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ART REVIEW

Seeing Charles Pollock anew in Venice

CHARLES POLLOCK

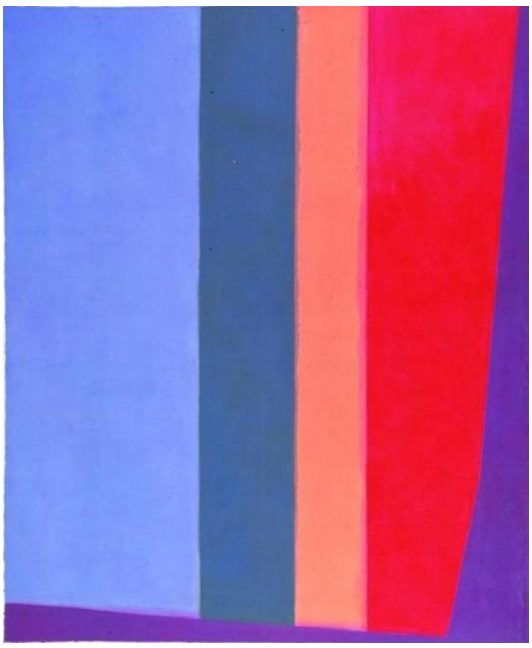
Jackson and Charles Pollock in New York in 1930.

By Sebastian Smee | GLOBE STAFF MAY 30, 2015

VENICE — A man of exemplary honor, real talent, and finely honed sensibility, he was committed. He was conscientious; he persevered. But you don't know about him, because his name was Pollock. And where he endured, his less talented, emotionally unstable, alcoholic younger brother briefly flowered and then flamed out, thereby achieving immortality.

That would be one way — certainly not the most judicious — to frame the case of Charles Pollock, modern painter, as well as older brother and mentor to the more famous Jackson.

Another way, perhaps equally unfair, would be to say that Charles was a very good artist, representative in countless intriguing ways of the period he lived through, but that posterity is ruthless, and so it is not entirely surprising, when all is said and done, that we don't know his work better.



Charles Pollock's paintings on display at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice include "Delta" from 1967.

This summer, Charles Pollock, who died in 1988, is the subject of an impressive, thought-provoking, and immensely poignant retrospective at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice.

It's poignant — to the point of heartbreak — because it reveals that he really was very good. The problem was that his brother was in another category. Or rather, he shattered categories, transcending both "very good" and "very bad" in ways no one could have foreseen.

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All of this doomed Charles — just as he was hitting his stride after a long and tortuous apprenticeship — to the limbo of bit-part player, a doleful but dignified straight man in his little brother's lurid life story.

The ironies are many. Charles, who was 10 years older than Jackson, was the Pollock brother (there were five of them) who first decided to become an artist. This original decision was remarkable in itself, given his family's hardscrabble existence (rock-crushing, dishwashing, fruit farming, hotel managing; mostly failing) in Wyoming, Arizona, and California. Without it, Jackson would never have pursued the path he did.

As a child, Charles experienced an epiphany when he walked into an abandoned schoolhouse where the floor was covered with foolscap sheets of Palmer writing exercises. "It was some sort of revelation," he later recalled. Somehow the experience engendered a lifelong fascination with lettering, calligraphy, and graphic design, which he went on to teach for many years at Michigan State University.

It was a fascination, like so many of Charles's interests, that was later taken up by Jackson, who covered many of his breakthrough paintings of the early 1940s with scribbled notation.

Charles studied art at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. He grew out his hair and dressed in bohemian clothes. He was wise, mature, studious, authentic. And Jackson was in thrall to him.

"When Jackson was a little boy and was asked what he wanted to be when he grew up," recalled his mother, Stella, "he'd always say, 'I want to be an artist like brother Charles.' "

In 1926, Charles went to New York to study with Thomas Hart Benton at the Art Students League. Benton had been an early, experimental modernist — one of the first abstract painters in America. But in the 1920s he renounced modernism and transformed himself into a Social Realist, making figurative art — including large-scale murals inspired by the Mexican muralists — with a left-wing, populist, and proudly nationalist agenda.

Charles stayed with Benton for six years, becoming one of his most talented and loyal disciples. When he heard about Jackson's personal struggles back in California, he wrote a long, solicitous letter full of brotherly advice, luring him to New York, where Jackson joined the Art Students League and effectively took Charles's place in the affections of Benton and his wife, Rita.

