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The Real Life of Social Realism

The communist Charles White created images of dignity to portray America's working class. Now, forty years after his death, his art is back in the mainstream.

To say that Charles White (1918–1979) is “finally having his moment” probably doesn’t do justice to his stature while alive. White never lacked fans: According to Andrew Hemingway’s authoritative *Artists on the Left*, he was “the most important Communist artist of the 1950s”; in the late ‘60s, the *Washington Post* named him as the foremost artist of the Black Arts Movement (though he was really an elder statesman). He taught and influenced important contemporary artists like David Hammons and Kerry James Marshall. He was close with Dalton Trumbo and Harry Belafonte. Sidney Poitier gave a statement at his wake.

What is true is that White is suddenly *mainstream* in a way that he never was before, with the great painter, draughtsman, and printmaker now the subject of a radiant touring career retrospective. The show is a stunner, ranging from White’s scheme for his earliest mural, the wheeling, tenebrous Depression-era *Five Great American Negroes* (1939), whose heroes were decided by a vote in a Chicago paper, through the clarion sobriety of his ‘50s charcoal image of a mother and child, *Ye Shall Inherit the Earth* (1953), to the gorgeously enigmatic, sepia-toned oil *Black Pope (Sandwich Board Man)* (1973). Everywhere White’s technique is

absorbing, always finding new ways to express the modulation of skin tones, new means to balance dynamism and solidity.

And everywhere, White’s black figures radiate dignity without stock sentimentality, which made him radical for his time. The cartoonist Tom Feelings once summed up what he felt to be his friend’s mission: “Charles White deliberately chose to depict the everyday, ordinary, working-class people. The most African-looking, the poorest, and the blackest people in our ranks. The ones who by all accounts were the furthest from the country’s white standards of success and beauty.”

What the show does *not* give is a lot of detail about the complexities of White’s socialist politics. To be fair, the specifics of his beliefs remain a bit enigmatic, but as Mary Helen Washington emphasizes in *The Other Blacklist*, there is every reason to stress the importance of radicalism in White’s life. With his first wife, the artist Elizabeth Catlett, White taught classes at the Abraham



Love Letter III (1977)

Color lithograph, 30 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 22 $\frac{5}{16}$ " (76.3 x 57.4 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago. Margaret Fisher Fund. © The Charles White Archives / © The Art Institute of Chicago.



Paul Robeson (Study for Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America). (1942–43.)

Carbon pencil over charcoal, with additions and corrections in white gouache, and border in carbon pencil, on cream drawing board. 24 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 19 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (63.2 x 48.4 cm). Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Kathleen Compton Sherrerd Fund for Acquisitions in American Art. © The Charles White Archives / Art Resource, NY.

Lincoln School in Chicago, led by Communists. He met his second wife, social worker Frances Barrett, working at the multiracial Camp Wo-Chi-Ca (Workers' Children Camp) in New Jersey. He even once wrote to Barrett that the stable foundation of their interracial marriage could be a shared "deep and tremendous faith in love, people, and Marxism."

Even the FBI never figured out if White joined "the Party," but he was definitely close. Today the

affiliation of such an evidently relevant artist with the CP may be embarrassing. It attracted many influential fellow travelers — but its politics were compromised by its Stalinist affiliations, cutting a zigzagging path at Moscow's direction from shrill Third Period ultraleftism to Popular Front patriotism, through a lumbering, confused World War II policy, all before being decisively bludgeoned by McCarthyism.

But the truth is that, on the ground, the Communists did honorable antiracist work. In the segregated "Red Chicago" where White grew up poor, party membership rose to be one-quarter black. And White, an early talent, owed his entry into the artist's life to leftist radicals — in 1937, he was involved in a sit-in strike against the Illinois Art Project, led by the Communist-influenced Artists' Union. The protest was over the autocratic tactics of IAP administrator Increase Robinson and the relief project hiring just one black artist. After the protests led him to "spend some nights in jail," White recalled, Robinson was replaced, and more black artists, including himself, were hired,

"My first lesson on the IAP project dealt not so much with paint as with the role of unions in fighting for the rights of working people," White would recollect. He was nineteen.

