



Charles Burchfield
The Insect Chorus
 1917
 Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute



Charles Burchfield
The Night Wind
 1918
 Museum of Modern Art

MAKING "HEAT WAVES"

by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

While much well-deserved attention is being paid to [Georgia O'Keeffe](#) at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, another pioneering American modern is getting the full treatment at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. "Heat Waves in a Swamp: The Paintings of [Charles Burchfield](#)," Oct. 4, 2009-Jan. 3, 2010, is a comprehensive and fascinating exhibition that includes 80 watercolors, oils and drawings as well as doodles, wallpaper designs and journals.

Of equal note is the show's curator, [Robert Gober](#), the contemporary artist renowned for his uncanny sculptures of mundane objects such as white sinks, fleshy body parts and environments. Superficially, Gober and Burchfield may have little in common, but Gober clearly empathized with the mysterious animism of Burchfield's landscapes, in which trees, rocks, flowers and wind seem energized by potent if invisible forces.

Burchfield, raised by a widowed mother in Salem, Ohio, attended the National Academy of Design on scholarship in 1916 but quit after one day. Already driven by his own ideals, he produced more than 200 paintings in 1917, what he called his "Golden Year." After a stint in the army during World War I, during which he designed camouflage, he moved to Buffalo, N.Y., in 1921, where he designed wallpaper for M.H. Birge & Sons. Burchfield remained in Buffalo until 1929, during which time he and his wife Bertha had five children. They bought a house in the rural suburb of Gardenville, where they remained for the rest of his life while he pursued his painting with considerable success.

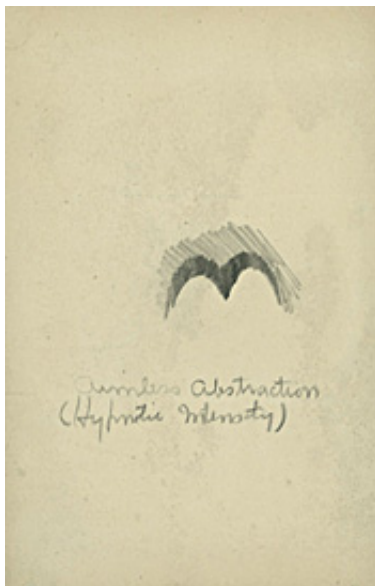
He began showing in New York at the Montross Gallery in 1924. After five years, he joined Frank K.M. Rehn Galleries. Museum of Modern Art founding director Alfred Barr organized an exhibition of his watercolors from 1916-1918, the museum's first solo exhibition. Burchfield became a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1943, just before a retrospective of his paintings opened at what was then the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo.

Burchfield's more conventional landscapes became associated with the American Scene movement. Feeling trapped by his own success, he decided to review his earliest watercolors to mine their unfettered, youthful sense of inspiration. He expanded many of these early watercolors by pasting pieces of paper around the margins to make larger, more elaborate compositions. (Gober did most of his research at Burchfield Penney Art Center in Buffalo, and there discovered the expanded drawings for a missing painting. He had seen the painting, *The Red Pool*, in a living room on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and brought the two parts together for the first time in this exhibition.)

As in his earliest watercolors, a mystic, yearning, ecstatic quality emanates from a great many of



Charles Burchfield
The First Hepaticas
 1917-18
 Museum of Modern Art



Charles Burchfield
Aimless Abstraction (Hypnotic Intensity)
 1017
 Burchfield Penney Art Center

Burchfield's late landscapes, such as *Dandelion Seed Heads and the Moon* (1961-65). Burchfield died in 1967, at age 73, and the exhibition at the Hammer is a welcome chance to review his work, especially through the eyes of an atypical curator like Gober.

Hammer director Ann Philbin was visiting the artist after he had recently purchased a Burchfield drawing. Already convinced that it was time for a major West Coast exhibition of Burchfield's work, she suggested Gober organize an exhibition. The endeavor grew and grew in complexity. Gober worked with Cynthia Burlingham, Hammer deputy director of collections and director of the Grunwald Center, and with curators at Burchfield Penney; the exhibition took one and a half years to organize.

Though Gober expressed a desire to keep the focus on the exhibition and not on his role as an artist, he agreed to discuss the pleasures and perils of this ambitious undertaking.

Hunter Drohojowksa-Philp: I'm most interested in how you as an artist with an artist's schedule had the inclination to be so involved in another artist's work.

Robert Gober: It is a pleasure to stretch and this was a real stretch. I've curated shows before but I'd never curated a large scale monographic show of another artist's work and I thought it would be an interesting thing to do, and basically I put my work on hold for year. But I've gone through periods before where I haven't worked for long periods of time, so I honestly don't know if I wasn't working on my sculpture because I was doing a Burchfield show or if I was lucky that I had a creative project to do during a fallow time.

