



Charles Burchfield: *The Four Seasons*, 1949-60, watercolor on pieced paper mounted on board, 55 7/8 by 47 7/8 inches. Krannert Art Museum and Kinkead Pavilion, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

CHARLES INTO THE MYSTIC BURCHFIELD

With career-spanning works and a wealth of ephemera, the Burchfield retrospective organized by Robert Gober sheds light on the revered watercolorist, current curatorial tastes and Gober's own artistic inclinations.

BY MICHAEL DUNCAN

THE VISIONARY WATERCOLORS of Charles Burchfield (1893-1967) have long occupied a special niche in American art history. In vibrant images celebrated for their psychological depth, quirky romanticism and strange beauty, Burchfield transformed humdrum middle American settings into mystic realms. The emotional intensity, graphic immediacy and storybook fantasy of his works set them apart from the realism of the Ashcan School or the artful experimentalism of Dove and O'Keeffe. Alfred Barr acknowledged Burchfield's quality by selecting a group of the artist's watercolors for the very first one-person exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1930.

Today, Burchfield's works seem completely in step with our own tastes—perhaps more so than those by the artist's celebrated Regionalist peers Edward Hopper, Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood. His ecstatic, tremulous depictions of forests, snowstorms, fires and ravines anticipate the charged landscapes of contemporary artists like Sharon Ellis, Judith Linhares, Karen Carson, Tom Uttech, Melissa Miller, David Bates and Fred Tomaselli. His filigreed clapboard shanties and fields humming with insects presage fantastical details in drawings by Kiki Smith and Hernan Bas, and his obsessiveness is not unlike that of in-vogue outsiders from the past, such as Martín Ramírez and Henry Darger.

One contemporary artist who doesn't come to mind in relation to Burchfield is Robert Gober. Yet a traveling exhibition of over 80 watercolors, drawings and oils, organized by Gober

with the assistance of Hammer Museum curator Cynthia Burlingham, seeks to give a fresh spin to the work of this "artist's artist." Gober is known

for sculptures and installations with elliptical, symbolic meanings and references that seem far from the direct reverence for nature expressed in Burchfield's works. Yet he owns a few Burchfield drawings and suggested the exhibition to Hammer director Ann Philbin. Though Gober clearly admires the artist, he has stated that any connections with his own practice are only casual. "People are assuming that I've had a long burning desire to get closer to Burchfield," he recently said, "to understand and reveal him. And that really wasn't the case. . . . It was the challenge of investigating another artist's life and presenting his story." While on the whole Gober presents a conventional historical survey, at several points his own concerns as an artist intersect with the exhibition in somewhat confusing and distracting ways.

A SURVEY OF BURCHFIELD has never been mounted on the West Coast—and not for 16 years in New York—yet he has continued to attract a cottage industry of scholarship, mostly centered around his archives at the Burchfield Penney Art Center in Buffalo, N.Y. That institution has catalogued more than 25,000 objects amassed by the artist and his wife, including voluminous journals, sketches, doodles, scrapbooks and other ephemera; the artist's studio was reconstructed in the museum after being transported from West Seneca, the town outside Buffalo where he settled in 1925 and lived until his death.

Interest in Burchfield focuses on three major bodies of work: the early expressive watercolors made in 1917, after he left the Cleveland School of Art; the more sedate Regionalist cityscapes and industrial scenes of the 1920s and '30s that brought him widespread acclaim; and the late explosive works, from the mid '40s on, that return to his early expressionistic style of nature painting. The show covers all three periods (including 14 works from Barr's 1930

OPENING SOON

"Heat Waves in a Swamp: The Paintings of Charles Burchfield" at the Burchfield Penney Art Center, Buffalo, N.Y., Mar. 5-May 23.

BURCHFIELD'S WORLD IS BOTH VISUAL AND AURAL, AND IS ENDOWED WITH A DARK PSYCHOLOGY IN PARTS REMINISCENT OF WORKS BY MUNCH AND HODLER.



The Insect Chorus, 1917, watercolor with ink, graphite and crayon on paper, 20 by 15 1/4 inches, Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Museum of Art, Utica, N.Y.

MoMA show, along with correspondence between Barr and Burchfield), but also indulges in a strain of fetishistic "Burchfieldiana," presenting telephone-pad doodles, designs for Christmas cards, a magazine ad for Johnnie Walker Black illustrated with a Burchfield painting and an entire gallery plastered with a Burchfield wallpaper pattern. Only four of the artist's journals were allowed to travel with the exhibition; rather strangely, a vitrine in the exhibition contained a stack of the remaining journals in their archival folders. In fact, these are facsimiles that, according to the label, "were fabricated by the Robert Gober Studio for the

exhibition to closely match the originals in scale and form." One couldn't help being reminded of the facsimile *New York Times* newspapers that Gober has stacked in some of his installations.

