

# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

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Tuesday, Nov. 6, 2012 ★ 2012 Pulitzer Prize Winner ★ \$1

\$1.35 in some locations outside the metro area



Art exhibition  
**Charles Burwell:**  
**“Everything Is a Series  
of Adjustments”**

Nov. 6–Nov. 30, Bridgette  
Mayer Gallery, 709 Walnut St.

**Burwell’s “New Reveal”**  
(2012), acrylic on canvas,  
is in his third solo show,  
at Bridgette Mayer Gallery.



**Charles Burwell**, a Pew Fellow  
who was born and still lives  
in West Philadelphia.

## A private, simple life; a bold, cerebral artist

By A.M. Weaver  
FOR THE INQUIRER

**A**t 6-foot-4 and with the physique of a basketball star, Charles Burwell has a presence that has been known to fool clients on occasion. But his passion fills an arena of a very different kind. He lives and breathes abstract art.

Burwell, 57, a Pew Fellow and longtime fixture on the Philadelphia art scene, is acclaimed for his vibrant canvasses that translate a

cornucopia of colors into carefully orchestrated geometric paintings.

His work is cerebral, with systems found in math and science. He organizes and reorganizes his existence, or so it seems, through his artwork.

“I like to explore complex surfaces,” says Burwell, whose third solo exhibition, aptly titled “Everything Is a Series of Adjustments,” opens today at the Bridgette Mayer Gallery. “I like the idea of structures

See **BURWELL** on C8



# His work is a fixture in Phila. cultural landscape

**BURWELL** from C1

that create unpredictability. It's almost a part of my personality, making paintings in this way."

"He is such a cornerstone in the Philadelphia artist community," says local art writer Robin Rice. "When you think about painting in Philadelphia, you think about Charles."

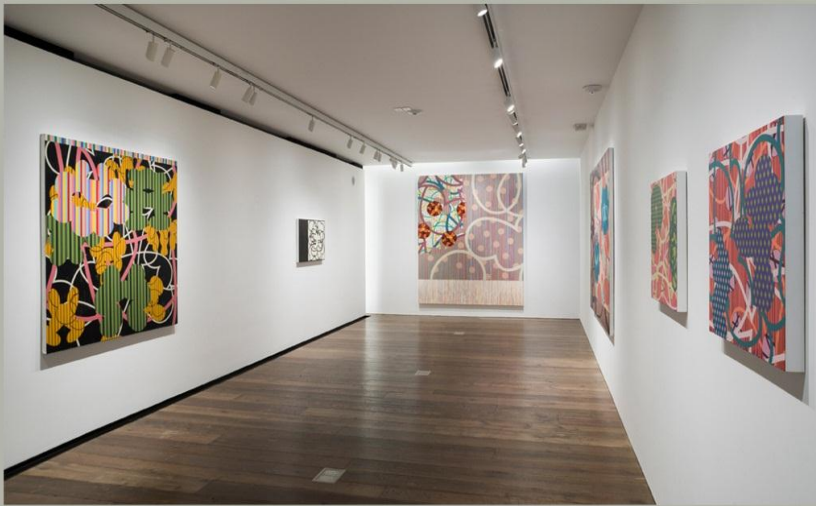
"The first time I saw his work, it was the complexity and intellectual rigor combined with a profound expressiveness. When you look at one of his paintings, it seems like part of a dialogue that could go on forever; there is always a sense of evolution."

Swirls, stripes, and bulbous shapes cascade across his canvases. His modulated shapes are rendered in many colors, from phthalide blue to cadmium orange, which he expands with systems of mark-making akin to that of Paul Klee, albeit simplified and enlarged. Artist Cy Twombly was one of his many influences.

Born in West Philadelphia, Burwell still lives in the family home. He has resisted the call of New York, staying committed to creating in his hometown and living a private, simple lifestyle. He hikes every day from his home to his studio in a Port Richmond warehouse.

"I have no interest in anything that is too complicated," he says.

Even so, admirers have found him. He has received



**Art of Charles Burwell**, of West Phila., in the solo show "Everything Is a Series of Adjustments," at Bridgette Mayer Gallery. In his paintings, said a local writer, "there is always a sense of evolution."

numerous awards for his work, from the Pew Fellowship to the Adolph & Esther Gottlieb Foundation award.

John B. Ravenal, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, got to know Burwell while working on the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibition "Twenty Philadelphia Artists: Celebrating Fleisher Challenge at Twenty" in 1998.

"I arrived in Philadelphia in 1991 and quickly became aware of Charles' work and his important place in the Philadelphia arts community," says Ravenal.

"I was first interested in Charles' early work, which recalled cave paintings or primordial organisms. I soon came to admire his new work — densely layered drips, patterns, and shapes, often in bright colors. He has built on this direction and is making complex and exuberant paintings."

Like many artists of his era, Burwell started as a realist. "My earliest influence was the African American master Charles White," said Burwell. "I even created copious self-portraits and nudes."

"I wasn't interested in painting other people; it was easier to paint myself. ... The work

was akin to the African American realist painters Barkley Hendricks and Phyllis West, two Philadelphia painters who came into prominence when I was getting out of high school in the '70s."

Later, scrutinizing *Look* magazine as a boy, Burwell discovered the Pop Art of Ellsworth Kelly and Jasper Johns, and Modernism entered his consciousness. He says he was "drawn to the sheer physicality of painting. The transition from realism to abstraction was seamless."

Burwell received a bachelor's degree of fine arts from Tyler and graduated with a

master's from Yale School of Art in 1979. "The Philly scene has grown tremendously in the last 10 years, primarily because younger artists from other places have taken root here," says Burwell. "It has a more national focus with relatively new spaces cropping up, like Little Berlin, Tiger Strikes Asteroid, Pterodactyl gallery, and 2424 Studio, and, of course, there is the Barnes. There is a vibrant scene here."

Burwell's art is a fixture in the Philadelphia cultural landscape. Formerly with the Sande Webster Gallery, now closed, he has seen his career escalate in recent years, due to the aggressive marketing of his work by Mayer in New York and beyond. Yet he is not attracted to the idea of becoming an art star. He accepts his awards and numerous acclamations graciously.

When asked about his own artistic legacy, he quickly retorts, "I am not interested in that. ... Maybe" to be remembered "as a significant artist, I suppose. Other than that, I don't know."