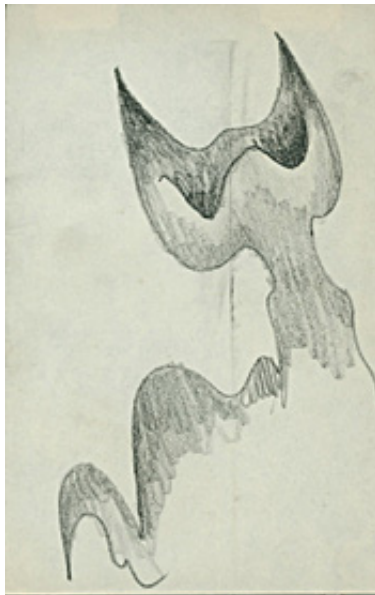
HDP: What attracted you to Burchfield's work? As I understand it, Annie Philbin, the director of the Hammer, was having dinner at your house and this came about in a most fortuitous way.

RG: It did. She was enjoying a glass of wine with dinner and was looking at drawings that we have on our wall and she just went off on Burchfield. She clearly loves Burchfield. When she was at the Drawing Center she took a traveling Burchfield show called the "Sacred Woods," in '93. Annie felt very strongly that Burchfield was under-known and underappreciated, especially by younger artists who are influenced by him but don't even know it. So she basically framed the exhibition and I sat on it for a few days and then I sent her an email and said, 'Well, what if I do a project about Burchfield at the Hammer?' Which I was very comfortable with because who knows what that is? It may be very modest.

Annie kept growing it. She was very ambitious for the show. Could I do 5,000 square feet? How about 7,000? Then touring the show. So from a small nugget of an idea, it grew into a large exhibition.

HDP: One gallery is extremely ambitious because not only does it feature Burchfield's watercolors, but it is entirely lined with his wallpaper. This is an interesting aspect of Burchfield that many people may not know, that Burchfield designed wallpaper to make a living. Did this relate at all to your own work and designing wallpaper?

RG: I started making wallpaper before I knew about Burchfield's wallpaper, so I would say it was maybe more immediate antecedents like Andy Warhol that were more of an influence that way. I guess it was about 15 years ago that Donna De Salvo, who is now chief curator at the Whitney, did a show at the Wexner called "Apocalyptic Wallpaper" that featured younger artists doing wallpaper. We went up together to the Cooper-Hewitt Design Museum to research Burchfield up there, to see if that might be an interesting inclusion. So that was the first time really that I



Charles Burchfield
Untitled (Fear 2)
 1917
 Burchfield Penney Art Center



Charles Burchfield
Freight Cars under a Bridge
 1933
 Detroit Institute of Arts



Charles Burchfield
Two Ravines
 1934-41

looked seriously at his wallpaper.

HDP: Of course he was doing it to make a living. Did you find in the course of your research that his work in designing wallpaper had any connection to the way his work evolved as an artist?

RG: No, he did wallpaper from 1921 to 1929. In 1921, he started having a family and had five kids in six years, and he needed a job. The works that are hung on the wallpaper in the exhibition are the works that he made while he was designing wallpaper. He sometimes referred to it as "hack work" because he did not feel it was that close to his artwork. There were some wallpapers that were very divorced from his interests in painting, but there were other wallpapers that hewed very closely to his interests, like the one here, because he drew and painted sunflowers repeatedly throughout his life. His wallpapers are always based in nature, as was his art.

HDP: There is an exquisite moment in this room where there is a painting of firefighters hosing down a burning building hung on cheery sunflower wallpaper. Was that intentional on your part?

RG: Yes.

HDP: There is a great darkness, it seems, beneath the examination of nature and genre paintings. Could you talk a little about that?

RG: He liked to present himself as a contented family man not interested in the city, at home in his garden studio with his dogs and his children. But in reading the journals, a more complicated and complex person emerges. We tried through some of the quotes in the book and on the wall to get at that complex interface that the person he pretended to be was not the complex person that he was. There were 10,000 hand-written journal pages that he left but there was a book published with 700 edited pages, so I've only read the 700 edited pages, not the 10,000.

HDP: What did you learn in those 700 pages?

RG: That he needed a better editor.

HDP: You say in your introduction that sometimes artists are asked "who influences your work" as opposed to "what influences your work." I thought that was an interesting distinction to make. What influences your work that might be in common with Burchfield?

RG: People are assuming that I've had a long burning desire to get closer to Burchfield, to understand and reveal him. And that really wasn't the case. If it had been a different director at my house for dinner, it could easily have been a different show. I recently bought a beautiful pencil drawing of a dog by **Rosa Bonheur** and after I bought it, I got very interested in Rosa Bonheur. She led such a fascinating life. She lived dressed as a man, enormously successful, lived in a castle surrounded by a zoo. If it was a different person visiting my house, I could see doing a Rosa Bonheur show. It wasn't necessarily Burchfield -- it was the challenge of investigating another artist's life and presenting his story.

HDP: Apparently there are two big paintings of ravines here that you have discovered and brought together for the first time in many years? Could you tell me about that journey?