These peripheral items seem to have been chosen because they support a curatorial preoccupation with Burchfield's troubled psychology—his repressed emotions or conflicted sense of social status. Exemplifying the exhibition's insistent emphasis on ephemera is the image chosen for the catalogue's front cover, a Burchfield camouflage design made during his six-month service in the U.S. Army in 1918. The design somewhat resembles an abstract detail in a Burchfield landscape but is hardly worthy of representing his work in its totality.

USUALLY CHARACTERIZED as a loner, though he was one of six children raised by a single mother in Salem, Ohio, Burchfield is a complex figure whose sensibility is not easily categorized. Living almost his entire life in small towns in Ohio and New York, he was introspective and largely at odds with mainstream tastes. The confessional, heartfelt and intimate entries in Burchfield's journals, selections from which were published in a volume of more than 700 pages in 1993,² chart the artist's dramatic mood swings and love of nature. They include precise observations about the natural world, but are attuned alike to birdsong, cricket chirpings, and favorite composers Wagner and Sibelius. Both self-berating and motivational, the journals are fraught with late-adolescent and midlife questionings. The descriptions of nature are composed with rhetorical flourishes and poetic flights worthy of Emerson or Whitman, as in this entry from Nov. 30, 1930: "The rain beats in my face, my feet sink in the mire, I am secure from, but mingle in, the elements."³

Although, as Burchfield scholar Nannette V. Maciejunes has pointed

out, critics and curators have too often relied on the journals to promote a notion of Burchfield as solitary artist-hero, the entries give scant evidence of his awareness of modernist, fin de siècle and Asian art, of his professional friendship and rivalry with Hopper or acquaintances with Wood and Andrew Wyeth, or of his decades-long public persona as a well-known and respected American artist.⁴ This is not to say that Burchfield was hiding anything in his writings, but rather that his work grew out of a more complex nexus of forces, feelings and influences than the journals chronicle.

Burchfield was hardly a self-made artist, as some have

liked to believe. He entered the Cleveland School of Art in 1912 intending to become a commercial artist, but his ambitions quickly expanded. A sophisticated group of teachers and fellow students exposed him to Asian, Post-Impressionist and modernist art, to the writings of Nietzsche, and to the experiments of William Zorach and William Sommer, both of whom spent time in Cleveland.⁵ In school, Burchfield adopted watercolor as his preferred medium, admiring it as "pliable and quick" as well as appreciating its suitability for working *en plein air*.⁶ The fluidity of watercolor softened the harshness of his sometimes clunky rendering and staccato gestures. The few efforts in oil on display in the exhibition seem stiff and stolid by comparison.

After his graduation in 1916 and a brief stint in New York City, Burchfield returned to his hometown, where he experienced both a psychological breakdown and a stylistic breakthrough. His overwrought emotions—as chronicled in the journals, he contemplated suicide—found their expressive correlative in works like *The Insect Chorus* (1917), which depicts a spooky side-yard domain of cicadas and katydids broadcasting from shadowy, cavellike shrubbery, as indicated in comic-strip-style lines suggesting reverberations. Burchfield's world is both visual

and aural, and is endowed with a dark psychology in parts reminiscent of works by Munch and Hodler. At the same time, he taps a vein of gothic transcendentalism that in American literature can be traced from Hawthorne and Melville to Sherwood Anderson, Robinson Jeffers and Flannery O'Connor. Generally devoid of the human form, Burchfield's works arguably invoke a deeper sense of loneliness and isolation than paintings of a similar tone by Hopper.

While Burchfield's work is stylistically rooted in van Gogh and Post-Impressionism, the charging of negative space in his compositions and the contrasts between delicate inked lines and heavily painted black shadows are indebted directly to Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock prints. J. Benjamin Townsend and other Burchfield scholars also have found in Japanese woodblock caricatures—as well as in American comic strips—precursors for the symbol notations that Burchfield developed as a kind of code for emotions.⁷ He sketched and labeled these symbols in 1917, and collected them later in an album that he titled *Conventions for Abstract Thought* (1955). A shape resembling a cartoon smile is identified as "fascination of evil"; a calligraphic squiggle resembling a bird in flight is "aimless abstraction"; a proscenium arch shape denotes "morbidness."

The Coming of Spring, 1917-43, watercolor on paper mounted on presswood, 34 by 48 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.





Church Bells Ringing, Rainy Winter Night, 1917; watercolor and gouache over graphite on paper, 30 by 19 inches. Cleveland Museum of Art.

