Charles White: *Art and Soul*

Freedomways

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT

Cover Art: *Sound of Silence* · Charles White · Lithograph, 1978

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CHARLES WHITE IN PERSON

by SHARON G. FITZGERALD

YEARS AFTER SEARCHING Madrid's Prado Museum and the Louvre in Paris, I discovered at last a personal meaning for art in the works of Charles White. Finally, the absorption that supposedly sweeps one from one masterpiece to the next was no longer academic or contrived but was truly catalyzed by serious and inspired reflection. The "classics" waned pale and incommunicative when contrasted with White's wide, blazing eyes and rich brown hues. I returned several times to that 1977 exhibit at the Heritage Gallery feeling the need to ingest all that he could reveal.

I was fortunate to obtain a personal interview. With each question, White delved deeply into his experiences and impressions to extract and explore and explain. His eyes soared, landed, then pierced; his fingertips drummed a secret code; his hands sculpted the air. Even these wordless expressions and gestures brought to life the unseen.

In these days filled with would-be prophets, the ideas of Charles White provide a dramatic catharsis for the human spirit. During the three years since this interview, I have learned more about the ways in which human sensitivities can be distorted or misplaced, how the artist's eye can also be used to transmit confusion and despair. Despite his awareness and anger at the world's injustices, there was no such cynicism in Charles White.

Q.: *You've talked a lot about your early experiences in Chicago, and although times were difficult, you managed to remain positive throughout it all. What kept you going?*

C. W.: I could sort of generalize about a lot of things. I could say that it was partially my mother, partially my peer group and partially whatever it was that had made me a sort of romantic little child. Lonely, but incapable of living with loneliness.

My home environment was chaotic in many ways, based on the relationship between my mother and my stepfather, but the thing that began to stabilize me a little bit in terms of security was the fact that I did discover drawing and painting as a means of communication. That first happened when I was seven or eight.

Sharon G. Fitzgerald is a freelance writer living in New York City. This interview was conducted in September 1977 at the time White's works were exhibited at the Heritage Gallery, Los Angeles.

Q.: *I've read that you developed some very exciting friendships during your early years.*

C. W.: I happened to grow up in a period of time in Chicago when my peer group included Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Katherine Dunham, Richard Wright. I was fourteen. The way the community structure was, if you were interested in any of the arts you eventually knew everybody else, every other Black brother and sisten who was interested in the arts. We developed a social relationship and a very close-knit one. We formed a theatre group called the Negro People's Theatre which all of us participated in. There was a poetry workshop organized. This was during the period of the depression and the WPA, so there were community arts centers where dance groups performed, where poetry reading groups were formed, writing and art groups. All of us got involved in all of the arts . . . the acting, dancing and so forth. We partied together on Saturdays. Katherine Dunham, for instance, used to have a kind of open house. She was a cultural anthropology student at the University of Chicago and, at the same time, she became interested in dance. She formed a group and so I had an opportunity to get involved in dancing. It was a very exciting period.

We were not an elitist kind of group. We were people whose families had come from the peasantry of the South; we were close to the soil. Our customs, our eating customs, our speech patterns, all grew out of the folk idiom of the Black people. That was reflected in the kinds of work that we were trying to do. We tried to deal with that kind of material.

Q.: *How do you feel about the increasing number of new artists?*

C. W.: I am excited by the fact that so many young people are willing to commit themselves to becoming artists. It's healthy, it's a sign that there's a new life force involved in the perpetuation of culture. It has always been exciting for any artist to realize that he is going to have more and more allies, that there will be more people involved with the same goals in mind.

Communities need artists like they need doctors and lawyers and everybody else, but it's painful in many ways because of the relationship that you have to the society. Society pretty much looks upon the artist as a luxury commodity; they tolerate him. You're not considered necessarily as functional, as useful, in the same sense as a teacher or a lawyer or a doctor. It's unfortunate because art is absolutely one of the most functional areas in the society. Without it, the spiritual poverty of man would be immense—far greater than what it is already. Man needs to get some visual picture of himself. We contribute to the values of our society. You can only call yourselves civilized as a result of our being here and doing what we do. We

contribute to the aurora of civilization.

Q.: *How would you define art?*

C. W.: Art has a broad definition in the way that I see it: Art is anything that gives you a spiritual relationship with yourself and a relationship with nature. These are all extensions of one's inner self, they make it possible to discover something about yourself and the reason for your being. We seem to have this need. Sometimes we use religion to give us some reason for being. We have to have spiritual nourishment, anything outside of using our manual skills or using just our intellectual skills. Why this is, I don't know.

You use art to constantly reassure yourself that you and nature are one, that your reason for being here in this form has answers. You search for answers to these things. You constantly try to regenerate, try to make yourself feel worthy for this privilege of being human. Art is somehow an extension of this spiritual kind of thing. I don't mean spiritual in a religious sense, I mean spirit as in the spirit of man.

