

Charles Ware

By Art Hazelwood with Janet Jones

Background to a brown bag . . .

"What's his name? . . . Jack Connolly . . . and . . . and Bill Wolff came up here the other day and Jack asked me, he says, 'Charlie, what do you think it takes to be an artist?' And I say, 'Well, first off you gotta be a bum . . .' And Bill says, 'Well, I guess that's right.' 'And second,' I say, 'you gotta be as selfish as hell.' Well, I guess they make you into a bum don't they? Society that is, society makes us artists into bums."

That's a story that Charles Ware seems to feel expresses his feelings about the life of an artist in general. And his life in particular has been full of events that make this point as well. In some ways Charles is an old style academic, in some ways an Outsider artist with a capital "O." He left art school after returning from service in World War II to find the academic atmosphere that he loved and excelled at was gone. The stars of the San Francisco art scene had arrived.

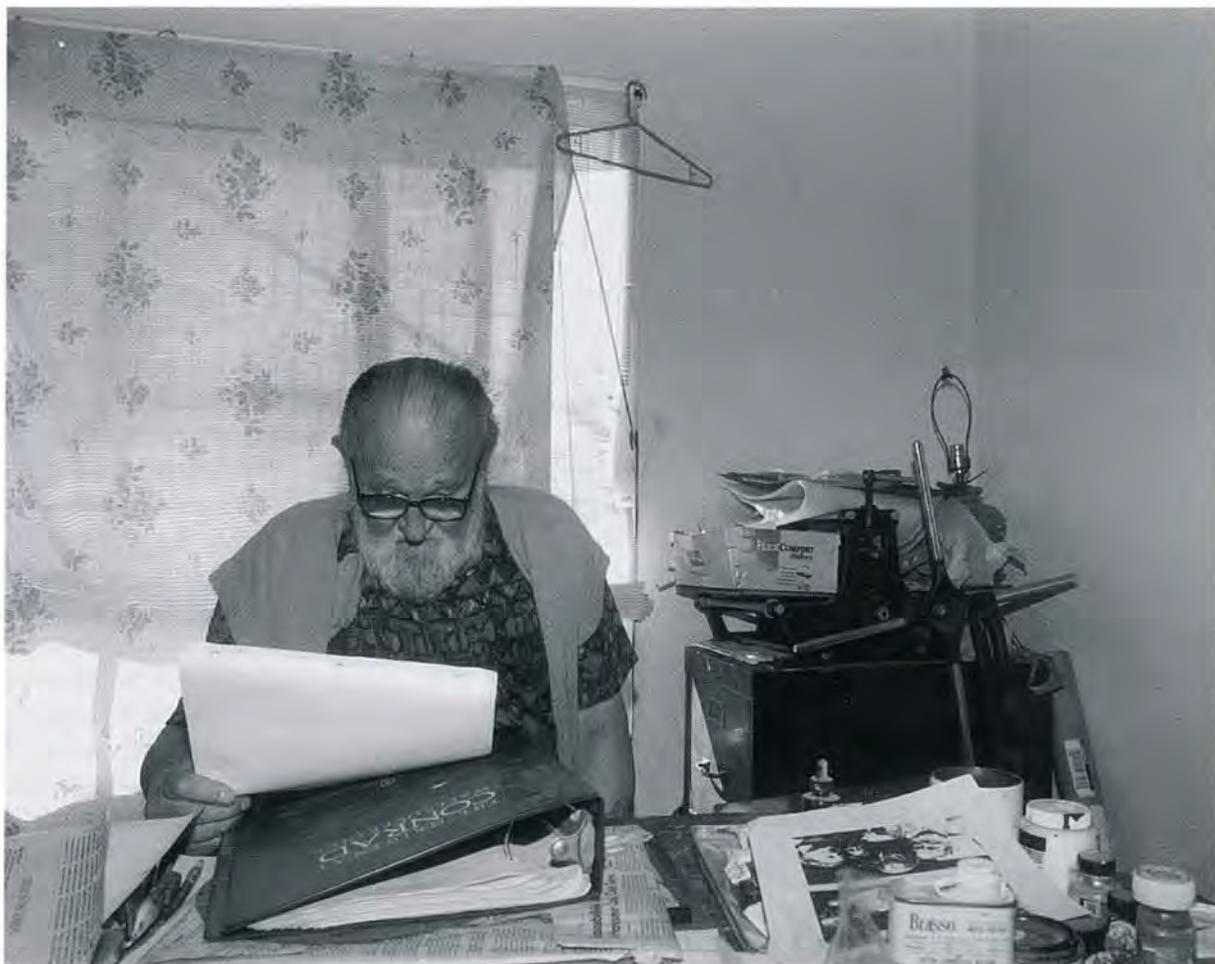
David Parks was teaching. Diebenkorn was a student. But to Charles it seemed that everything had changed for the worse. Whereas before, the figure drawing classes were taken seriously, now they were treated lightly. The academicians had been swept away during the war. Charles considered it the end of seriousness about technique and the end of the appreciation of the old masters. "I used to love the old masters." He says, "The students and faculty must've thought I was some kind of a freak."

