

# There's a Darkness at the Edge of Town: "Tom Torluemke, Live on Paper, 1987–2024" Chicago Cultural Center, May 24—August 10, 2025

by Neil Goodman

I have known Tom Torluemke for many years and, in some ways, have always considered him a kindred spirit. I grew up in northwest Indiana, also known as "da region," and taught at Indiana University Northwest in Gary for thirty-eight years. Tom, although born in Chicago, has spent most of his career in northwest Indiana (first Hammond and now Dyer), where he both works and lives. The heyday of NW Indiana coincided with the rise of the steel industry. If we view it now as an outpost of Chicago, it was once a series of smaller cities (Gary, Hammond, East Chicago, Highland, and the Harbor) that encompassed the entire region. If someone asks where you are from, you will refer to those smaller locales, as each had a distinct economic and racial profile. These communities with once vibrant downtowns have largely been replaced by shopping malls and box stores. Large segments of the population have moved south to areas like Crown Point, Schererville, St. John, and Valparaiso. This is Tom's subject—urban meeting suburban—and, like Springsteen's songs, his paintings and sculptures are often poignant and empathetic portraits of their time and place.

Having been familiar with Tom's work throughout the years, his exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center was a powerful and diverse exploration of his works on paper. For audiences less familiar with this oeuvre, the exhibition featured large and small-

scale works with a variety of subjects and techniques—some works were entirely abstract, while others were representational. Tom seems to have an intuitive and unedited imagination, as hand and thought seem organically linked with limited second-guessing and editing. There is an approachability to his art that speaks to audiences with various levels of artistic experience. The wide range of work equally seems to have something for everybody and is engaging both formally and narratively.

Tom's career spans his work as a painter, muralist, sculptor, and gallery director. From 2002 to 2009, Tom and his wife, Linda Dorman, ran Uncle Freddy's Gallery in Hammond, then Highland, Indiana. During its tenure, Uncle Freddy's Gallery was the artistic hub of the northwest Indiana community, hosting exhibitions and forums. Tom was always approachable, eager, warm, and encouraging to the many struggling artists in the region who were trying to find their way and looking for exhibition opportunities or community support. Uncle Freddy's was the place, and as it no longer exists, for the time, it was an important component of the Northwest Indiana region life.



*Squirrelly Urban Garden*,  
2019. Watercolor, 27 x 36  
inches. Photo courtesy of  
the artist.

Uncle Freddy's Gallery, Highland, Indiana. Gordon Ligocki "Bevy of Beauties" Opening, 2003. Photo courtesy of Dorman + Torluemk.



Below, is an interview I had with Tom about Uncle Freddy's Gallery and his exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center this summer.

**Neil: Why did you name the gallery Uncle Freddy's?**

**Tom:** We named the gallery after my Great Uncle Freddy. I credit my life as an artist to him. He taught me the importance of visual communication. He was deaf and mute and took care of me much of the time when I was young. We communicated by drawing pictures of what we wanted to do each day. As I grew older, the drawings became more complex. He was teaching me to be an artist.

**Neil: Why did you open the gallery and why did you close?**

**Tom:** We love art and artists. It's difficult to be picked up by a gallery. There are so many incredible artists out there, from all walks of life and all ages, who find it daunting to court a gallery for a long time. We wanted to create a more nurturing environment for artists. We simply love strong art and want to help artists.

It's difficult to do justice to the artists and their work, and we didn't have a clientele in Indiana to sustain the gallery, even with all the attention we were getting. We used all our resources to keep it going. It was too difficult to sustain, so we closed the gallery to focus on my work.

Uncle Freddy's Gallery, Highland, Indiana. Gordon Ligocki Reception, 2003. Photo courtesy of Dorman + Torluemk.



**Neil: Also, do you ever see yourself starting a gallery again?**

**Tom:** Maybe, if everything lines up just right.

**Neil: As you mentioned, you had quite a community of artists that frequented Uncle Freddy's Gallery. Who were some of the artists that exhibited with you, including those who have gone on to more visible careers?**

**Tom:** We surprised ourselves when thinking about the answer to this question. The list is strong and long, although two have since passed away: Adelheid Mers, Patrick McGee, Ish Muhammad Nieves, Jno Cook, Gregg Hertzlieb, Stephen Marc, Gordon Ligocki, Billy Pozzo, and Felix Maldonado.

