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At 77, Painter Archie Rand Is Still Telling New Stories



BY DANIEL CASSADY April 27, 2026 12:32pm

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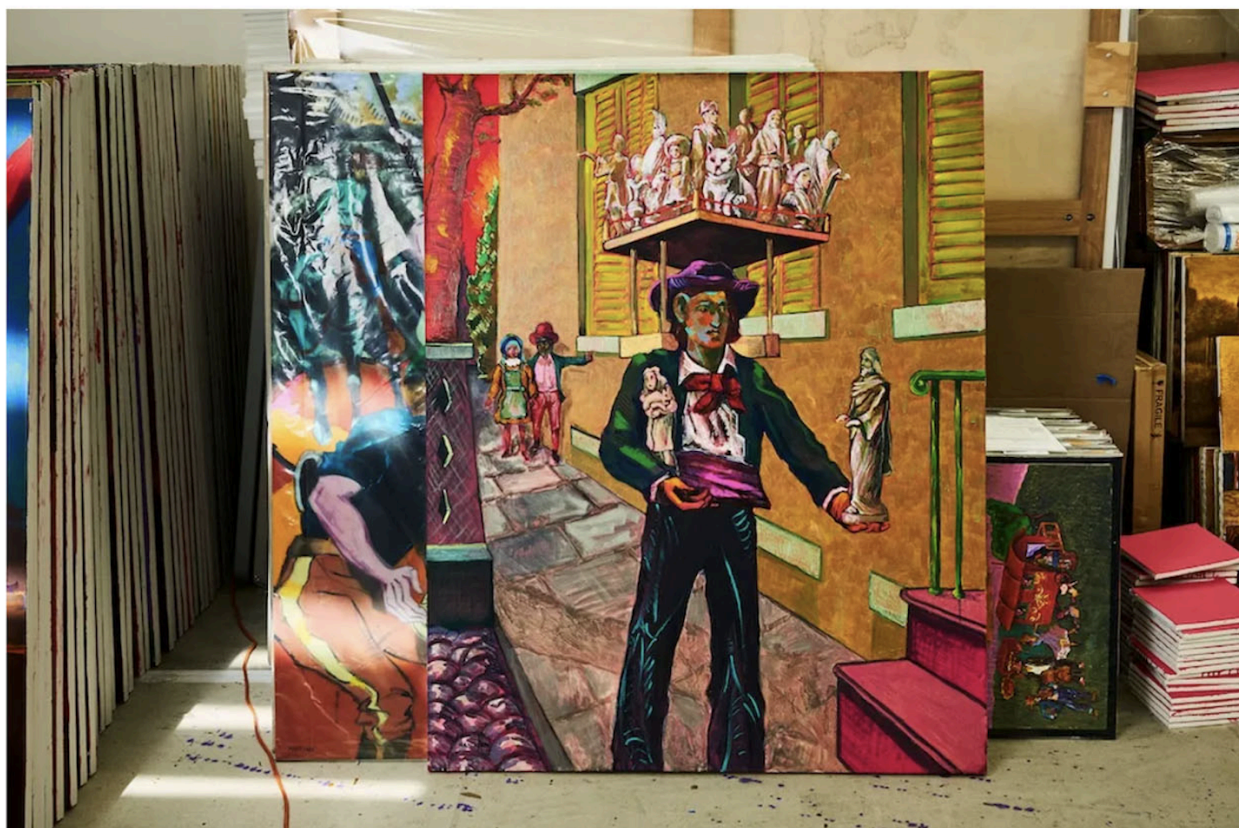


Archie Rand *Duck*, 2025. Photo credit Deidra Higgins. Courtesy Jarvis Art, New York.

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How do you know when a painting is finished? It's a question asked of so many painters, many of whom struggle to come up with an answer. When I posed it to Archie Rand during a conversation in his Brooklyn studio, he stood up from his lounge chair and walked toward an easel on which sat a half-finished work. In it, a dapper street vendor sells ceramics from a wooden board balanced on his head. Two children watch him from behind while, in one sliver of the background on the top left side of the picture, a blazing red sunset overruns the sky.

"You know what the most important part of this painting is?" he asked. "This, right here." He pointed to the top left of the picture, where the building that serves as the painting's background meets the crimson sky.



A recently finished painting in Archie Rand's studio. Photo by Christopher Garcia Vale/ARTNews.

Why? "Because I want to go around here and find out what's around the corner. Where are these people coming from? What's over there?" He kept his finger on the canvas as he said it, tracing the edge of a building in the background of the picture. "And I know I'm pointing to a piece of cloth. But if I can say, 'What's over there,' then it's working. That's when I can put the brush down."

He moved his hand toward the street vendor. "This guy," he said. "He's the least important part of the painting. But he has to be there. Otherwise none of the rest of it makes sense."