After the war, he and Catlett went to study popular art at Mexico City's revolutionary Taller de Gráfica Popular. He recalled later



Ye Shall Inherit the Earth. (1953)

Charcoal on paper, 36 x 26" (99.1 x 66 cm). Private Collection. © The Charles White Archives / Courtesy Princeton University Art Museum.

“accommodated Communism to American conditions,” it swerved to a freshly denunciatory stance, imagining that postwar capitalism was doomed to terminal crisis. A focus on toeing a hard line was the order of the day. In art that meant that any trace of the eclectic cultural alliances of the Popular Front had to be expunged and “realism” was emphasized anew as the one true style of the people.

living “for about a year” with David Alfaro Siqueiros, one of the “Tres Grandes” of Mexican Muralism (a Stalinist hard-liner). Back in New York, in 1951, White and his second wife were sent on a trip to Moscow, where he was feted as a cultural hero.

White’s name appeared on the masthead of *Masses* (☪) *Mainstream*, a CP organ, in this era. The February 1953 issue featured a gorgeous White cover of a woman reaching out to a dove and an effusive article from critic Sidney

Finkelstein: “[I]t can be said flatly that no artist up to now in our country has painted the working people with the depth, richness, love and understanding found in these works of Charles White.” (The same year, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote a personal letter to the magazine to express his appreciation for the White portfolio it had produced.)

White’s sojourn in Mexico had coincided with the party’s dawning Cold War crisis. Under accusations of having

White’s earlier work has lively notes of expressionist distortion, sometimes even cubist faceting that gives figures a sculptural, monumental quality. Now, Communist critics revisited these and denounced them as bourgeois tics; White himself, on return from the Soviet Union, declared that “the great forward-moving tide of art was realism.” Thus, his 1950s work adopted an elegant naturalism — stately, finely modeled images of black workers, farmers, and marching figures.

**Black Pope (Sandwich Board Man).
(1973)**

Oil wash on board. 60 x 43 $\frac{7}{8}$ "
(152.4 x 111.4 cm) The Museum of
Modern Art, New York. Richard S.
Zeisler Bequest (by exchange), The
Friends of Education of The Museum
of Modern Art, Committee on
Drawings Fund, Dian Woodner, and
Agnes Gund. © 1973 The Charles
White Archives. Photo Credit:
Jonathan Muzikar, The Museum of
Modern Art Imaging Services.



The year 1956 was a punctuation mark, when White removed himself from New York to Los Angeles. This was mainly due to chronic lung problems, though some have insinuated that it may have also had to do with the crimping of the imaginative faculties within the newly hardened “social realist” position. It also happens to coincide with Khrushchev’s sensational “secret speech” on Stalin’s crimes, which leaked, triggering a hemorrhage of 30,000 from the already wounded CP. (When writer Howard Fast, then the most important literary figure in the party, dissociated himself, the *New York Times* ran it as front-page news.)

White’s subsequent decades in LA are usually told as a swerve from Communist sympathies to black cultural politics. Which is valid (though I would consider his role founding the Committee of the Arts to Free Angela Davis in 1970 right in line with his CP-affiliated activism around cases of racist persecution) — but whether it represents actual apostasy or just that the Communist infrastructure cratered as the star of black nationalist politics rose is unclear. At any rate, as Washington writes, White’s “story is definitely not one of leftist manipulation and betrayal but a rarely told story of a highly nuanced, personally and professionally productive,

sometimes difficult and vexed, but ultimately life-long relationship with the Left that was still vital when White died in 1979 in Altadena, California.”

For decades, nothing could be considered less cool than “social realism,” deemed interesting mainly as the simplistic stuff that US experimental art defined itself *against* in its ascendancy in the ‘40s. And now, here’s Charles White again, back as if he never went out of style, showing that the work doesn’t always fit the critical cliché, that it could contain extraordinary nuance. The same, I think, holds true of his biography. ■