

Review of Charles Schorre

by Peter Brown

Originally published in SPOT Fall 1997

Book Info:

Charles Schorre
Herring Press,
Houston 1997

Charles Schorre, even at seventy-one and burdened with Parkinson's, was one of the youngest people that I have known. He died, still open and still working, far too young and far too soon in the summer of 1996. His death, it seemed at the time, would leave a void that only memories of him and his art could begin to fill.

Yet recently, transposing some of this emptiness, there has appeared a startlingly beautiful new book, Charles Schorre, which, in small but important ways, stands in Charles' stead, mitigating, as words and images sometimes miraculously do, a transition from life to death and back again - not incidentally, a theme that reverberated throughout Schorre's art. Fittingly, the book (and the exhibition curated by David Brauer and Jim Edwards which accompanies it) was produced as a collaborative effort. It was begun before Charles' death by a group of friends and admirers who cared deeply for the artist and his work.

Charles Schorre was a warm, sympathetic, fiercely honest and engaged human being. His life, which he filled with family, art, friends, music, religion, and to varying degrees, the workings of the Houston art community, represented for me, and I think others, a model for what it might mean to be both a committed artist and a fully dimensioned human being.

Charles was smart and experienced and edgy. He was sane and kind and forgiving and gentle. He was also very funny. And he was helpful. He could, with an understanding smile and a simple shake of his head, appear to accept and dismiss some particularly egregious human folly and then, in genuine puzzlement, mull it over for some time. He could gripe about the art establishment and about art in general, and he could talk and write - always with troubled conviction, about art and the making of art, in ways that sprang from himself but moved quietly into the lives of others.

These same humane qualities might be used to describe his art: a mix of oil and acrylic, canvas, watercolor, paper, charcoal, pencils, photographs and occasionally, writing. It was an art that was filled with mystery, grace, vivid beauty, and a reverence for among other things, the natural world, the human form, the ability to make marks, the life of Christ, the best art of the past, the integration of hand with heart, and the fumbling creative path that each of us makes to discovery.

Charles' virtues - a Boy Scout list of kindnesses, reverences, loyalties and determinations I don't think came easily to him. My sense is that they were challenged by his energy, his humor, and his unique brand of Cuero, Texas macho - a

gentle gutsiness that could put one at ease, but that certainly, and often, went to work on his sweeter side with a devilish glee.

All of this is to say that he was remarkable and that he is missed. There were certain things it seemed, that only Charles understood. Many in the Houston community sensed this, and David Brauer, in his moving epilogue to the book describes this influence well.¹

Charles Schorre was born in 1925, and grew up in the small town of Cuero, in south central Texas. He attended the University of Texas, married Miggie Storm in 1948, and went on to dual careers in art and design in Houston. He taught at the Museum of Fine Arts and for a time at Rice; he had a wonderful marriage, raised a family, showed his work and was an integral and pioneering member of the Houston art community.

His career was varied: a mix of painting and drawing, multi-media/photographic collage, graphic art and design - and in this book, each is given credence. Charles was of a piece, with one aspect of his creative life moving easily into the next. Just as his studio was set up to enable him to move from project to project, so to, the book moves - from interest to interest, from informative text, to Schorre's impassioned musings, to the art, to the studio, to photography, to family - all bound together by an enormously effective design.

The book design by Jerry Herring, Rick Gardner's photography, and the various texts and interviews by Herring, Anne Tucker, Jim Edwards, David Crossley, Geoff Winningham, David Brauer, Lew Thomas and others, are visually integrated in ways that are reminiscent both of Schorre and his art. The book's diversity makes sense. It is profusely and imaginatively illustrated. The text, which dips in and out of the book, begins with a warm overview by Anne Tucker describing the man, his art and his place in Houston. And we dive then, quite precipitously, into the rabbit hole that was Schorre's studio, a studio, which, David Crossley suggests, should become a national shrine - a gorgeous multi-leveled warren of color, form, treasures, nooks, photographs, books and pockets that Rick Gardner, who knew Schorre well, photographs with skill and sensitivity. These photographs Herring then collages and butts together, much in the way that the various bits and pieces of the studio itself seem to merge and repeat in theme and variation, and reminiscent also, of the way that Schorre's art itself was constructed. A more formal and quite informative text by Jim Edwards follows that puts the work in both cultural and art historical context - an essay again that is filled with reproductions. And we enter Schorre's life as a teacher - class descriptions by Schorre himself, hand written course notes taken from

