

## Steven Charles

By Michael Wilson

“Whatever happens, I wanna mess with it.” Steven Charles flits from painting to painting around his cluttered Upper West Side studio, describing a hyperactive methodology entirely consistent with the canvases’ intense detail. “I like to have lots of works in progress simultaneously so I don’t have to commit to anything,” he grins. “I don’t own anything, I’m not married, I don’t have kids... I’m in this for the long haul.” Warming to his theme, he launches into a joking rant – “I’m angry, I’m fierce, I’m on fire!” – then gets serious. “I’ve spent the last ten years just painting but I feel like I’m just getting started.”

Charles, a Brit who studied in Texas and Rome, might fairly be called a painter’s painter. He doesn’t own a computer and has little sympathy for video or photography. He aims for an art that sets itself apart from gratuitous meditation by emphasizing the direct experience offered by physical materials manipulated by the artist’s hand. And he is proud of the fact that, due to their graphically intricate and richly textured surfaces, his works don’t reproduce well. Many of the artists he most admires, including Robert Ryman, Anselm Kiefer, and Paul Klee, suffer from the same problem – if it is ultimately a problem. “In print...” He tails off, shrugging. “But in person... wow!”

“thirteen monsters for lightning bolt”, Charles’s first solo exhibition at Marlborough in 2007, was named in homage to the titular band, a frenetic noise rock duo whose compulsion to blast every silence with sound meshes with the painters’ maximalist drive. In eighteen paintings and one small sculpture, he improvises on arbitrary or prosaic beginnings such as drips or simple objects, expanding and elaborating on their outlines to generate dazzling all-over patterns. While rendered mostly in glossy enamel, some of the works also incorporate other materials – *the sun for Ann*, 2007, lists “gold leaf, gold glitter, modeling paste, floral wrapping paper, contact paper, and grand theft auto poster” alongside the paint.

When it comes to subject matter, Charles is ambivalent. He acknowledges that viewers have seen and will continue to see figurative imagery in his works – anything from computer circuitry to topographical maps and urban plans to microscopic life (he recalls artist Dona Nelson dubbing one collegiate work “a happy little AIDS painting”)- but declines to actively pursue illustrative allusions. He has long since been fascinated by abstraction but

doesn't consider himself an abstractionist per se. And while they often seem to reference Aborigène or Aztec designs, his buzzing networks and agglomerations are, while not wholly self-contained, relatively free-floating. As the artist cheerfully emphasizes, "everything's a self-portrait, everything's a landscape, everything's an abstract, everything's a lie."

In his new paintings and objects, Charles persists with some established ways of working but spins off in uncharted directions too. He is now working in acrylic, and has been adding more collaged elements (look for the photos of well-dressed uptown ladies with little-dog heads, and some steals from old Marlborough catalogues). Figurative starting points are also more prevalent and discernible in the newer panels: One composition is built around his girlfriend's silhouette. New themes are emerging: the conversation, 2009, alludes to his experience as an analysand (not being a native New Yorker, he is a newcomer to therapy). And he has been making more sculptures, dipping corks and popsicle sticks into paint multiple times to produce eccentric three-dimensional "color charts," and laying larger works on towels to give them a "fresh from the shower" look.

What remains is the characteristic quasi-psychedelic feel of Charles's work, a hypnotic energy that hauls the viewer ever further in. The artist continues to employ what he calls "targeting," a semi-automatic process of filling in areas with successive bands of opaque color that recalls Daniel Zeller's delicate ink drawings or Jim Lambie's floor works. The labyrinthine density of the results is part of what makes them so hard to look at on the page but such a pleasure to catch in person. He also sticks with a playful titling system that involves turning phrases into acronyms (2007's *thwhissm*, for example, translates to "that which is small"). And he continues not only to absorb myriad influences (in the space of half an hour, everyone from Mary Heilmann to Steve DiBenedetto to Stanley Whitney gets a nod) but also to keep up the pace of his own productions. "Art is a non-stop opportunity to be ceaselessly original," he says. Then, begging me not to quote him, "If you don't like my work, change the way you live!"

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*Catalog created in tandem with Steven Charles's solo exhibition, the upstairs room, Marlborough Chelsea, NY, October 15 - November 14, 2009.*