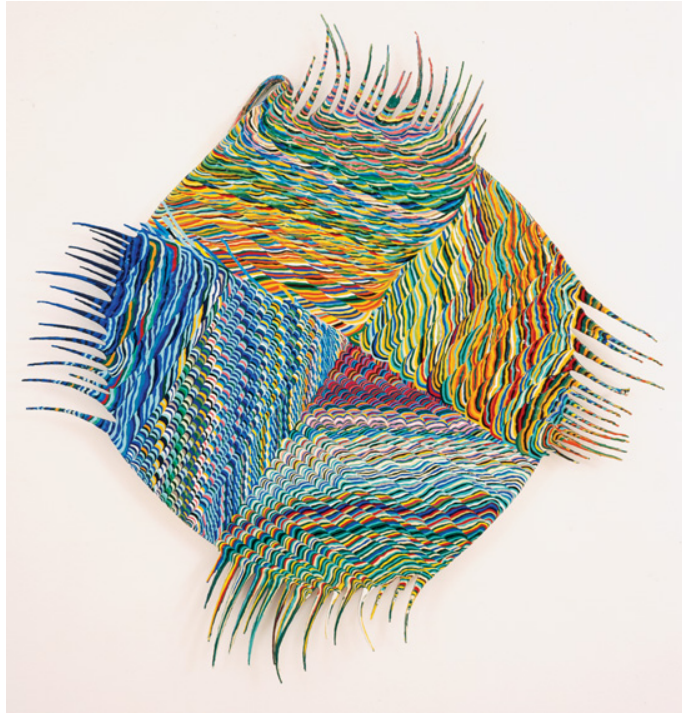


Steven Charles by Dona Nelson

By Dona Nelson



Self-Portrait, 2004-06, enamel on canvas, 33 ¼ x 33 ¼ inches

Steven Charles is so nearsighted as to be legally blind—when reading a book he can see the surface of the paper as being a texture distinct from the inked letters—and he possesses an intensity of energy that seems directly related to the swarming surfaces of his paintings: he talks fast, like a disc jockey, in an uninflected stream of wisecracks and complaints—bits about growing up in the culturally blank suburbs of Texas, the son of a construction worker, reading comic books and obsessively doodling, and about the underground music scene in New York, a place that echoes his own energy. But all this does not explain the accomplishment of his paintings, which is their extraordinary quality of time and space, more sensed than seen: indeed, these paintings are very hard to see. One steps up close to catch a virtuoso detailed passage, but upon stepping back, it vaporizes into the whitish overall mist of the color spectrum. The paintings are patterned in photographs and more spatial in person.



Eifoinbysetwin (with detail), 2003, enamel and collage on canvas, 84 × 72 inches.

Charles starts his paintings with anything at all, simple painted shapes of animals and other images, or collaged materials of all sorts and big fat spills of paint, which liver when dry, providing a complex, wrinkled terrain that he then covers with tiny lines and dots of sign-painter's enamel, squeezed from little bottles. Charles's relentless dividing of the canvas transforms it into a constantly changing, shadowed, shallow space. I listened to some of the music he likes (noise-punk bands like Lightning Bolt), walls of sound in which patterns emerge and fade like the rhythms of war felt and heard beneath water.

Both the paintings and the music parallel contemporary culture in that the flow of incident is so dense that it is difficult to focus upon any one event, which contributes to a sense that everything is happening at a remove from the present moment. In this way, looking at Charles's paintings is a different experience from viewing, say, a Jackson Pollock, which seems to exist completely in the present. The alarming complexity of Charles's paintings is silencing.

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Icemur, 2005, enamel, modeling paste and collage on canvas, 20 × 20 inches.

Charles's process emerges from an obsessive impulse that both frees and compels him to take as much time as the painting demands, sometimes two years. Time spent on a painting has often been seen as the concern of people who don't know anything about art, who can't see the ideas in art, but in 2006, when there are so many demands on our time, time spent making each painting makes Charles's studio practice into a kind of extremely radical solitary performance. His paintings are reminiscent of aerial maps or the infinitely complex circuitry of a computerized world, but coupled with the thick turgid quality of the paint (the clumsiest of mediums), time is made visible, literal and material.

Dona Nelson is a painter based in New York.