Rand's studio in Clinton Hill, where he's lived and worked for more than two decades, is massive. At 50 feet wide and 100 feet long, and with 35-foot ceilings, it almost feels like a bunker. He even dug down six feet to

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install hydronic radiant heating, which allowed him to duplex the space. A deep row of purple primed canvases stands next to equally deep rows of finished works. On one end of the room are two small cozy sofas and a lounge chair. The furniture is flanked by hundreds of jazz and classical CDs in tidy, towering racks, along with stacks of books and magazines. On the other, a grand piano. (Rand was once the keyboard player in an early 1960s band called The Hassles. His replacement was Billy Joel.)

His current show of new paintings at Jarvis Art, co-curated by Max Werner and Lindsay Jarvis, brings together works from a series called “Heads.” The paintings could be stills from the Technicolor imagination of a precocious child. A round, short haired boy practices the trumpet, his eyes shut tight and cheeks billowed, while seated in a feverishly pink and green floral lounge chair, one leg slung over its arm. In *Duck* (2025), two children sail on a catboat, with a jaunty mallard as a figure head. The sea is rough, and despite the duck’s smile, the boys are heading toward, or are already in, heavy weather. At the ship’s bow, one of the two boys, grim-faced and flush, reaches out for something, or someone, out of our view.

Like with all of Rand’s work, *Duck* takes place in media res. We’ve been dropped into the middle of a story, and it’s up to us to figure out how it ends.

Werner knew Rand’s work for years before putting the show together. The son of dealers Mary Boone and Michael Werner, Max was 8 years old, playing in Malcom Morley’s studio, the first time he met Rand. They saw each other there often. Then, in 2021, they reconnected at an opening at the Lower East Side gallery Totah. “He’s ahead of his time and somehow still in it,” Werner told me. “You can look at the early work, and look at the work he’s doing now. It looks nothing alike, but it’s just so clearly by the same guy.”

People find the pictures refreshing, said Werner, which isn’t surprising given how cross-pollinated the art world has become. “There’s 18 Peter Doigs and 18 Cecily Brown’s and 200 riffs on Frankenthaler. Archie’s not riffing. He moves according to his own path, and he’s kind of agnostic to the rest of the world.”

Lindsay Jarvis agreed. “Archie’s visual language is truly singular and idiosyncratic at a time when everything is so derivative,” he said. The best part, he continued, is placing work with young clients who weren’t around when Rand was exhibiting in the ‘80s at storied galleries such as Tibor de Nagy and Phyllis Kind. “They’re experiencing something wholly new.”

Born in Brooklyn in 1949, he studied first at the Art Students League, then at Pratt, where he took courses in cinegraphics. He was pulled toward storytelling early on, mainly through picture and comic books, and he started showing in commercial galleries when he was just 17. Clement Greenberg saw the work, which in the early days leaned toward Abstract Expressionism, and took a shine to the young painter. “He’d pat me on the head and hug me because I got what he was trying to say about art,” Rand recalled. But Rand realized that he did want to be wedged into an aesthetic that was already running its course.

