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## In Quiet Chorus: Mary Frank's *Or Was It Like This?* and Charles Burchfield's *Solitude*

JANUARY 28, 2020 BY [JOHN HABER](#) — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

at D.C. Moore Gallery, NYC (through February 8)

Reviewed by John Haber

Mary Frank is not just a visionary. Neither was Charles Burchfield, back when Modernism was just bringing art back to earth. Yet showing them together brings alive their most unearthly twentieth-century visions. Frank has always had an eye on planet earth. She studied with Max Beckmann, the artist who refused to look away from Germany in the 1930s, even after Beckmann's exile in America. And then she studied life drawing in New York with Hans Hoffman, the teacher of Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner. She has stood out among artists less than half her age in a 2009 group show of *Natural Histories*. She returns now to painting after a decade of photography with an eye to nature – her surroundings at home in the Catskills. That return, though, marks even her most naturalistic subjects as not altogether of this world.



Mary Frank, *Head III* (2015-2017)

All Mary Frank, Courtesy of the artist, and DC Moore Gallery, New York



Charles Burchfield, *Window In a Deserted House* (1917)

All Charles Burchfield, Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York

It hardly hurts to see her, from the 1980s right up to the present, beside work by Burchfield from the mid-twenties. They may seem an unlikely pair – the Midwesterner and the Englishwoman, the aspiring artist in 1917 and the artist still active today at eighty-six, watercolors and paintings literally set in stone. The gallery considers them two separate shows, with Burchfield first in his chosen medium, watercolor, although they share a room and even a wall. Still, his New England shades easily into her upstate New York, his views of the seasons into her timeless narratives, and his dark storms and fiery fields into her steady intensity. In context, her selections new work looks even newer.

Born in 1893 in Ohio and educated in Cleveland, Burchfield, too, settled in upstate New York and out of the public eye. In photographs, he looks like a small-town accountant, hair partly neatly in the middle and collar neatly stayed. Yet he never outgrew a child's encounter with nature. He kept hearing *Church Bells Ringing*, *Rainy Winter Night* and *The Insect Chorus* before dawn, to quote just two of his early titles. He seems never to have gotten over childhood fears of chasms in the woods. His late watercolors mingle elation, Gothic fantasy, and a serious touch of Disney.



Charles Burchfield, *Dusky Woods* (n.d.)

The subjects themselves sound like paradigms of lost time – *Afternoon in the Grove*, *Garden of Memories*, *The Song of Katydid on an August Morning*. They also sound idyllic, but this is not the New England utopia of *Looking Backward*, published five years before Burchfield was born. Where Edward Bellamy’s vision was socialist, Burchfield is always isolated. He has one far-away city, more or less unreachable, in black silhouettes spotted by eerie white reflections of clouds or attic windows, a little like a bombing run. He has a grand total of two people, including a woman in “crabbed old age” framed by the blackness of an open doorway and her garden of memories. The other, the artist’s mother, is also dark and blurry, like a haunting.

Nature has a way of hovering ominously, like a huge cloud over a dead-vertical storm. A bare tree gnarled like a Gothic tower looms in the distance, and *The Night Wind* stirs cloud shapes into ghosts. Humanity, though, is worse. Mostly it, too, does a lot of looming, like eaves peeking out above dense trees arching the insect chorus. A Romanesque tower rises behind wheat fields and bare clearing, crossed by rigid streaks of sun and shadow. A mine pit ruins a willow grove.

In a 2010 retrospective at the Whitney, one could see how nature for him served as his own private apocalypse, but the turn began early. He could not have exemplified the American modern in 1917,

because he was still creating it, and he never cared much for familiar forms or formalism anyway – not even at his closest to abstraction. His stalks and trees ascend into the air as if of their own volition. While Frank's figures rarely set foot on the ground, not even in stone. They find refuge where they can in the nooks and crannies of a very material sky.



Mary Frank, *Translation of Bird Calls* (2018-2019)

Frank became known first for sculpture – with one eye on the human form, one eye on Modernism, and an inner eye on her doubts about both. A woman's head may break off into planes, as in Cubism, or seem on the brink of melting away. Its features may look defiant or heartbreakingly and vulnerable, but more often both at once. An example turns up just now in "Making Knowing" at the Whitney, a show of craft in American art since 1950, and another in the back room here, but as only a prelude to painting. There the hints of Cubism are gone, and women are rarely alone. In fact, they are not half as clearly human.



Small paintings on shale-like stone work well enough on their own, but on a shelf together they set out her vocabulary and a single natural history. The figures in black or white include birds, reptiles, primates, and humans – or an evolutionary stage in between. A man and woman, huddled together on canvas, have not altogether lost their fur. Stone fragments turn up in the larger paintings, too, along with additional strips of canvas, for a layering of materials and thoughts. Wavy incisions into thick white bring out the texture of paint, but also the material weight of art itself or that sky. With a predominance of red, the air may have caught on fire as well.

Her monoprint in “Natural Histories” had a deep red, too – its humanoid monkey bent like a fossil in mystic contemplation. Frank’s subjects now are still fossils and still mystical, but they can no longer stay still long enough to contemplate anything, whether the great beyond or their fate on earth. They leap, swim, float, or sink as in an apocalypse or a dream. Two may appear to confront one another from opposing sides of a diptych, unless one is too busy dragging behind her a fish. After “I caught an enormous fish,” Elizabeth Bishop in poetry “looked into his eyes” and had to let the fish go. Frank cannot let go of anything in pursuit of her vision.



Mary Frank, *Or Was It Like This? II* (2018-2019)

They may appear to transcend barriers or to be caught up in them. One leaping woman has just left a huge rock, in hope of landing on another. Will she find herself instead shattered by its crags or drowning in the sea below? A family forges slowly ahead along an endless highway. If their nudity stands for a shared intimacy, it makes even clearer their vulnerability and isolation. Their lean gray flesh has nothing in common with art's classic nudes – just as their family ties have nothing in common with accommodating women since Titian.

Another nude finds more encouragement in a highway by dominating it. Running into the picture, away from the viewer, she asserts her independence. It speaks, too, to Frank's own self-assertion that figures apart from couples are invariably women. Yet what looks like still another path ahead is merely the top of the Great Wall. Its long parapet could serve as a prison. It is and is not a dream of freedom.



Mary Frank, *As You Can See* (2018-2019)

Frank keeps repeating the same motifs because she is actively forging a vision. That gray flesh picks up the tone of the slate on which she paints. Her most ambitious painting here brings her motifs together in those fragments of gray against that fiery red and swirling incised white. The figures to every side may not acknowledge one another, but they belong to a single circumferential swirl as well. Their often prehistoric nature links her natural history to something older than herself or Modernism. Still, like an unplowed field for Burchfield, it unfolds within a present-day imagining, where neither she nor her subject can let go.