Before World War II he had received the Angus Boggs scholarship, a great honor and still a source of pride for him today, to attend the California School of Fine Arts (now San Francisco Institute of Art). "Then World War II came along and when I came back from that, I couldn't take it. I didn't last more than a couple months."

This rebelliousness against the new movements of the day coupled with his allegiance to formal technique found expression in his richly detailed fantastic imagery. And it is still this imagery that immediately sets Charles's work apart from the more recently established academics of today. Someone told him once he was too subjective in his paintings. "All my ingenuity goes into the pictorial stuff. I can't be objective. You know, people have been talking down about illustrative work as if that's something terrible,



Charles Ware,
The Last Tea Party,
dremel drypoint
(Photo: Robert Jones)



Charles Ware in his studio.

(Photo: Robert Jones)

but if you look at the really great artists, they're all great illustrators. Now you do something like the old masters and they call you an illustrator. Christ, some of those children's book illustrations are amazing."

After leaving the California School of Fine Arts, he became a regular at various North Beach hangouts, what he calls "old Bohemian establishments" like The Black Cat, The Iron Pot, Vesuvio's and The Artist's Club, where he made a sort of a living painting barroom nudes from photographs. "They were hard to find in those days." When one of his former teachers, Clay Spohn, caught sight of some of these works, he got angry. He kept looking at Charles's paintings, getting angrier and angrier and drunker and drunker and he started yelling to Charles, who was in the next room, to come out and fight.

In those days Charles would sell a painting for "something ridiculous." Today he is ashamed to say what the prices were, "like five bucks. I'd practically give it away for a drink. My brushes were so shot I was using my thumbs."

In the early 1950s, Charles moved to New York City where he painted signs for stores in the garment district. The sign shop manager paid fifty cents an hour which even then was way below minimum wage. But for Charles this was ideal because he could work as few or as many hours

as he wanted. He worked a lot. He drank a lot. And he slept in the park a lot. But though he never really managed to exhibit in New York, he kept sending piles and piles of paintings and drawings home to San Francisco.

In the late 50s he came back to San Francisco and with a friend opened the Elysian Art Gallery on upper Grant Avenue in North Beach. This was really the artistic moment for Charles and a group of similarly minded artists. North Beach was jumping and art galleries were flourishing. The gallery did quite well for a few years.

The vision that inspired Charles and some of the artists who showed at his gallery was a fantastic vision similar in some ways to the European Fantastic Realists. This vision was based on a search for paradise. For years he has been painting, among other images, the story of Alice in Wonderland. This started as a vision of something he had known all along. "A kind of *deja vu* experience. I decided I was trying to paint heaven. It's much more difficult to paint heaven than hell. And Alice fit into this. Alice, the Elysian Fields, The Garden of Eden . . . one going out of paradise, and one going in . . . That's Alice . . . they all have a universal element as well as a specific element." This universal element which Charles tries to bring out through his work can be seen in a print combining the tea party from

Alice and the biblical last supper, called the "Last Tea Party." Through the juxtaposition of these two tales the print portrays, without being declarative, both the specifics as well as what the tales hold in common. There seems an odd correctness in this pairing, as with another work in which Jesus is being crucified as Alice's neck grows to incredible lengths, with the words inscribed below, "Curiouser and Curiouser."