That, too, was OK with Charles; Jackson needed affection. He needed help. When their father died, the two brothers took an 8,000-mile trip in a Model-T Ford across the continent, from New York to Los Angeles and back again, to visit their widowed mother.

It was the year of the Okie Migration, and seeing the worst effects of the Depression out west with their own eyes hardened both men's determination to pursue Benton's activist agenda. Charles, in particular, was determined to make art that served a social purpose, helping to ameliorate the plight of the poor and the dispossessed, with whom his own upbringing made it easy to identify.

Charles was socialist but anti-Stalinist. He was a lifelong follower of William Morris, the founder of the 19th-century Arts and Crafts movement, and he believed in craft, the dignity of work, and the redemptive powers of beauty.

Throughout the '30s and early '40s, in Washington, D.C., Detroit, and East Lansing, Charles worked as a cartoonist, graphic artist, and mural painter for organizations like the Resettlement Administration, the United Automobile Workers, and the Works Project Administration.

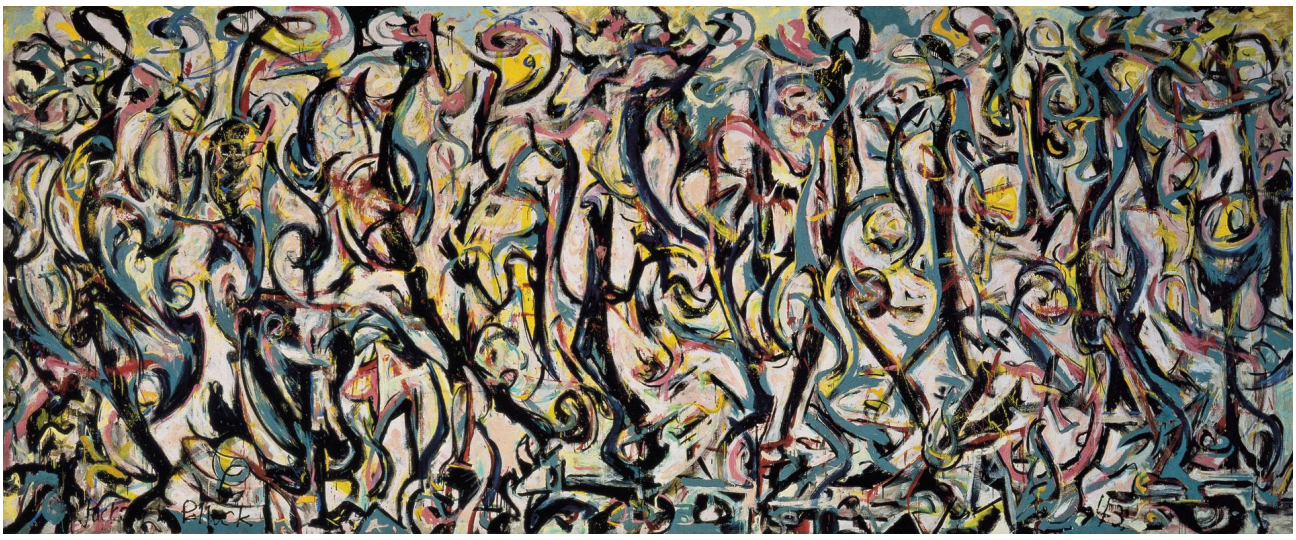
His relationship with Benton, he always maintained, was the most profound of his life. But in retrospect, he realized, it had led him down "a long blind alley." It had made his art provincial, pinched by political imperatives — many of them banal and petty — when by instinct he was cosmopolitan, expansive, poetic.

Back in the summer of 1929, Charles had inherited Benton's studio in Union Square. He discovered, in a suitcase Benton had left behind, a large number of his mentor's early color-based, modernist works, which he had later disavowed. They were sensitively colored, abstract or semi-abstract, and they derived from the French, formalist tradition Benton later repudiated as decadent and un-American.

In Charles, they had planted a seed. And so in 1944, in a state of disillusion, he discarded Benton's Social Realism and over the next decade transformed himself into an abstract painter, and in the words of Terence Maloon, the author of "The Art of Charles Pollock: Sweet Reason," "a superb exponent of 'color-music.' "

Charles didn't make great headway in this new vein, however, until 1955. Living in Ajijic, on the edge of Lake Chapala in Mexico, he painted a series of subtle works in oil and tempera using calligraphic notations in layered colors, rhythmically dispersed. Pared back, relaxed, and expansive, they were a major breakthrough.