Q.: *Are you religious?*

C. W.: No.

Q.: *Why not? Your paintings have such a spiritual feeling.*

C. W.: I have a philosophy of life that doesn't necessarily embrace Christianity. If you want to use religion in another context, then the answer might be yes. You believe in some mythical thing out there, some nebulous thing. To me, it's nature, it's my fellow beings. I don't live in some other kind of world and believe in a Supreme Being, these are things that have no meaning to me. I've explored various philosophies and come to my own conclusions. I've lived long enough to do that; I've had enough experiences. It's not a rejection of the tenets—some parts of the Christian tenets I can accept—but I don't feel the need for that deeper involvement in what religion means. I point out Christianity because that is what I was brought up under. I could be some other faith. I have faith in men, in mankind.

Q.: *Your work is so universal that people other than Black people are not intimidated, they embrace it. What about that communication—do you feel that your audience fully understands your message?*

C. W.: No, I think that's almost impossible. I'm not that literal in my work to make it totally understood what my intent was. You see, a good painting has to have multiple meanings. Whatever meaning somebody draws from it is part of my intent, without my consciously making it the intent. I'm thinking only about my inner self. I'm being very introspective when I do a piece of work, I'm not that concerned about how somebody is going to interpret it, I throw that part of the burden onto the observer.

I had a discussion yesterday with a young artist who talked about how he wanted to please his public, how he wanted to give them something they would like. So he sits down in the studio and he works that way. Well, I was very critical of this approach. I said, "If you want to do that, fine, but you're going to rob yourself of a great deal of your ability, maybe, to dig down inside yourself and give them a far greater meaningful thing than you're capable of giving them to please them."

Q.: *Why do you use so many more women in your work than men?*

C. W.: Women are the source of life. It's very easy for me to use them as a symbol of anything that I talk about in nature, and that's basically what I am doing with all of my work. I'm talking about the most fundamental of all of our sources. All of our energies come from our relationships with women. I think that their role has been very well defined in that sense. I see women as a beautiful symbol of what I'm after in terms of my philosophy. If I had to give a gender to things, then I see everything as female. Some psychiatrists might have a problem or a field day with that in analyzing me.

Q.: *You commented that you've always been painting one picture. Could you explain this?*

C. W.: It's one picture in terms of my philosophy. It hasn't changed. I always paint fragments of it. Your whole career comes out to be the sum total of one thing. You're one belief, one person. Whatever you are, whatever you've shaped, that's it, you are that individual. There's a thread in everything I've done, there's a continuity. I paint in fragments of what is the total me. I don't have a big enough canvas to paint the whole thing on one canvas; it would stretch across this world. I constantly search for more dimensions, but I'll never fulfill all my potential in terms of my dimensions. I won't live long enough to do it.

Q.: *So, it's not hope here and dreams there.*

C. W.: No, it's all mixed up together. Hope, dignity, reality, as I see it. If I paint an expression on a face, there's tremendous sorrow without the loss of dignity. There's hope by the gesture of the body. It's all embodied in the whole, total being of the person or the atmosphere of the incident.

The ingredient that I can't deal with is happiness. It ain't there, not for what I see. When I see the whole big picture of this society, I don't see happiness the way I define it. For there to be happiness, you have to have freedom, first of all. That's essential. As long as there is the absence of that, it's impossible to be happy.

The capacity for what we see as joy and happiness is a fragmentary thing. We can sit down here and have a party, we can have a whole

lot of fun and walk away saying, man, it was a ball of an evening, but that's a reality that can never be sustained. The only way that it can be sustained is if you shut out reality and create your own that has nothing to do with what is really real.

Q.: *How can we achieve happiness?*

C. W.: By removing all of these negative things and beginning to get all of the people together, and when we can walk this earth and say that we're free. When we reach that goal Dr. King talked about and we look over that mountain.

Q.: *Do you mean free from outside strictures?*

C. W.: That's the only way you can free your insides. I can't walk around this world and talk about how I've achieved freedom, that I've found it. That's a myth. I can't shut out everyday living. I'm no longer free if I read tomorrow morning that some brother has been shot and killed by some racist cop, or if I walk around and see the breadlines and people on welfare. I'm well assured that I'm not free anymore. There's poverty, there's starvation, there're wars. How can I be free knowing that somebody over in someplace is having a war? This is what I mean, there is no freedom, there's no joy and happiness in this world, it's fragmentary.

I'm talking about freedom in a very romantic and idealistic sense, but that's the only way I can conceive of it. I'm not a pragmatist who can say to myself, well, you are always going to have this and always have that and, therefore, what are you talking about, pure freedom or what? No. I see the world as a place containing all of these unnecessary conflicts between men. It doesn't have to be. I've arrived at the point where I can see that there's nothing organic in this society that says these things should exist. My reason, my logic, tells me that. Therefore, it is not necessary and it's possible to eradicate.

I have no blueprint to offer this world. If I did, I'd be a fantastic person. I don't know the answers to all of these questions. I can say that I have relative happiness in relation to my family, but then I'm concerned about the world outside my little inner sanctum.

Harvest
Lithograph, 1963