

ArtSeen

Charles Burchfield: *Solitude*

By [Alfred Mac Adam](#)



Charles Burchfield, *Black Void*, April 28, 1917. Watercolor and gouache on paper, mounted onboard, 22 x 18 inches. Courtesy DC Moore Gallery, New York.

Charles Burchfield (1893–1967) is a beacon shining down on us from the prehistoric era of American modern art. While he seems to be standing in splendid isolation, he is actually part of a living tradition, one that looks back to Romantics like William Blake and Samuel Palmer and forward to Neil Welliver, Fairfield Porter, and Rackstraw Downes. This show of 14 watercolors, created between 1917 and 1957, is a grand opportunity to see a comprehensible number of Burchfield's works in an intimate setting instead of the mass grouping of a museum retrospective.

ON VIEW

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Burchfield was in the habit of strolling the forests in western New York. He took notes and made sketches, but he was not a plein-air painter in the style of, say, Rackstraw Downes. Rather, he would wait for some scene to catch his eye or his mind's eye, which he would then translate into one of his phantasmagorical watercolors. So, on April 28, 1917, with World War I blazing away in Europe, Burchfield composed *Black Void*, a 22 inch x 18 inch watercolor and gouache on paper. The image could be a battlefield after the battle, expressing unbearable melancholy. On the verso, Burchfield explained the work:

An attempt to express a vague feeling rather than a fact. It is the feeling of black north woods, or perhaps the void of the North itself. It comes to a boy in remembrance, or can almost be seen out of the corner of his eye; but if he looks directly, it is gone.

Who is this boy? Is Burchfield remembering something from his own boyhood? Setting aside Marcel Proust's reliving experience through memory, Burchfield in effect replicates the aesthetic of the French Symbolist poets, especially Stéphane Mallarmé, whose statement "To name an object is to suppress three quarters of the enjoyment of the poem," certainly jibes with the corner of Burchfield's eye: if naming an object kills it, looking directly at a bewitching scene, even in memory, kills it. Thus, Burchfield's watercolor is not about facts but feelings or feelings reconstructed, or, perhaps, glimpsed with the mind's eye. Something evanescent, not to be viewed directly.



Charles Burchfield, *Jaws of the World*, 1920. Watercolor, gouache, pencil, chalk, and charcoal on joined paper, mounted on board 29 5/8 x 29 1/2 inches. Courtesy DC Moore Gallery, New York.

Translating that vision into a work on paper implies some sort of loss, in the way the Symbolist poets' suggested objects inevitably take shape in ordinary, banal language. Burchfield's version of this fall is convention: the stream that winds back to the vanishing point, the repoussoir trees placed to focus the viewer's gaze. These are the sine qua non elements of naturalistic landscape painting from Albert Cuyp in the 17th century to J.M.W. Turner or Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot in the 19th. Burchfield uses the conventions, not merely to imitate a model, but to make his ideas intelligible as icons, and indeed, the works in this show are often more somber than the ecstatically stylized paintings for which he is rightly famous.

Jaws of the World (1920), watercolor, gouache, pencil, chalk, and charcoal on jointed paper, is an exercise in the sublime—Burchfield's version of it. Yes, there is a terrifying canyon or gorge; yes, the sky is a battlefield of clouds, but instead of awe or fear, we feel we are entering a magical, welcoming place. Compare that paradoxical combination of vast space and intimacy with a small (12 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches x 21 inches) watercolor on paper, *Reflections of Trees* (ca.1916). Here windblown, leafless young trees are reflected in a pond, with a burnt stump marking the foreground. A distant echo of Caspar David Friedrich's infinite space haunts this little picture, with the saplings bent over their reflections like souls mourning over their own bodies.



Charles Burchfield, *Window In a Deserted House*, 1917. Watercolor, gouache, and pencil on paper, mounted on board, 23 x 18 inches. Courtesy DC Moore Gallery, New York.

When Burchfield focuses on structures—there are no people in these pictures; the only living creature is a solitary crane in its nest—he displays his technical virtuosity. *Window of a Deserted House* (1917) partakes of the same enigmatic esthetic as Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1524), but instead of a mirror Burchfield depicts a scene reflected in an unusually large window. He shows his representational dexterity by creating a reflecting glass that contains another picture. Intellectual complexity and utter simplicity at the same time: perhaps the best definition of this extraordinary artist.

Contributor

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