Kessler, *Dr. Charles T. Hickok: His Love Affair with Coe*. Ed. Jack Laugen, V.P. for Development (Coe College, 1980) 17.

¹⁵ Coe College, *The Acorn*, 1933 (although the statement is written and dated in 1932) 18.

can and do forget them.”¹⁶ While such struggles likely bound the campus population together, it also may have left behind a residue of stress. At a meeting in September 1939, President Gage even called for the faculty to be more civil to one another!¹⁷

There were topsy-turvy elements in Cone’s artistic life as well. A letter from good friend and long-time professional supporter Edward Rowan, former director of the Little Gallery in Cedar Rapids, points to some of the creative challenges Cone was experiencing at this moment:¹⁸

I was disappointed in your painting. My joy was great when I heard that you had gotten in. Your achievements and recognition will always be a source of interest and great personal pleasure to me, but the painting in the Corcoran is too derivative to be of any importance. My cruel thought when I saw it was ‘If he wants to imitate someone why doesn’t he pick out an artist.’ Several people not knowing you have asked me if I saw the Grant Wood referring to your work. I tell you this at the risk of your displeasure because I am interested in you as a creative artist and see that for a moment you have stepped from the path of your own truth.¹⁹

Rowan’s sharp criticism may have been a blow to Cone, who likely was already reeling from the grind of a heavy teaching load and the financial pressures of the last several years at Coe.

What, then, suggests *Educational Exhibit* might be a personal statement for Cone, perhaps more than the other circus imagery? The title itself offers an intriguing reference to

¹⁶ Coe College. *The Acorn*, 1935 (written and published by the Junior class of Coe College, copyright 1934) 10.

¹⁷ Minutes of Coe College faculty meeting, September 13, 1939: "The President closed his remarks with an urgent plea for cooperation among the members of the faculty." (Coe College Archives).

¹⁸ The letter is undated, but references a painting in a recent Corcoran Gallery exhibit, suggesting it was written soon after the appearance of Cone’s 1936 painting *River Hills* at the Washington D.C. museum in 1937. The Little Gallery was a focal point for Cedar Rapids in the early 20th century, a place where Cone, Grant Wood, and other local artists showed their own work, viewed the work of others, and encouraged the community’s interest in art. A Carnegie Endowment Grant in 1928 supported Rowan’s appointment in Cedar Rapids and the development of the gallery. By the time Rowan wrote this letter, he was living and working in Washington D.C. for the U.S. Treasury Department as the Assistant Chief of the Fine Arts Section, Federal Works Agency, Public Buildings Administration.

¹⁹ Undated letter to Marvin and Winnifred from “Edward,” CRMA archives. The painting in question must be *River Hills* (see note 18) which was exhibited at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. from March 28 to May 9, 1937.

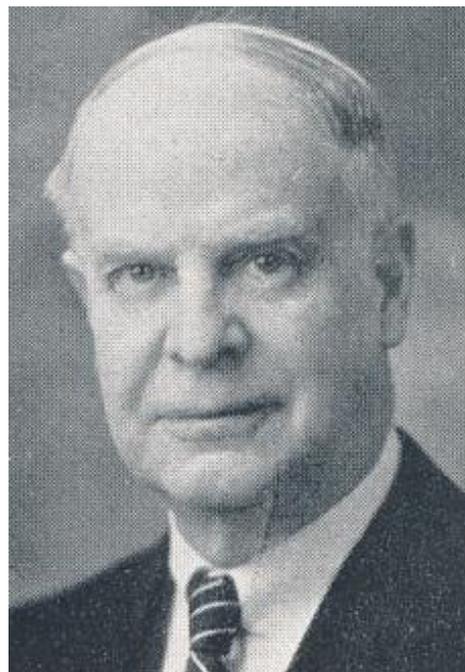
college life, and is somewhat atypical for a circus painting.²⁰ A review of an exhibit opening at Coe suggests a further collegiate connection:

An attendant at the college tea which opened the exhibit last Sunday delighted in seeking resemblances among the painted people to the other guests and then taking them over to show off his finds. It is surprising how many folk you'll think you know among them.²¹

Coe Professor of Art Emeritus Robert Kocher, Cone's former colleague, recalls that Cone himself identified the woman facing the viewer in the foreground as the French instructor, Anna Heyberger.²² Her downcast eyes and tightly parted hair appear similar to her Coe yearbook picture.²³



Anna Heyberger



Charles T. Hickok

²⁰ Some circuses did try to bill themselves as educational. See, for example, "Circus Coming on Thursday" *Marion Sentinel*, June 4, 1936: "It's a great educator."

