



Mystic Cryptic Revelations

Transcendental landscapes, haunted houses, and trees with halos

by Jerry Saltz

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Sun Setting in a Bank of Smoke

Young painters should look at the work of Charles Burchfield (1893–1967), the mystic, cryptic painter of transcendental landscapes, trees with telekinetic halos, and haunted houses emanating ectoplasmic auras. Burchfield, who like Hopper painted as if cubism never happened, is van Gogh by way of Caspar David Friedrich, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, calendar art, and Sunday painting. Consciously or not, recent painters like Peter Doig, Verne Dawson, Gregory Amenoff, Kurt Lightner, and Ellen Altfest are channeling bits of Burchfield's visionary vibe.

One reason more young artists aren't familiar with this great American may have to do with Burchfield being yet another painter who is left out of the Museum of Modern Art's narrow-minded, mad march through modernism. Although he had three retrospectives at the Whitney, one at MOMA (way back in 1930), and one at the Met, Burchfield continues to be an odd man out of modern-art history.

In this patchy but occasionally stirring survey of 33 works on paper, you can track Burchfield in landscapes that have a Blakean spookiness. Like Hartley, Burchfield brings a mad I-see-everything- at-once spirituality to his work. Landscape With Rain, from 1917, looks both like a God's-eye view of a valley and God's half-closed eye. The 1917 Sun Setting in a Bank of Smoke is a modern-day Star of Bethlehem scene with five glowing extraterrestrial orbs hovering near an old house and another blazing above. Several late works, notably the electric-orange Butterfly Tree, from 1960, and a drawing from 1964–65 of a metaphysical tree that looks like an alien hairdo and a coxcomb, suggest that Burchfield wasn't only good early on but was one of the better American painters of the early '60s, as well.