RG: There are two paintings. One is called *The Coming of Spring* (1943) and the other is called *Two Ravines* (1934-43). In 1943, Burchfield had an artistic crisis. He was turning 50. The

Hunter Museum of American Art
Chattanooga, Tenn.



Charles Burchfield
End of the Day
1938
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts



Charles Burchfield
Glory of Spring (Radiant Spring)
1950
Parrish Art Museum

country was in the middle of its involvement in World War II and he was acclaimed. And success can bring its own problems. He was acclaimed for what was then called "American Scene" painting, which now we somewhat negatively refer to as Regionalism. And he felt that it really wasn't expressing his deepest possibilities as an artist, but he was stuck as to how to go forward. So he went forward by going backwards. During 1917 and '18, the drawings that he did, he really felt inspired. He went back to those drawings and took them out, pasted them on to larger boards and expanded them into larger works using the 1917 drawings. These are the first two works that he did that with. Although they were started decades apart, they were finished within a month of each other in his studio. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time they have been reunited since they left his studio.

HDP: How were they expanded?

RG: He added paper onto the bottoms, sides and tops. He grew the composition out from the original to the expanded sizes. *Coming of Spring* is probably made up of ten different pieces of paper if you look closely, you can see the seams. He was a very good technician in joining the seams -- if you look closely you can spot them.

HDP: When people come to the exhibition, they will look at these watercolors and not see that they are pieced together.

RG: Until you go into the next room where visually and verbally we explain the process.

HDP: And in this room is one of my favorite watercolors of the dandelions, where it looks like he's lying down in a field of dandelions.

RG: Exactly. In the middle of the night, at 70 years old, with his head on the ground, looking at the moon through dandelions. That's the way to go.

HDP: I know you don't want the focus to be on you as an artist, but you *are* an artist. Do believe that you see this work in way that is different than an art historian or curator?

RG: I truly don't know. What we are trying to do through the presentation of the work and the ephemera in the vitrines is to tell a larger story of a man and his artwork with the exhibition and not just the artworks themselves, and that is because he has been somewhat forgotten by the public at large. I thought if we are taking this opportunity, let's try to sketch the fullest, most complex picture that we can.

HDP: As an artist yourself, if you were forgotten 100 years from now -- which is highly doubtful -- would you want your own personal archives to be part of an exhibition?

RG: I will not have anything approaching the vast quantities of material that Burchfield and his wife saved. You cannot believe how much, it seems that every scrap of paper was archived. Thousands of doodles, for one painting he might do 90 drawings, he saved them all in handmade notebooks with labels. I have very little like that. It's also his letters, his record collections, his postcards. . . it doesn't end.

HDP: There is a wonderful moment in one gallery with an actual framed leaf, a leaf that was apparently in many of his paintings. Can you tell me about the significance of that leaf?

RG: In the last ten years of his life, he endured a number of serious physical ailments. It was



Charles Burchfield
The Four Seasons
1949-60
Krannert Art Museum
Urbana-Champaign, Ill.



Charles Burchfield
Dawn of Spring
ca. 1960s
DC Moore Gallery



Charles Burchfield
Sun and Rocks
1918-50
Albright-Knox Art Gallery

during one winter when he was healing from one malady, every morning he would go out and look at this oak leaf. Oak leaves are tough and they last through the winter and into the spring. He called it "Indomitable Leaf," because he found it heartening that it was still there through Buffalo's winter winds and snow. He did a painting of it, *Constant Leaf*, and then his wife went out and took the leaf and framed it and saved it.

HDP: He had a parallel career with Georgia O'Keeffe but he didn't seem comfortable with that level of fame.

RG: He called his level of fame a prison. He resented the encroachment it made on his time and on his psyche.

HDP: Can you respond to that as an artist who has achieved a certain amount of fame in your own right?

RG: I think Burchfield had more of a need than I do to isolate himself. He wasn't a hermit, it wasn't a neurotic isolation. I think he was truly happy in his studio, left alone, protected by his wife and left to do his work. He had a much stronger need for that than I do.

HDP: Is there something you'd like to add that we haven't asked you?

RG: I think Burchfield achieved one of the rarest things in the life of any artist, and that is great art in old age. That was the last ten years of his life.

HDP: What do you like about that part of his work?

RG: Oh, the freedom and the bravery to reinvent yourself, and the formal smarts.

"Heat Waves in a Swamp" continues to January 10, 2010 at the Hammer. It travels to Burchfield Penney Art Center, Buffalo, N.Y., Mar. 5-May 23, 2010, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, N.Y., June 24, 2010- Sept. 2010.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP writes about contemporary art in Los Angeles.



Portrait of Charles Burchfield
ca. 1941
Photo by Peter A Juley & Son
Burchfield Penny Art Center



Charles E. Burchfield painting in his studio in
Gardenville, N.Y., in 1966
Original color slide by William Doran
Burchfield Penny Art Center