²¹ Taylor, as in note 11.

²² The identification was made by Kocher in an interview with the author, July 27, 2009. The identification was reaffirmed by Kocher in a subsequent interview, July 16, 2012.

²³ Winnifred Cone remembers that Heyberger wanted Cone to continue his French studies and earn a Ph.D. She was not interested in his desire to teach art. See: Kocher interview with Winnifred Cone (Coe College Archives, Winnifred Cone Interviews, 1969-84, no. 2).

Just as the contemporary Coe viewer sought familiar faces in the image, today's observer also is tempted to speculate about the identities of these caricatures. For example, the balding barker has more than a passing resemblance to yearbook photos of Professor Charles T. Hickok, "Mr. Coe," the college booster known for his recruitment and fundraising activities in addition to his strong teaching.²⁴ And at first glance, the gangly hands, arched brows, and tilt of the clown's head suggest a possible identification with college president Gage. Clowns are meant to entertain, but this wraith-like rag-doll figure seems sadly off-task. We are reminded of Gage's quiet "I have no joke" statement in the *Acorn* yearbook, for he had certainly encountered more than his fair share of obstacles holding the college together at a difficult moment in its history.



Coe President Henry Morehouse Gage

Of course, this tragi-comic clown also recalls the artist himself, a known practical joker who previously self-identified with clowns in the paintings *Freaks* and *The Snake Charmer*. Not only does Cone appear clown-like in both of these images, but he is visually positioned on the

²⁴ Remember, too, that Roby Kessler recalled Hickok and Cone joking and laughing about the salary situation (see note 14).

side of the clowns onstage as a mediating presence for the viewer. It is only a small step from the crowd to the stage itself, as the rest of the caricatures suggest. The possibility that Cone himself may have felt a connection with the clowns becomes even more tantalizing when we consider a poem written in 1971 by his granddaughter, Winnifred Weeks and inscribed at the top “for my Grandfather – Marvin Cone.” One verse reads:

Self portraits appear as clowns
and Uncle Ben’s eyebrows seem yours
above his intended frown²⁵

It is not surprising that a family member might recognize the deeply personal connection Cone had with his own work. Cone himself reminded us: “A glance at the canvas reveals the identity of the artist.”²⁶

That these identifications are suggested rather than specific is in keeping with Cone’s working style. He often noted that artists record “an experience, not a photographic impression.”²⁷ These caricatures are powerful precisely because they are not direct transcriptions of specific individuals, but rather reference every man, woman, and child. Certainly, such an understated joke would be in keeping with Cone’s known sense of humor. “One of the best things about him,” his wife Winnifred Cone said, “was his sense of humor. He was quite notorious around Coe as a practical joker.”²⁸ From drawing a picture of a student who fell asleep in class to the jokes and funny stories he clipped from magazines and newspapers, Cone could clearly see the lighter side of life.²⁹ The clever artist also was not above the kind of mocking

²⁵ The poem is titled “The Inheritors” and dated February 1971 (Marvin Cone papers, 1908-1977, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Microfilm reel 2). Uncle Ben, a remembered relative, appears in portraits on the wall of several of the haunted house images.

²⁶ See note 9. The quotation is from the lecture, reprinted in: Czestochowski, 212. Also found in the Marvin Cone papers, 1908-1977, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Microfilm Reel 1.

²⁷ “Professor Marvin Cone Believes That Paintings Are Experience Records” *Coe College Cosmos*, April 30, 1936.

²⁸ Bridget Janus, “Marvin Cone Remembered,” *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, Sunday Nov 2, 1980.

²⁹ The letter of a former student reminds us of the often subtle every-day application of humor in Cone’s life, referring to “that charcoal you did of me when I fell asleep on the class one day.” Letter from Ralph Bushee Jr. of

humor from which caricature derives its strength. Once, when Cone and his friend Grant Wood were making sets for a community theater production, they needed to create a shelf filled with books:

Grant and Marvin invented titles for the books as they went along. Grant would do one, and then Marvin would do him one better, and so on. Every title was actually a gross insult to some prominent Cedar Rapids citizen: *You Can Live With One Ear*, by Dr. Wayne Foster, and *Brother Can You Spare a Dime*, by Van Vechten Shaffer [a local banker.]³⁰

Undoubtedly, Cone understood the nuances of good-natured satire.