In the meantime, however, Jackson had himself broken with Benton and turned toward abstraction. And between 1943 and 1946, he seemed to have found a way to overcome all his native disadvantages — his poor drawing, his volatile psyche, his problems with alcohol — and flourish.



A detail from Jackson Pollock's "Mural" also on display at the Peggy Guggenheim.

One of the key paintings of this period, which led directly into his scintillating poured and dripped paintings of 1946, was the large mural Peggy Guggenheim commissioned from him in 1943. Owned by the University of Iowa, the painting, called simply “Mural” and measuring 8 feet by 20 feet, is on loan to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice in a small exhibit that complements the Charles Pollock retrospective.

A thrilling work made in a famous all-night rush after a prolonged creative block, “Mural” is a direct antecedent to the drip paintings to come. It establishes powerful rhythms and energies across its entire expanse, and includes surprisingly bright yellows and greens that never come across in reproduction.

Within a couple of years of painting it, Jackson had become the most famous modern artist in the country.

The story of Jackson’s rise is as astonishing to contemplate as ever. But what is also astonishing is how well Charles handled it. Jackson’s head was understandably turned, and at times he behaved like a cretin, once even claiming that he was the first artist in his family.

But Charles was unfazed. According to Maloon, he “proudly preserved each exhibition invitation card and each press clipping that Jackson sent him from 1943 onwards.”

Art historians and biographers tried for decades, continued Maloon, “to detect the smallest streak of jealousy and resentment [in Charles] towards his brother’s achievement and fame. But Charles’s magnanimity, his stoicism about being the ‘other’ Pollock and his resignation at his own lack of worldly success were anchored in an abiding brotherly love, in his thorough appreciation of Jackson Pollock’s genius, and in his own extraordinary nobility of character.”

Jackson's ascendancy was shockingly brief. From 1951, his reputation, along with his mental health, were in decline.

Meanwhile, Charles's career continued to suffer from what Maloon called "a bad sense of timing." His Mexican work, from 1955-56, is strong, and one can imagine it being taken up by critics and collectors who were also responding at the time to the works of Mark Rothko, Franz Kline, and Barnett Newman.

But 1956 was also the year of Jackson's death, and subsequent critical resurrection. The world wasn't interested in this tragic, raging figure's restrained, soft-spoken older brother.

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Charles also "lacked the opportunistic instinct," writes Maloon. "Having no inclination to thrust himself forward, he gave the impression of being too reserved, too independent and proud, hence he was a poor networker and ineffectual 'operator' in the art world."

Comment

The year after Jackson died, Charles did, however, befriend Clement Greenberg, the influential critic who had bravely championed Jackson before almost anyone else was willing to take him seriously. Their friendship lasted 10 years, and in many ways it was useful to Charles. Greenberg was sincerely supportive.

Charles's work from this period is sustained and impressive. It was aligned with many of the qualities Greenberg championed in the 1960s – above all, a kind of compositional openness and a merging of color and canvas support, so that brush strokes and expressive textures disappear.

Charles Pollock's "Rome Eight" from 1962.

For a while, Charles was linked with other so-called Color Field painters pursuing Greenberg's agenda. But again, the moment passed quickly, and the suddenly burgeoning art world turned its restless attentions to Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptual Art.

Charles was above all a suave and original colorist, and some of the best work he made was in the mid-1960s, when he used combinations of bright, artificial colors with softer pastel hues to create color effects of absorbing complexity and subtlety.

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lilacs and purples) for any of it to really sing. Tacitly acknowledging this, the Guggenheim show cuts out at the beginning of the 1970s, when Charles moved permanently to Paris.

But by then, Charles had more than half a century of strong work under his belt.

In the annals of art history we usually learn nothing about the endless ranks of talented artists who fail to achieve fame, despite devoting themselves energetically and wholeheartedly to art. History is selective, and the criterion for selection is success. So if, on the stages that count, success proves elusive, history has nothing to say.

Charles Pollock is an exception. History has quite a lot to say about him — but largely because of the crucial role he played in the life of his younger brother. His own story — and the high quality of his art — is a salutary reminder of how brutal the writing of history can be, and of how much there is to gain from paying attention to some of the figures (many of them, let's be honest, women) that it so ruthlessly discards.

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