In 1970 Charles bought a thirteen-inch bed Holbein press and started to teach himself printmaking. He'd taken a lithography class once but could never remember the steps, so someone else had to print for him. Now he began to print in earnest. His reason for printing began as one of economics. He could sell a print. It was more affordable for his customers. Over the years he has developed his own peculiar techniques and approaches to printmaking. The search for new materials, unencumbered by ideas of the "right" way to proceed and a willingness to try anything, helped him explore a wide range of possibilities. An eye for the inexpensive material and a skill for utilizing it led to new discoveries; some useful, like those reported below, and some less so, like a cardboard box which he laminated to make acid baths in his bathtub.

He now lives with his son in Bernal Heights in an environment piled high with art work. He has a large press in the garage straddling a crack in the concrete from the 1989 earthquake. There is clearly no separation in his house between art and life. Every room is a work-space and a storage space. There are stacks of his work in every room. Paintings, prints, collages, drawings, cut-ups of his own work which he has reassembled into new works are everywhere throughout the house. The walls are densely hung with his work and the density of his fantastic imagery contributes to the sense of entering into Charles's world. On one wall hangs a painting of a sphinx-like creature with the head and breasts of a woman centered amongst a plethora of wildly animated beings including, in one corner, the artist's head on a butterfly.

Brown Bag demonstration

In December 1996, about fifteen CSP members joined Charles Ware at his house and studio to learn about his technique of using cold rolled steel and latex paint in engraving. But the demonstration soon veered off in many other directions as the attendees picked up pieces of his work and said, "Tell us how did you do this?"

Charles began printmaking with aquatint and etching but now stays away from acids. His principle method of engraving is to use a small hand-held dremel electric engraver, rather than a burin, on a variety of metals such as galvanized sheet metal, tin, and cold rolled steel. The tin, he said, is cheap and works easily but cannot be controlled as well as the steel which holds the engraving best. Demonstrating his technique, he wiped a plate with bare hands

and said, "My doctor gave me hell. He said, 'Charlie, you've been drinking again.' But I haven't had a drink in years. I guess it's this ink that's hard on my liver." He uses the dremel to draw the image onto the plate as he continually rubs the plate up with oil based ink to better see the image as it develops. The dremel he uses has a rapid up and down movement as opposed to the flexible shaft rotating dremel. The line produced is a feathery, delicate line that doesn't hold up for large editions, especially on the tin.

Two different ways of using latex house paint were described. In one case the latex is painted on to an etching plate as a texturing affect. It can be used as an atmospheric effect and can be variously manipulated with brushes or by hand as it dries to the plate. As it dries, it cracks, and this can also be used to advantage. The plate Charles demonstrated on had an engraved image in the center with latex around the sides, giving a texture to the area surrounding the image. A second technique using solely latex paint is also employed. In this technique, latex is painted on to a plate so that it covers the entire surface and then the paint is drawn into while it is still wet. The plate is left to dry and then printed. The groove of the drawn line remains and the plate can be printed relief or intaglio.

Cardboard is another of the commonly employed plate materials used. Two methods of using cardboard as a matrix were described. In one, cardboard (he uses the backs of sketch pads) is sealed with Krylon acrylic spray; then a layer of the cardboard is peeled back and removed using a razor blade to cut out the image. The result is a very shallow relief print which can be inked also as intaglio. With the second technique, an image is painted on a piece of cardboard using white acrylic paint. The finished painting is then sealed, again with Krylon acrylic spray. After it dries, it is then inked and wiped. The ink remains on the cardboard but wipes clean from the acrylic painted part of the surface.

Most of Charles's techniques are not unique to him. And one might assume his use of surprising and inexpensive materials is not significant in itself. However, perhaps because he came by them on his own, in his singular pursuit of a subjective vision, the techniques and materials have become intimately connected to his imagery. With no printmaking rules to unlearn, he is willing to try whatever comes to hand and to mold it to his purposes. In this can be seen a disparity between his technical skill and the cheap quality of his materials which points out again Charles's dual nature as academician and outsider, artist and "bum."

Janet Jones was previously the editor of the Journal.

Brown Bags are one of CSP's most popular events. If you are interested in sharing your printmaking knowledge with your colleagues by giving one, please contact Xavier Viramontes at (510) 235-0701. If you'd like to write up a brown bag event, call Linda Boyd at (510) 652-3649.