The special Coe connection for *Educational Exhibit* might finally be underscored by the fact that the painting was widely exhibited, but never sold. In fact, it remained in the artist's possession until he selected it as part of a group intended to become part of the college's permanent collection of art.³¹ Consider, too, that it was *Educational Exhibit* that was dramatized as part of the college's Centennial celebration in 1952. As a *Life Magazine* feature on the event related, college co-eds took on the roles of clown, snake-charmer, and barker, eventually breaking the frame of the image by doing an interpretive dance.³² It is tempting to think it was no accident that the clown was portrayed by Harriet Brooks, daughter of the Coe president at that time. Perhaps this was a subtle reminder of the special relationship of the painting to the Coe College family.

The circus images were not just created at a pivotal point in Cone's personal and professional life, however. The ten year period of their creation also marked a significant

Chicago from 18 May 1948 (CRMA archives). Some of Cone's humor clippings also can be found in CRMA archives.

³⁰ Brown, 53-54.

³¹ For example, in a retrospective exhibit at the University of Iowa, *Educational Exhibit* was listed as "Not For Sale." ("Complete List of Paintings for Iowa City" from Sept 15, 1960, CRMA Archives). Elizabeth Moeller of the Davenport Museum of Art notes in a letter of March 1947 that she wishes their museum could have bought *Educational Exhibit*: "Allow Your Mind to Broaden and Expand" will therefore become our possession, and we are thrilled. Wish we might have "Educational Exhibit to go with it! Circus by day, and by night!" (CRMA Archives). The implication here is that the latter painting was not available for purchase.

³² *Life Magazine* 32:24, no. 24 (June 16, 1952).

moment in the trajectory of his artistic development. Compositionally, the circus images reveal the beginnings of Cone's exploration of abstraction, putting him in step with larger movements in American and European painting. "Today's art is restless, confusing, and frequently chaotic," Cone said during this period:

The confused parts are difficult to arrange in any pattern that makes sense. We live in that sort of world. But it is a world more vigorous, forceful, and dynamic than it has ever been—a spectacle of movement, now exhilarating, now depressing, sometimes sinister—always bewildering but generally of absorbing interest. We are all bewildered—art is bewildered. We might as well try to enjoy it!³³

The world turned upside down of the circus—its drama, its spectators made subjects, its hectic hyper-real gaiety—these elements became Cone's canvas for exploring and enjoying the bewildering spectacle of everyday life.

After 1945, Cone never painted another circus. He turned his back on the Big Top, and turned his brush to the mysterious shadowy rooms where stairs and doors lead everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. Cone discussed the compositional process for one of these images, *Night Prowler*, offering a somewhat topsy-turvy view of design:

...it started out, as I recall as an abstract pattern – a grouping of shapes bounded by diagonal lines, with the latter so placed to keep the eye within the bounding rectangle. The abstract pattern suggested representational elements. I was concerned more with the space divisions and directions of line than with accurate perspective. I have forgotten most of the rules of my art school days. Drawn accurately, it is certain the painting would lose its power to hold attention and a certain exciting quality which I am bold enough to believe the painting now has.³⁴

Perhaps the act of composing the world turned upside down of the circus released Marvin Cone from the rules of design. By making the familiar seem strange and the strange seem familiar,

³³This 1937 lecture is cited in note 9. It is reprinted in Czestochowski, 210, and can be found on pages 8-9 in the version reproduced on Microfilm Reel 1, Marvin Cone papers, 1908-1977, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

³⁴ Letter from Marvin Cone to Ernest W. Watson, Editor-in-Chief of *American Artist* dated July 29, 1947 (CRMA Archives).

Cone encouraged viewers to look beneath surface appearances—the very advice he gave to his students.



Marvin Cone, *Night Prowler*, 1941

Cone's circus, like life, is never quite what it first seems to be. Forming a bridge between his earlier, more representational works and the later abstracts, Cone's portrayals of the 'world turned upside down' made the exotic seem familiar while his subsequent renderings of the doors and stairs made the everyday world become strange. Cone's circus images, his self-portraits, his doors—all of these reveal in different ways what is not seen as much as what is. In painting the circus, Cone engaged a subject he enjoyed in a way that gave him space to paint the other side of humor, pathos, and being. Working through problems in art, design, and life, Cone's sideshows opened the door to his mysterious stairs.

Andrea Kann

Dr. Andrea Kann teaches art history at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She earned a BA from Amherst College, and an MA and PhD from the University of Iowa. Her dissertation focused on images of “otherness” in medieval travel literature, and she has presented on this topic at both national and international conferences. The material presented in this essay is part of a larger project on Marvin Cone and his place in American painting. Kann was initially drawn to Cone’s circus and sideshow imagery because of its familiar strangeness.