The Hammer installation opened with a gallery featuring 13 of these symbol sketches. Burchfield used his codes in early drawings such as *Church Bells Ringing, Rainy Winter Night* (1917), in which a drip-smeared gothic chapel includes the symbols for "fascination of evil," "fear," "morbidness" and "insanity." Burchfield's perverse "Where's Waldo" game doesn't really make much difference in works of such overwrought expression. As Burchfield must have realized when he assembled the doodlelike sketches into the 1955 album, their principal interest is as evidence of the anguish and emotional turmoil of his youth, when he was clearly determined to load his paintings with as many dangerous feelings as possible. Although other early works are more lyrical, all are loose, vigorous and formally inventive. Burchfield presents dandelions as dots of white paint, a rainstorm as vertical streaks of gray, sunflower stalks as twisted gestures, distant city rooftops as strokes of diagonal white receding in space.

BURCHFIELD'S EMOTIONALLY RESTRAINED works from the 1920s were presented at the Hammer in a gallery papered with the facsimile of a ghastly wallpaper that he designed during his 1921-29 tenure at the wallpaper firm

Right, view of the exhibition "Heat Waves in a Swamp; The Paintings of Charles Burchfield" at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photo Brian Forrest.



Left, three drawings from the series "Conventions for Abstract Thoughts," 1917. All Collection Burchfield Penney Art Center, Buffalo.

Top to bottom: *Fascination of evil*, graphite on paper, 9¼ by 6 inches.

Dangerous Brooding, China marker and graphite on paper, 8½ by 5½ inches.

Untitled (Fear 2), China marker on paper, 8½ by 5½ inches.





M.H. Birge and Sons. The effect was jarring. The paintings from this period are primarily of ships, fields, and small town and industrial milieus, executed in a straightforward realist style somewhat akin to the Regionalists'. These works are hardly one-note, of course, and among those in the exhibition are a few with particularly loaded content, such as *Pyramid of Fire (Pyramid of Flame)*, 1929, with its silhouetted firefighters in action at a burning house, and *Still Life—Scrap Iron* (1929), showing a pile of industrial refuse, a scene that has become all too familiar in our own time. The eye-popping wallpaper, by contrast, is claustrophobically patterned with orange sunflowers and vibrant blue vine-leaves, and emanates a neurotic buzz.

With this choice, Gober anachronistically employs the tactics of his own installations, in which he juxtaposes wallpaper designs with facsimiles of odd symbolic objects. Given the psychological implications of Gober's work, one guesses that his decision to display these particular paintings on this wallpaper might shed some light on the ways he is thinking about Burchfield—say, that the pumped-up wallpaper represents a Freudian "return of the repressed"—an echo of the keyed-up emotionalism that seems to be missing in the contemporaneous paintings. Regardless of

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how the wallpaper installation is interpreted, it distracts from paintings that can, and should, stand on their own without heavy-handed curatorial display. The exhibition is divided into named sections, and the title for this room, "Wallpaper and Marriage," in itself seems to contain a deadpan editorial comment on Burchfield's shift into more commonplace work just before marrying Bertha Kenreich in 1922. (Let's not forget that Gober sewed a wedding gown for a 1989 show, which included genitalia-printed wallpaper.) Burchfield once described his wallpaper designs as "hackwork,"²⁸ and he seems to have been happily married for 45 years. There is no evidence that he was dissatisfied with bourgeois family life; indeed, it could be argued that marriage allowed him to realize his broader ambitions and repeatedly saved him from psychological breakdowns.

GIVEN THE CONTEMPORARY CONCERN FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES—NOT TO MENTION THE VOGUE FOR ECCENTRIC VISIONARIES—BURCHFIELD'S NATURE PAINTINGS FEEL NEWLY RELEVANT TODAY.

Success in several New York gallery shows enabled Burchfield to leave his day job in 1929 and work full-time as an artist. While his career continued to blossom during the Depression, his paintings acknowledged the economic hardships around him. *End of the Day* (1938) records in a widescreen hilltop perspective the journey of bedraggled factory workers plodding toward dilapidated shantytown homes. Other works present the oppressive aspects of industrialization more obliquely. *Black Iron* (1935) is a low-angle depiction of a bleakly monstrous drawbridge over the Buffalo River that seems ready to crush all who approach. *View of Garden Plants Beyond Fence* (1937) shows a patch of spring growth seen through the slats of a fence—a framing device that reflects Burchfield's reputation as a penned-in loner, while also evoking one of Goyer's jail-cell windows.

