

# WHITNEY

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## Press Release

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### MAJOR SURVEY OF THE WORK OF CHARLES BURCHFIELD, CURATED BY ROBERT GOBER, TO BE PRESENTED AT THE WHITNEY

*June 24-October 17, 2010*



*Glory of Spring (Radiant Spring)*, 1950. Watercolor on paper, 40 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 29 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (101.6 x 73.7 cm). Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Corning Clark, 1959.

**NEW YORK, April 14, 2010** – This summer the Whitney Museum of American Art focuses on the work of the visionary artist Charles Burchfield (1893-1967) in an exhibition curated by acclaimed sculptor Robert Gober. *Heat Waves in a Swamp: The Paintings of Charles Burchfield* features more than one hundred watercolors, drawings,

more...

and paintings from private and public collections, as well as selections from Burchfield's journals, sketches, scrapbooks, and correspondence. Organized by the Hammer Museum, in collaboration with the Burchfield Penney Art Center in Buffalo, the exhibition provides the most comprehensive examination to date of an underappreciated modernist master. Whitney senior curatorial assistant Carrie Springer is overseeing the installation in the third-floor Peter Norton Family Galleries, where it will be on view from June 24 through October 17, 2010.

Born in 1893 in Ashtabula Harbor, Ohio, and raised nearby in Salem, Burchfield spent most of his adult life in upstate New York, in Buffalo, where he moved in 1921, and the neighboring suburb of Gardenville. Working almost exclusively in watercolor on paper, his principal subject was his experience of the natural world, which led him to create deeply personal landscapes that are often imbued with highly expressionistic light. His works quiver with color and the almost audible sounds of humming insects, rustling leaves, bells, birds, and vibrating telephone lines. In 1945 he noted, "It is as difficult to take in all the glory of a dandelion, as it is to take in a mountain, or a thunderstorm."

Contemporary artist Robert Gober has curated previous exhibitions, most notably *The Meat Wagon* at the Menil Collection in Houston, in 2005, drawn from the diverse selection of works in the Menil's holdings. With this exhibition, Gober – who discovered that his interest in Burchfield was shared by Hammer Director Ann Philbin and coordinating curator/Hammer Deputy Director Cynthia Burlingham – is for the first time curating a large-scale monographic show of another artist's work. The exhibition is arranged chronologically, with each room presenting a distinct phase of Burchfield's career. Exploring both physical and psychological terrain, Gober has augmented the selection of Burchfield's works with extensive material that sheds light on the artist's thoughts about his work and artistic practice. Burchfield (with much help from his wife, Bertha) left a trove of well-maintained sketches, jottings, notebooks, journals, and ephemera spanning his entire career. This material is now part of the Burchfield Penney Art Center at Buffalo State College.

The title of the show, *Heat Waves in a Swamp*, comes from the title of a Burchfield watercolor. Gober writes of Burchfield in his catalogue introduction: "He loved swamps

and bogs and marshes. He loved all of nature and was torn as a young man between being an artist and being a nature writer. He liked nothing more than to paint while literally standing in a swamp. Liked the mosquitoes and the rain and the decay of vegetation. I felt early on that this title had a metaphorical sweep that captured Burchfield's enthusiasms at their deepest and best."

The exhibition begins with work Burchfield created in 1916 while living in Salem, Ohio, and follows his career with particular attention to transformative and reflective moments in his life and work. Among the earliest works is a 1917 sketchbook entitled "Conventions for Abstract Thoughts," which includes a series of symbolic drawings depicting human emotions. The abstract forms in these drawings would reappear in Burchfield's work for years to come.

A room is dedicated to a series of works that were shown in a 1930 exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, *Charles Burchfield: Early Watercolors, 1916 to 1918*, the first show at MoMA devoted to a single artist. Correspondence between Burchfield and MoMA's legendary curator/director Alfred Barr will be shown alongside the work. As Gober notes, "Burchfield's complex communion with nature, as seen in these early watercolors, would resurface later, becoming the inspirational touchstone for the work of the last two decades of his life."

From 1921 to 1929 Burchfield worked as a designer at the M. H. Birge & Sons wallpaper factory in Buffalo. His designs, like all his art, were based in nature and reveal such diverse influences as Japanese woodcuts by Katsushika Hokusai and Ando Hiroshige, Chinese scroll paintings, and the illustrations of Arthur Rackham. Burchfield's work as a wallpaper designer during the 1920s is featured in a room that includes watercolors from the same period hanging on walls covered in a reprint of one of his designs. When the opportunity arose to show his paintings at the Frank K. M. Rehn Galleries in New York, Burchfield gave up his job and decided to paint full time.

