

# Art in America

September 2006

## PHILADELPHIA

### Charles Burwell at Swarthmore College and Sande Webster Gallery

Charles Burwell is one of those artists who, having set what might seem to be narrow boundaries for himself, continues to find challenges and room for evolution within them. Thus, the mini-retrospective of 19 works at Swarthmore College's List Gallery, spanning about the last 10 years, and the survey of recent work at Sande Webster, felt all of a piece.

Burwell's abstract oil paintings and works on paper simultaneously exude formal rigor and visual excitement. His labyrinthine compositions are generated by a series of masks and overlays, created from a bank of shape templates and set linear curves. Thin and thicker lines meander like vines over the surface, broken by repeating ellipses, circles or biomorphic forms. These forms, often striped, wink like entities with protective coloration—existing between foreground and background, acting as solid shapes or negative space in relation to their similarly ambiguous surroundings. Depth and flatness are intermixed in a kind of visual fugue, equally compelling on both smaller and larger scales.

Close up, more perceptual paradox emerges through the play of texture. Some of the stripes, it turns out, are the result of thick but controlled drips. In the medium-scaled work *Pink*

*Ground with Circles* (2005, 30 inches square), the putative pink background has been laid down with dripping lines bulbous enough to swell out over the edges of the support like frosting. Meanwhile, a series of floating circles reveals, like portholes, another layer of cleanly-painted vertical stripes masquerading as drips. Other paintings contrast dripped surfaces with smaller areas of painstaking, seemingly penned lines, which mimic the texture of canvas or linen. These tricksterish effects reveal a painter playing his own highly assured riffs on the mark-making issues explored by Jonathan Lasker and others.

The artist cites Twombly as an inspiration, but his fullness of color, unequivocal execution and energetic forms remind me more of Stuart Davis's semi-abstract cityscapes. Burwell's smallish *Caution* (2005, 18 inches square), for instance, with tongue-like forms sporting cantaloupe and teal stripes, which abut others with pink, red and yellow motifs, draws on the vigor and controlled chaos of urban signage. A room in the List Gallery featured Burwell's black-and-white works; the earlier of these, with deep blacks and grays of charcoal and graphite—and more symmetrical layouts—have a sober, even somber tone. But a more recent work, *Gray City* (2004, 12 inches square), recreates in monochrome the animated complexities of the paintings.

The larger paintings deploy masses of varied areas in ways that are relaxed yet stunningly effective. In *Untitled* (2001, 54½ inches square), a layer of pea-green forms on cream seems to roll back from the middle to reveal a darker, deeper space dense with pink curlicues. Strong as they are, Burwell's compositions never feel urgent; rather, they seem to develop at a leisurely, second-movement pace. Individually and en masse, they continue to build, gaining visual power with their slowly evolving, long-form variations.

—Miriam Seidel



Charles Burwell: *Untitled (Green)*, 2001, oil on canvas, 54½ by 52½ inches; at Swarthmore College.