Some were established, some were well on their way, some were emerging, but all made substantial contributions.

**Neil: Tell me about your partnership with Linda as you seem to work together as a team.**



*Moving Gooseberries*, 2020.  
Watercolor, 27 x 36 inches.  
Photo courtesy of the artist.

**Tom:** When I was priced out of Chicago and moved to Hammond, I began organizing arts activities around northwest Indiana, including exhibits, events, and happenings in Hammond. People involved started to say I should meet with Linda because she was doing similar things for the arts. Unbeknownst to me, these people were telling Linda the same thing. So, we met and had a conversation that never stopped. We worked perfectly together; we each have different strengths, and we got the best out of each other. Our first office was on the curb at Fayette Street and Hohman Avenue in Hammond, where we would meet every morning.

The rest is history, and we have been working together since 2001. We got married in 2020.

**Neil:** The Cultural Center exhibition seems to be a milestone in your career. How has that affected your practice?

**Tom:** Well, first off, I'm calling it the "Miracle Show" and the publication by Skira, the *Miracle Monograph*. It's all because of two friends who recommended me (unbeknownst to me) to Dan Cameron. If it weren't for those two friends, Dan Cameron and my wife, Linda, the exhibit at the Cultural Center would not have happened. The show alone is enough; it quells the self-doubt.

The response has been overwhelming. We have been spending two or three days a week at the show, talking with

visitors, both locally and internationally. Some of the questions are surprising and ones that I wish I'd asked myself. It's been a joy to have shared so much of my life and work with a large and diverse audience.

**Neil:** When I look at your work, it occasionally brings me to Reginald Marsh and James Ensor and perhaps even Thomas Hart Benton. Who are the artists that you most admire, both historical and contemporary, as well as representational and abstract?

**Tom:** I love art and artists, and I've collected over 2,000 art books, having read them all. But some of the more influential artists on my work are Goya (he wasn't afraid of the dark), Van Gogh, Michelangelo, the German expressionists (especially Otto Dix and Käthe Kollwitz), Arnold Böcklin, Charles Burchfield, Francesco Clemente, Lucian Freud, Edward Hopper, Frida Kahlo, Willem de Kooning, and J. M. W. Turner. I am drawn to most of these artists because they were bravely and boldly themselves. They fought to be themselves and didn't give in to the trends or the status quo. Winslow Homer was stubborn and stuck to his guns and made his best paintings before he died, even though people and the critics didn't like them. I admire that.



Installation View, Chicago Cultural Center. Photo courtesy of the artist.

**Neil:** Stylistically you cover a large territory yet retain a continuity between abstraction and figuration. Do the images just evolve or do you start with a narrative and then find your way to the drawing or sculpture?