In 1943, with the wartime lull in artworld activity, Burchfield took some time to reassess his practice, which he felt had grown somewhat stale. He began literally to expand some of his watercolors from 1917 by joining blank strips of paper along the paintings' edges and augmenting the scenes. The resultant works are bolder, more fanciful panoramic landscapes. In the breakthrough woodland scene *The Coming of Spring*

(1917-43), the light on a high hillside horizon is relayed by reflection through a cascading stream that empties into a mysteriously dark icy pond. In the companion *Two Ravines* (1934-43), a fairy-tale forest showcases similar contrasts of light and dark with a more lateral, cinematic scope.

Burchfield had achieved the technical skill to transform the heightened emotional settings in his youthful work, regenerating them with more complex modulations of light, an even freer hand and a greater sense of volumetric space. The larger scale fosters more elaborate and fanciful contrasts of earth and sky, forest and stream. In *The Sphinx and the Milky Way* (1946), the artist remade a 1917 watercolor of shrubbery as a rural nocturne, in which a cosmic vision of the night sky is seemingly ignited by a mysterious sphinx moth pollinating a flower in the foreground. Especially untamed and agitated is *Sun and Rocks* (1918-50), in which Burchfield illuminates a gnarly precipice of rocks and scrub pines with a crucifix-shaped sun.

Burchfield's late, reconfigured works spin into all-new compositions ripe with emotion, gesture and fancy. Loose, vigorous brushwork in *Gateway to September* (1946-56) describes, at the center, a golden-hued portal in a flowering grove inhabited by a giant grasshopper and moth, and seemingly abuzz with insects. There is no holding back in works like *The Four Seasons* (1949-60), which contains within its cathedral-like arbor an entire life cycle of growth and decay. Delicate insects reminiscent of Florine Stettheimer's "flutterbys" fly through the silvery night sky of *Dandelion Seed Heads and the Moon* (1961-65). The late works have a kind of toughness, evident in the core of blackness within the budding woods of *Early Spring* (c. 1966-67); only occasionally do they evoke Disney cartoon effects or sci-fi illustration.



1 Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, "Making Heat Waves," *Artnet.com* magazine, Nov. 6, 2009. 2 J. Benjamin Townsend, ed., *Charles Burchfield's Journals: The Poetry of Place*, Buffalo, State University of New York Press, 1993. The journals date from 1912 to 1966, containing what Townsend calls "a continuous account of the artist's daily activities, encounters, sketching trips, work, and reflections over fifty-seven years," p. xvii. 3 John I.H. Baur, *The Inlander: Life and Work of Charles Burchfield 1893-1967*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1984, p. 177. 4 Nannette V. Maciejunes, "Burchfield on Burchfield: An Artist's Journal Reconsidered," *The Paintings of Charles Burchfield: North by Midwest*, New York, Harry N. Abrams and Columbus Museum of Art, 1997, p. 103. 5 See William H. Robinson, "Native Sons: Burchfield and the Cleveland School of Art," Maciejunes, pp. 62-72. 6 Cynthia Burlingham, "A Natural Preference: Burchfield and Watercolor," in Cynthia Burlingham and Robert Goyer, ed., *Heat Waves in a Swamp: The Paintings of Charles Burchfield*, Los Angeles, Hammer Museum, and Munich, DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2009, p. 12. 7 Townsend, p. 437. 8 Baur, p. 128, citing Burchfield's unpublished manuscript, *My Years 1915, 1919, 1943*.

Curated by Robert Goyer with the assistance of Cynthia Burlingham, "Heat Waves in a Swamp: The Paintings of Charles Burchfield" opened at the Hammer Museum, University of California, Los Angeles [Oct. 4, 2009-Jan. 10, 2010]. It travels to the Burchfield Penney Art Center, Buffalo [Mar. 5-May 23], and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York [June 24-September 2010], and is accompanied by a catalogue written by Goyer and Burlingham, with additional contributions by Nancy Weekly, Tullis Johnson and Dave Hickey.

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Gateway to September,
1946-56, watercolor on joined
paper, 42 by 56 inches.
Hunter Museum of American Art,
Chattanooga, Tenn.

Although today rarely examined, ecstatic nature painting remains a significant tradition in American art. Powerful works of the last century by the likes of Dove, O'Keeffe, Pavel Tchelitchew, Agnes Pelton, Raymond Jonson, Peter Blume, Hyman Bloom and Frederick Wight still exert a strong influence. Given the contemporary concern for environmental issues—not to mention the vogue for eccentric visionaries—Burchfield's individualistic respons-

es to nature today feel newly relevant. At once bold and tenebrous, vigorous and hyper-esthetic, Burchfield's landscapes speak intimately to our fragile relationship with nature and spirit, darkness and light, transcending all attempts to pigeonhole the artist through speculative psychoanalysis or mythmaking. ○