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ART REVIEW

Charles Burchfield: A Master of American Modernist Watercolor

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Charles Burchfield painting in his studio, Gardenville, New York, 1966. (William Doran/Hammer Museum)

Arguably, watercolor was the most important medium sustained by American painters struggling with the new demands and untried possibilities of Modernism in the first half of the 20th century. Georgia O'Keeffe, John Marin, Charles Sheeler, Marsden Hartley, Max Weber, Charles Demuth -- whatever artistic achievements they and many others certainly had are unthinkable without their work in pigments suspended in water and laid down on paper. And for some of them, watercolors represented the pinnacle of their accomplishments. Charles Burchfield (1893-1967) is among them, somewhere near (or perhaps even at) the top of the watercolor heap. If his name is less well-known today than it was during his lifetime, the fugitive nature of watercolors, which cannot hang permanently on the light-saturated walls of the many museums that now own them, is one reason why. A breathtaking exhibition newly opened at the UCLA Hammer Museum -- the artist's first major West Coast survey -- demonstrates the extraordinary power he was able to coax forth, while also suggesting why the watercolor medium was so critical. It includes a few oil paintings on canvas or board, American Scene landscapes of gritty village streets at twilight or in winter that, when juxtaposed with scores of exceptional watercolors, mostly suggest competence. There are pencil drawings too -- including a compelling series of small works from 1917 that he called "Conventions for Abstract Thoughts" -- plus a room encircled with

26 framed assemblies of scores of paper scraps covered with sketches. Burchfield unceremoniously described them as doodles. In their densely packed fields of whirling forms, spidery shapes and repetitive organic patterns, they recall the Surrealist inventions of Joan Miró. **'Aimless brooding'** Among the 1917 "conventions" is a pair of upright ovals, reminiscent of seed pods. Lightly shaded at the bottom and darkly marked at the top, the forms oscillate between solid form and hollowed-out space, like a biological, nature-based Cubism. Burchfield wrote "aimless brooding" in pencil across the bottom, an indication of the way his drawings functioned as a species of incubation. The presence of these many open-ended pencil drawings and smattering of tightly rendered oil paintings is instructive. Watercolor emerges as a critical juncture between the two. The fluid paint application incorporates the immediate record of unfolding artistic thought characteristic of drawing, which is usually unavailable to the more measured, formally regulated demands of oil painting. Yet it also embodies traditional painting's capacity for careful composition and chromatic deliberation. For Burchfield, a sheet of paper emerges as a membrane stretched between the outer world of nature and the inner world of the artist's emotional life. Think of it as an aesthetic skin, separating different domains that are both in constant flux. His story as an artist is the lifelong odyssey of reconciling the two -- of finding the means by which to bring them into harmony or its semblance. Burchfield gave the spiritual intuitions of 19th century American transcendentalism a Modernist reverberation. He was born in the bustling Lake Erie coal-port town of Ashtabula Harbor, Ohio, and moved south with his family to the small village of Salem in 1898, when he was 5. In 1921, following odd jobs taken after studies at the Cleveland School of Art, he relocated to Buffalo, N.Y., to work as a wallpaper designer at M.H. Birge and Sons. He was an immediate success. Within a year he was married, soon moving into a house in suburban Gardenville. There he built a studio out back, raised a family and lived the rest of his life. (The Burchfield Penney Art Center at Buffalo State College has the largest collection of his work.) Starting in 1929, on the brink of the Great Depression, he began to make a living selling his art -- experiencing the toughest times during World War II, when sales not surprisingly ground to a virtual halt. The Hammer show, "Heatwaves in a Swamp: The Paintings of Charles Burchfield," reminds us that the artist had an unusually successful career. In 1930, shortly after the Museum of Modern Art was founded in Manhattan, it was Burchfield rather than a European artist who was the subject of the ambitious new institution's first solo exhibition. About half the watercolors from that show are in the Hammer's second room, labeled "A Golden Year?" It refers to 1917, the pivot of the MOMA exhibition. As was typically the case, MOMA was less interested in new art fresh from the studio than in cataloging the history of Modernism. Director Alfred Barr looked back to the roots of Burchfield's evolving aesthetic. The painter made some 450 watercolors in 1917 while still living in Ohio -- a proliferation that would dwindle to one or two a month when he reached maturity and the size of individual works greatly expanded and their complexity deepened. "A Golden Year?" demonstrates that by the time of the Great War, when Burchfield was around 25, his repertoire was pretty much in place. It included natural imagery, Asian-inspired compositional motifs and an autumnal palette of golds, russets, grays and other often nippy colors, plus a heavy dose of black. "Garden of Memories" is emblematic -- an old woman sunken in a chair outdoors,

surrounded by the pitch-black darkness of a doorway behind her, amid a tangle of dying sunflowers and beneath a dimly glowing moon. A recurrent theme of his great landscapes is the coming spring, which wrestles with the retreat of a winter that may not give up its deadening chill. Burchfield is no Pollyanna. Consider a selection of descriptive titles: "White Violets and Abandoned Coal Mine," "Flowers in a Back Alley," "Forest Fire in Moonlight." Another work, "Still Life -- Scrap Iron," shows cast-off waste in a junkyard whose industrial resilience is self-evident and vaguely ominous. Even his wallpaper designs, showcased in a stunning gallery papered floor-to-ceiling with framed paintings hanging on top of it, can assume a wintry glow. The wallpaper evokes Victorian profusion and bristling gloom. The privations of World War II turned out to be unexpectedly liberating for Burchfield. The collapse of his sales prompted a surge in experimentation. One result was an increase in scale. The artist began to join multiple sheets of paper together, sometimes reworking older paintings with new additions that radically changed the original focus. The final room, cheerfully titled "Great Art and Death," presents 16 monumental works from the 1950s and 1960s, some begun 40 years earlier, the largest nearly 5 feet on a side. Burchfield has here left easel painting behind. Previously, watercolors were attractive to him in part because he could bring his materials outdoors to paint in nature. Now, he's competing head to head with wall-size Abstract Expressionist canvases of the New York School. One irony is that Ab Ex is itself unthinkable, whether Jackson Pollock's fluid paint dripped onto canvas or Helen Frankenthaler's thinned pigments spread with a sponge rather than a brush, without the tradition of American Modernist watercolors that Burchfield epitomizes. **An artist's show** The rich and provocative show, which travels to Buffalo and New York next year, was expertly organized by artist Robert Gober, who worked with Hammer curator Cynthia Burlingham. It feels very much like an artist's show, one that springs from an empathy for working studio process. Each room includes vitrines with fascinating adjunct material -- magazines, tools, sketches, correspondence, catalogs, etc. None is more poignant than the final display, featuring two precarious stacks of more than 60 manila folders carefully cataloging a selection of Burchfield's voluminous annotated journals. We can't look inside them, sheltered beneath their plexiglass cover. But the display is an eloquent testament to the fact that, with an artist of Burchfield's deep and prodigious gifts, we will never get to the bottom of it. In the meantime, we have his paintings.