¹"Stylistic influence is the most superficial of influences. The greater achievement is to teach by example how one may become a thinking, functioning, creative being. That is why Schorre exerted such an influence on so many people who were not artists. That is why so many of his friends needed to own his work - not as a token of loyalty but rather to have a living example of his method in their private lives. Creativity is, after all, a way of being, not just a way of doing. It has been, more often than one might have wished, a somewhat disappointing experience to meet an artist whose works one has admired. I never met anyone who was not glad to have known Charles Schorre. In him one was reminded of the vigor and discipline of being an artist. Up or down, ill or well, he went to his studio and worked. He did what all true artists do, ignoring the fluctuations of taste and market. He simply did the work."

David E. Brauer, *Charles Schorre*, (Houston: Herring Press and the Houston Artists Fund) p. 200.

students' comments, and an energetic remembrance by Geoff Winningham which describes his experience of Schorre's generosity as a teacher.

And the work: first, examples from his time as a designer. He worked for a number of businesses, won awards and eventually worked only on his own terms.

He was a photographer. He often used photographs in his Pages of Books Unpublished, (a monumental ongoing photo/collage project) and he used them as well in his design. Clearly his oddest work, and his straightest photographic work, was his Artist's Handbook - a gridded series of photographs of artists, friends and artworld people with their hands cupped at the sides of their faces - looking either defenseless and cute, mock combative, belligerent or peaceful. Some fine quick portraits come out of this work. But the cumulative effect of all these fairly serious people - names such as Robert Rauschenberg, Gary Winogrand, William Wegman, Saul Bellow, Barbara Rose, Donald Barthelme or Robert Motherwell, as well as a fair representation of the Houston art community, similarly posed in such an odd way, is fascinating - and daunting. I think the project was an ice breaker of sorts for Charles - a way for him to learn new things about the people he was photographing. Time, thought, relationship and the differences and similarities that we possess come into play. A publication of this work in its entirety would be fascinating.

As would a publication of the Pages of Books Unpublished - a sequence of work that combines the concerns outlined above in graceful, surprising ways: short lyrical visual stories that read well individually, but when sequenced, grow and build into an enormously effective body of work. All of his interests are dealt with here - from mark making, to desert work, to the nude, to cruciforms, to birds, apples, bones and shells, to landscape, trees, and the use of vivid and celebratory color.

Charles' art contains many aspects, but a sense of expanding energy, a celebration of seeing and being, of delight in the things around combined with an exploration of the mystery within, best defines the spirit of his art for me. And Pages From Books Unpublished distills this.

Reproductions of Charles' paintings and drawings follow. The reproduced scale of the paintings is unavoidably deceptive in ways that the rest of the book is not, largely because his paintings have so much to do with physical impact. Charles' paintings are a sensory experience - large, enveloping - wild with color and space - or alternatively crisp, brooding in a way that suggests the religious connotations that night skies can imply. One flies through them, transported by color and symbol: diptychs, triptychs, cruciforms, and always, that kind, electric color.

There are pointed titles. Charles was a good writer, whether in marginal notes in his collages or in prose-poem essays, words were important to him and he used them well. Jim Edward's essay is helpful on all this work - particularly on Schorre's great gift as a draftsman: the drawings and quick sketches that he produced again and again in his notebooks.

The book concludes with a series of interviews and reviews that remind one of Schorre's openness to improvisation - in words as well as work.

I'm quite certain that Charles would have loved this book. He was an honest critic - and there are things wrong with any publication - but not many missteps took

place here. He was involved in the early stages of this book's design - and on the choice of the art. With his help and with the help of many, we have a beauty.

A number of people are to be thanked and congratulated for the appearance of Charles Schorre - certainly at the top of the list is Miggie Schorre, Charles' wife, who he also saw as his best critic (see the interview with Lew Thomas and James Bell for her enormous influence); Mike McLanahan and Loomis Slaughter organized the Charles Schorre Project and created an advisory board of John Boehm, Frec and Betty Fleming, Lester Giese, Jane Gregory, Helen Morgan, Alton Parks, and Wallace Wilson Jr. Our indebtedness goes to these people, to the contributors already mentioned and to the hundreds of others who gave to this book.

Charles' work and spirit move on - and Charles Schorre serves as access to both, a touchstone and reminder - and an eloquent introduction for those who did not have the profound pleasure of knowing him.