



Gallery-Going
By DAVID COHEN
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The Mood Poet of Suburbia

It is a truism that great art is always current. Sometimes, however, historic work can look contemporary by accident. The late composite works in drawing and watercolor of Charles Burchfield, extraordinary examples of which can be seen at DC Moore Gallery in an exhibition drawn from the artist's estate, are a case in point. The artist took complete works, some of which had already been exhibited, and set them within larger configurations. Paper extensions took the composition into the new areas, and new mediums, too: Often charcoal is added to what had been exclusively watercolor or gouache in the originals.

What makes Burchfield's greatness enduring is his luminous command of watercolor, the personal intensity of his pictorial language, and a pervasive mystical quality of his rapport with nature. Burchfield has always been held in high regard, and justifiably so. His early watercolors were celebrated at the Museum of Modern Art in 1930, when the artist was still in his 30s and the museum was in its first year. Edward Hopper was a friend who wrote about him, and in some ways Burchfield was the mood poet of suburbia and the countryside that Hopper was of the city.

These late works — from the 1950s and '60s, when the artist was in his 60s and 70s and in ill health — are strangely provisional and transient. They would be perverse enough thanks to their recycled nature, but additionally they may still be unfinished. Far from enervating them, these works are enlivened by such disruptive features as a collision of languages, the challenge to notions of spatial and temporal boundaries (shape, completion), and a scratching away at their surfaces. They are inadvertently deconstructive.

This might be projection on the part of a contemporary viewer used to artists who mix modes and vary supports within a single work. But a lot of the positive energy comes from the sheer intensity of his vision, reflecting a combination of resolve and revision. "Dawn of Spring" dates from the 1960s and cannibalizes a watercolor from 20

years earlier. The revisions, both in glued-on extra panels and within the partially scraped-away earlier work, are in charcoal. Reworkings in late Burchfield landscapes generally increase their symbolism. The three trees in "Dawn of Spring" are at different stages of growth, both, as it were, pictorially and botanically: An old withered tree is shown in shadowy, sketchy monochrome, whereas a tree in full leaf is well worked in body and color. Often Burchfield would paint birches as Ages of Man self-portraits in a homophonic pun.

These "two period pictures," to use his own term, reflected Burchfield's characteristic mix of restless and rooted. This in turn was of a piece with impulsive career moves. He walked away from the National Academy of Design, where he had won a scholarship in 1916, after just one day, stifled by their pedantic approach. He soon embarked on a "Golden Year" in which he formulated a series of personal symbols that he called his "conventions for abstract thoughts."

Of course it is not uncommon for artists to rework earlier paintings they find in their studios, or to recycle compositions. But Burchfield was unusual in that he expanded his compositions, rather than paring them down. Lee Krasner collaged her early life drawings into late abstract expressionist paintings, but there the artist was making use of an unwanted body of work, exploiting its ready-made pentimenti and scoring a victory for abstraction over figuration. Burchfield's watercolors had already found favor, even, one supposes, with their maker.

"Blue Dome of June" (1955-63) incorporated what can still be seen as a resonant, satisfying work, "June Clouds" (1955). The physical edges of the earlier page are distinct, quite apart from the difference in chromatic crispness between the original and its relatively muted addenda. A tree, to the right, competes almost in solidity with the thick, wavy clouds to its left. Both are built in Burchfield's dense, strident calligraphy. In the expanded drawing, however, a new emotional meaning takes over composition as the sky bursts out into a calm dome, almost as if the sky is a Romanesque arch carved into nebulous heavens. The tentative charcoal sketchiness at the top of the new page is joined to the rest of the painting by luminous strokes of gold. The artist's journals made clear how the new vision recalled for him a Sunday School notion of a heaven that could be accessed from the clouds. What is extraordinary is that an artist can have an epiphany of nature not just by seeing nature, but by contemplating his own work anew.

The impulse of these late works often seems religious. Burchfield had joined his wife's church, although his mystical sense of genius loci seems more pantheistic, in line with his formative reading of Nietzsche and Thoreau and discovery of Beethoven. "December Sun (with 'Sun Dogs')" (1959-1960s) radically reworked a watercolor from 1940 to incorporate a sundog in which the sun reverberates along a vertical axis. (Like Constable's cloud sketches, late Burchfields can be a lesson in meteorology.) There is a feeling that the sun is about to drip color onto the elaborately sketched out flora in the appended panel beneath.

Whatever reason the original works were left unfinished, the juxtaposition of shadowy, tentative charcoal and dense, rich watercolor often reads as intentional and symbolic. "Sunburst in October" (1960-63) pastes drawn hills beneath watercolored dark clouds with sun sending out rays behind as if depicting two realms. The sense is of mediums as metaphor for dualism, as if color or outline (they alternate in the roles) intimate the original of forms in a parallel, spiritual universe.

In an inspired coupling, the gallery also has a display of small paintings by the slow-producing George Tooker to complement Burchfield. Like Burchfield, Tooker was what could be called a romantic realist, working in a tight, deliberative style but with as much concern for psychological as social values. Where Burchfield's handwriting fused elements of Art Nouveau and Chinese scroll painting, the hermetically sealed-in meticulousness of Mr. Tooker's egg tempera is closer in spirit to the High Renaissance.

His best-known work, "The Subway" (1950), depicts existentially isolated New York transit passengers almost as if characters in Dante. The works in this show, which range in date between 1974 and 2005, feel even more timeless and ethereal. Reflecting a Renaissance mix of the sacred and the profane, their sensibility is neoclassical pagan and deeply religious. An exquisite black face hovers over the artist's tender self-portrait in "Dark Angel With Self-Portrait" (1996). A golden youth appears in the window of a sleeping saint in "The Dream" (1991). The pensive young woman in "Laurel" (1987), leaning over a parapet beside a pot of laurel bigger than herself, seems ripe for annunciation.

As much as they complement each other, these artists form an essay in contrast. In Mr. Tooker's delectably serene latter-day Nazarene or Pre-Raphaelite pictures, revelation is very much past tense, whereas in Burchfield it is imminent and alive. Until June 22 (724 Fifth Ave. at 57th Street, 212-247-2111).