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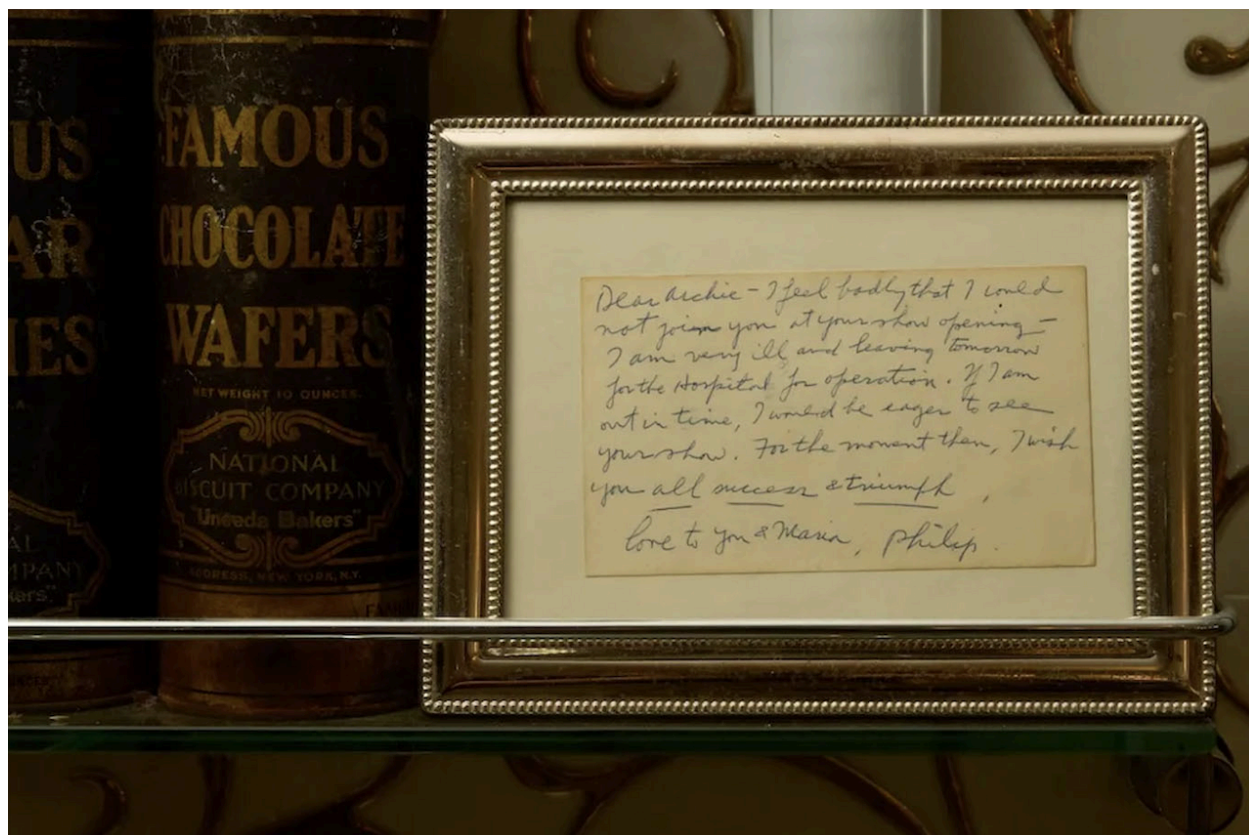
Archie Rand at work in his Brooklyn studio. Photo by Christopher Garcia Vale/ARTNews.

In 1970 he had an epiphany in the form of red-hued canvases populated by thuggish cartoon figures in white pointed hoods. At Marlborough Gallery, Philip Guston had shed his Abstract Expressionist skin and reintroduced himself to the art world through figurative paintings of thuggish, cigar smoking Klansmen. The show polarized the New York art world, but it found supporters in Rand and his friend, the poet and critic Ross Feld, who on that first visit sat on the gallery floor, going back and forth over what they were looking at.

Feld wrote about it kindly, even while other critics did not; Guston read the piece and asked to meet him. Feld told him he wasn't coming alone. "You have to invite Archie," he said. "He told me what to write." They went to Guston's bolthole upstate and talked for three days. Rand was in his mid-20s. When he thinks back, he remembers the pace of it — the references, the way Guston moved through them, the sense that the painting was something you entered and stayed inside, following it forward.

For Rand, it's almost as if their connection had been prophesied: when he first went to Guston's studio, he saw a postcard of a Pontormo fresco pinned to the wall. For years, he'd had same image he had over his own bed.

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A framed letter from Philip Guston to Archie Rand.

Like Guston, Rand is a prodigious reader. He's gifted with the kind of memory that, at various points during our conversations, allowed him to recite lines from an Allen Ginsberg poem, a Simone Weil exploration of the limits of language, and an Oscar Wilde quote. "I can't help it, I talk this way," Rand said. "I'm Jewish, what can you say? We are a digressive people. It's a very Talmudic way of thinking."

I asked how he felt about not fitting neatly into any current category of contemporary art, and he brought up a letter Einstein wrote to Niels Bohr that Rand read in high school. Bohr asks the theoretical physicist to explain how he came up with the theory of relativity. "The answer blew me away," Rand says, "and it's so very Jewish. He said: 'I simply chose to ignore an axiom.' That's with me still today. He figured, well, let me see what happens if I just ignore everything. And let's be honest, this isn't Cubism. I'm not inventing anything. I'm just doing what I have to do."

Teaching has been a constant through his career. At Columbia, he chaired the visual arts department and worked closely with students, including Dana Schutz. He is now Presidential Professor of Art at Brooklyn College. His modus operandi? One or two paintings with grid system so they can paint like Vermeer, he says, then they are on their own. "I don't critique. I don't talk about aesthetics. I just watch," he said. "It drives them crazy. But at the end of the semester, every one of them becomes a painter, and they are all different. It's beautiful."

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At 77, Rand is still working every day, often with Johannes Brahms or Eric Dolphy pulsing through the studio. "One of two things is going to happen when I die," he said. "Either somebody is going to think, I should make an effort to actually maintain the work of Archie Rand, so the world can see his genius, or the next day, the sanitation department will come and throw everything in the dumpster. That's not my problem. My problem is not to ensure my future or gain posthumous fame.

"I've accepted that and I'm happy with my life," he continued. "I've done what I had to do."