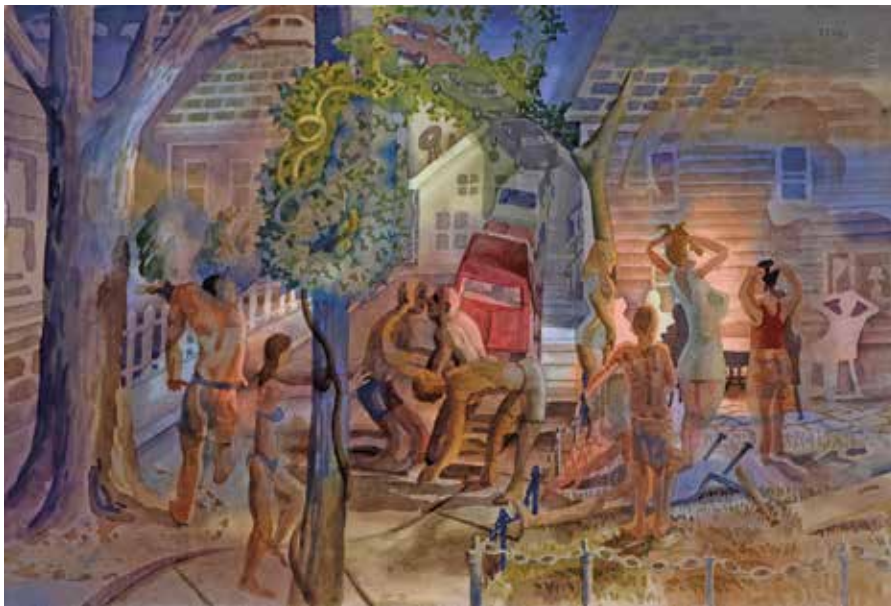
**Tom:** I strive for total freedom without a preconceived idea of what is going to happen in the studio. Often, I have a vague idea, and I proceed straight away with paint. At other times, I'll draw it out and work on preparatory studies, particularly in the case of public works and murals. I will often work for a couple of weeks in one direction, then radically shift as new ideas present themselves. Some projects are completed quickly, while others can take over a year. If I find my work becoming repetitive, I stop and move on to something different. I find my way through the work, following where my eye and hand lead me.

**Neil:** Paul Klein was a great early supporter of your work. Tell me about that relationship?

**Tom:** I was afraid of Paul Klein. I was a sort of social realist expressionist that also did a bunch of other things, and he specialized in abstraction. I used to attend the openings at his gallery and was drawn to his forward, bold personality. He was a straight shooter and had very fruitful, constructive conversations with artists. After he closed his gallery, Paul enthusiastically reviewed several of my exhibitions in his "Art Letters" and was encouraging and supportive of my work. Over the years, Linda and I developed a warm friendship with Paul.

**Neil:** Equally you showed with Linda Warren in Chicago. Is having a dealer important to you or have your years of a more self-directed career given you freedom and autonomy and an independence from the gallery world?

**Tom:** Linda Warren is fantastic and she loves artists. In my case, she took a bigger chance with me, as I have a very diverse output and many of my works are not easily saleable. She let me exhibit whatever work I wanted



*When Cars Fly*, 2019. Watercolor, 15 x 22 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.



*Ties That Bind*, 2025. CTA Lawrence Red Line Station. Media. Photo courtesy of the artist.

to show, and likewise, she extended that freedom to all the artists she represented. Several galleries over the years have successfully represented my work, although they have since closed. Gallery representation was important financially, yet equally, I have a broad history of showing at alternative spaces, which have been welcoming and supportive of my creative path.

**Neil:** As an artist that has worked in the fringes of the Chicago art world, what advice would you give to other artists that work in satellite communities, and reciprocally, what advice would you give to a young artist starting out?

**Tom:** Advice is a scary thing to give, so I'll just do a quick synopsis of my inner thoughts:

*I didn't do it for the money.  
I wanted to have a life with art.  
Great art is the artist's unique  
vision made into a solid  
form.  
The only way I could achieve  
my goal was to grant my-  
self total artistic freedom.*

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*Between Space and Time*, 2020. Watercolor, 40 x 60 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.



The final passage of the Springsteen song, "Darkness on the Edge of Town" seems evocative of Tom's experience as an artist who both chronicles and celebrates a kind of rust belt regionalism. Tom's gift is to find beauty in places that could easily be overlooked, and like Springsteen, transform the mundane into the mythic. Although the patina of time has worn the landscape thin, for Tom and others, the region is home.

"I'll be there on time, and I'll pay the cost. For wanting things that can only be found, In the Darkness of the Edge of Town. In the Darkness at the Edge of Town." ■

"I'll be there on time, and I'll pay the cost. For wanting things that can only be found, In the Darkness of the Edge of Town. In the Darkness at the Edge of Town." ■

**Neil Goodman** is a sculptor formerly based in Chicago with an extensive exhibition history. Presently living on the central coast of California, he retired from Indiana University Northwest as Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts. He is currently represented by Zolla Lieberman and serving as the South-Central California Region Editor for the *New Art Examiner*.