Burchfield accepted commissions from *Fortune* magazine to paint railroads in Pennsylvania, sulphur mines in Texas, and coal mines in Virginia. Many of his paintings of this period deal with the rural and industrial worlds around him and present these

worlds in a less fantastical way than in his earlier watercolors. By the mid-1930s, Burchfield was celebrated for his realist depictions of the American landscape. In 1943 Burchfield faced a creative crisis as he was approaching fifty and the country was in the middle of World War II. At that point he began to look back at his earlier watercolors and to expand them. The exhibition reunites two pivotal paintings, both completed in 1943 within a month of each other, although one was begun in 1917 and the other in 1934. These two paintings, *The Coming of Spring* and *Two Ravines*, were the works that marked Burchfield's transition from crisis to the extraordinary achievements of his last two decades. Gober notes, "He felt that his work had lost the intensity of his early watercolors, and in his struggle to make works that he felt reflected the best possibilities for his creativity, he took early drawings and physically expanded them to make these two landmark works."

Although he struggled with health problems during the 1950s and 60s, until his death in 1967, Burchfield created some of his most vibrant and fascinating works toward the end of his life. As Gober writes, "The works from this period of Burchfield's life are immersed in what he perceived as the complicated beauty and spirituality of nature and are often imbued with visionary, apocalyptic, and hallucinatory qualities. In these large, late watercolors, Burchfield was able to execute with grace and beauty many of the painting ideas that he had developed as a young man...And in so doing, he transformed himself and his practice, producing one of the rarest events in the life of any artist: great art in old age."

### **Catalogue**

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue edited by Cynthia Burlingham and Robert Gober, with an introduction by Gober and essays by Burlingham and Gober, as well as by critic Dave Hickey; Burchfield Penney Art Center Charles Cary Rumsey Curator Nancy Weekly; and Burchfield Penney Art Center Research Assistant Tullis Johnson. It is published by the Hammer Museum and DelMonico Books, an imprint of Prestel Publishing.

## **Funders**

*Heat Waves in a Swamp: The Paintings of Charles Burchfield* was organized by the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, in collaboration with the Burchfield Penney Art Center, Buffalo, New York.

*Heat Waves in a Swamp* is made possible by The Joy and Jerry Monkarsh Family Foundation. Major support is provided by the LLWW Foundation and Lynda and Stewart Resnick.

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## **About the Whitney**

The Whitney Museum of American Art is the leading advocate of 20th- and 21st-century American art. Founded in 1930, the Museum is regarded as the preeminent collection of American art and includes major works and materials from the estate of Edward Hopper, the largest public collection of works by Alexander Calder, as well as significant works by Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Bruce Nauman, Georgia O'Keeffe, Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, Kiki Smith, and Andy Warhol, among other artists. With its history of exhibiting the most promising and influential American artists and provoking intense critical and public debate, the Whitney's signature show, the Biennial, has become the most important survey of the state of contemporary art in America today. First housed on West 8th Street, the Whitney relocated in 1954 to West 54th Street and in 1966 inaugurated its present home at 945 Madison Avenue, designed by Marcel Breuer. The Whitney is currently moving ahead with plans to build a second facility, designed by Renzo Piano, located in downtown New York at the entrance to the High Line in the Meatpacking District.

## **Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art:**

### **2010, the Whitney Biennial**

#### **Collecting Biennials**

**Heat Waves in a Swamp: The Paintings of Charles Burchfield**

**Christian Marclay: Festival**

**Modern Life: Edward Hopper and His Time**

**Charles LeDray: workworkworkworkwork**

**Through May 30, 2010**

**Through November 28, 2010**

**June 24–October 17, 2010**

**July 1–September 26, 2010**

**Opens October 27, 2010**

**Nov. 18, 2010-Feb. 13, 2011**

*The Whitney Museum is located at 945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street, New York City. Museum hours are: Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Friday from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m., closed Monday and Tuesday. General admission: \$18. Full-time students and visitors ages 19–25 and 62 & over: \$12. Visitors 18 & under and Whitney members: FREE. Admission to the Kaufman Astoria Studios Film & Video Gallery only: \$6. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 6–9 p.m. For general information, please call (212) 570-3600 or visit [whitney.org](http://whitney.org).*

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