

Life & Arts

Charles White – images of dignity, agony and redemption

On show at New York's Museum of Modern Art, White's paintings are the work of a quietly polemical artist



Charles White's 'Our Land' (1951)

Ariella Budick OCTOBER 16, 2018

Charles White, the subject of a stirring retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, was a quietly, powerfully radical painter. He channelled his anger as a black man into art that fumed but never escalated into stridency. A humanist to his core, he believed that portraits could propel the world towards justice, if they were good enough. Hovering between realism and allegory, he saw his subjects as complicated and fallible people, but also as symbols of the struggle for justice.

In the joyous 1957 “Folk Singer”, we see White’s friend Harry Belafonte enraptured by song, head thrown back and fingers splayed, beating out a syncopated rhythm. Though the star is clearly identifiable, the almost mannerist exaggerations endow him with disproportionately large hands, thick arms and a small, delicate head. Belafonte wrote that White’s portraits “are real, but they are oftentimes much bigger than life, as if the artist were saying to us, ‘Life is much more than this. Life is big and broad and deep.’”

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White was born in 1918 in Chicago and raised by a mother who had migrated from the South. His talent blazed early and won him a full scholarship to the Art Institute of Chicago, which honed his gifts to a classical sheen. A sketchbook from 1938 offers a glimpse of the technical fluency he had achieved by graduation. An anonymous woman, perhaps someone he had spied on a train, cradles her head in her hands. She is lost in thought, or maybe just dozing off, but either way, White takes an introspective moment and gives it an epic cast.

This show, curated by Sarah Kelly Oehler and Esther Adler, covers his entire career — which is to say, the tumultuous heart of the 20th century — and tracks the way political and aesthetic principles braided together in his work. White painted only black subjects, with one or two exceptions, including a portrait of Abraham Lincoln. “I like to think that my work has a universality to it. I deal with love, hope, courage, freedom, dignity — the full gamut of human spirit,” he told an interviewer in 1978, the year before he died. “When I work, though, I think of my own people . . . their history, their culture, their struggle to survive in this racist country. And I’m proud of being black.”

From the late 1930s to the 1950s, he expressed that pride in a social realist style that amalgamated bits of El Greco, Michelangelo (in his “Last Judgment” phase), cubism and Diego Rivera. In a 1945 lithograph, White places his “Hope for the Future” in a sharecropping Madonna who cradles an infant in giant, meaty hands, while a blighted tree droops in the distance. The title suggests that the wages of optimism are a present of relentless misery.



'Five Great American Negroes' (1939)

In 1947 he travelled to Mexico City to see the work of Rivera and other leftist muralists up close. But he came away more impressed by the Taller de Gráfica Popular (Workshop of Popular Graphics, or TGP), which churned out stark and dramatic prints that virtually anyone could afford. In that studio, he learnt how to exalt martyrs, commemorate everyday struggles, and inveigh against racism in a range of inexpensive media. For the rest of his life, he made posters, album covers, linocuts and lithographs.

His mission was always political, and he demanded that art at least try to redress discrimination. In New York, he travelled among the 10th Street crowd, which included Pollock, de Kooning and Kline but, with his activist's soul, he was unwilling to indulge in the luxury of abstraction. He worked for leftwing journals such as the Daily Worker and the New Masses, supplying them a steady supply of hortatory images. He drafted historical figures to fight contemporary battles. A young Harriet Tubman appears in "Exodus I Black Moses" (1951), leading her people towards the promised land. Frederick Douglass grasps barbed wire in his huge steel fist, liberating a host of political prisoners. "Our Land" (1951) nods politely to Grant Wood's "American Gothic", but in his boldly feminist revision, White replaces the scrawny white couple with a black woman who clutches a pitchfork and asserts dominion over her own destiny. Her face is kindly, her body unyielding; she fills out the threshold of her white frame house like a Sistine Chapel sibyl, all bulk and muscle and grace.

White contracted tuberculosis while serving in the army in the second world war, and in 1956 a doctor advised him to move to a more forgiving climate. He chose southern California, and though it took nearly a decade, he finally landed a full-time job there, teaching at the Otis Art Institute. The change in circumstances triggered a stylistic transformation. Even as the times grew more chaotic and American politics more tangled, he simplified his art. He adapted the social realist style of the 1930s to the civil rights struggle of the 1960s by eliminating noise — editing out extraneous figures, clamouring colours and real-life backdrops. The black body became a site of agony and redemption.

In "Birmingham Totem" (1964), a nude boy struggles to climb a pyramid of splintered wood. Perching atop that unlit pyre, he clutches a plumb line, an architectural tool that suggests

rebuilding and rebirth. That ink and charcoal monument was White's response to the Ku Klux Klan's bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, which killed four young girls and lit a wildfire of outrage and mourning. "The death of these little children may lead our whole Southland from the low road of man's inhumanity to man to the high road of peace and brotherhood," Martin Luther King, Jr. said, and White took him at his word.



'Soldier' (1944)

Eventually, the art world caught up with White's politics, but he steered clear of 1970s aesthetic experiments such as conceptualism and performance art, putting his trust in classical poise and immaculate technique. He moved, instead, towards a high-gloss hybrid of symbolism and realism in which lone figures stood in for whole social movements. "Mississippi" (1972) depicts a monumental black man wrapped in a thick wool blanket — a beggar or a god, or maybe both. The

fabric, its weight and itchiness rendered with palpable virtuosity, swirls up towards a pointed hood. A bloody handprint emblazons the canvas above his head. He is a homeless prophet, like Elijah, and his portrait is at once an indictment, an omen, a reminder and a curse.

Religiosity tolls even louder in “Black Pope (Sandwich Board Man)”, a golden, Byzantine-ish painting from 1973 that is based on a Leonard Freed photograph from a decade before. Freed’s street preacher marches past a showy 1956 Mercury Montclair, wrapped in an old coat and scarf and carrying a dog-eared Bible, an expression of spiritual transport on his face. White updates and elevates him, keeping the Greek-cross headgear, losing the car and the scripture, and adding a touch of grooviness with aviator shades and fingers V’d in a peace sign. The result is a late-model holy man, a contemporary American expressing timeless hopes in one of art’s ancient dialects. Which is a pretty accurate description of White himself.

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