

INTRODUCTION

Kean University is pleased to feature the work of W. Carl Burger from November 10, 2008 through January 15, 2009 in the CAS Art Gallery. Throughout the region, Burger is a legendary character, known as an outstanding artist and a generous teacher. Over the years, he has influenced thousands of students and has been recognized with many awards and prizes for his artwork. On the Kean University campus, merely mentioning his name brings a smile to those who know him. He is Professor Emeritus having taught in the Fine Arts Department from 1961 through 1993, and a true friend to the community.

Essential W. Carl Burger could have been crafted as a narrative exhibition of works spanning the six decades of this artist's prolific career, starting out with a few early renderings of French landscapes or European architecture seen through the eyes of a young artist-soldier, then advancing through each subsequent stage of development. Burger is a virtuoso draftsman, a master of collage and an expressionist master of extravagant color. We could have highlighted these stages. To be sure, this would make for a beautiful exhibition. In fact, the Butler Museum in 2007 and the Morris Museum in 2002 both have done comprehensive retrospective shows and produced catalogs presenting a broad perspective on Burger.



Sanctum Sanctorum, 2004, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 in.

W. Carl Burger moves with deliberate energy and creativity. At 82, the artist radiates with inspired affection and enthusiasm. He lives with a youthful urgency to paint. And remarkably, his next painting always promises to be his best. For this reason the exhibition *Essential W. Carl Burger* is an investigation into the recent oil paintings and watercolors that have never been shown. Unlike much of his well-known oeuvre, some of the artworks use color sparingly, or for that matter, not at all. The visceral energy of these paintings do

not depend on color. Although few are aware of this, for Burger it is not an entirely new way of working. The exhibition includes some older works that create context, and suggest the artist has been thinking monochromatically for many years.

On behalf of Kean University and the School of Visual and Performing Arts, I want to thank W. Carl Burger for his generosity in lending these works for our exhibition. We appreciate that he has returned for this show. Burger exemplifies the teacher who continues to enrich our community.

Neil Tetskowski
Director of University Galleries



Stockton Forest, 2004, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 in.

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Cover: *Rite of Spring*, 2008, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 in.

ESSENTIAL W. CARL BURGER



KEAN UNIVERSITY

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Insectuals #3, 2004, ink on paper, 37 x 44.5 in.

ESSENTIAL W. CARL BURGER

Recent Work: Making the Mark

Think of watercolor paper as the tabula rasa of potential aesthetic drama. W. Carl Burger (b. 1925) demystifies the idea of art making, taking actual and recollected fragments from the phenomenon of everyday life, and converting memory and nature from an object to a subject on the bare paper. The mark made on the surface by the artist's hand describes, but it is detached from its initial objectivity – it has been converted to Burger's interpretation of the natural world. It recognizes the natural world, yet denies completeness. Analysis is an open-ended question, and Burger does not want to burden us with an answer – all possibilities are in play.

Burger instinctively selects what he needs from nature through gesture – by splashing and splattering veils of pigmented marks, and the tangible world interpreted by line. He applies a skeletal structure to the support on which the natural world is draped in his painterly manner. The physicality of Burger's landscapes dissolves into patches of atmospheric color and form. And all have equal value, suspended between abstraction and naturalism.

The link between the paper and the hand is the essence of the artist's search for a visual language. "Style" is too facile a label, bringing a connotation to bear that invites parody. Burger's mind and hand form a recorder that captures appearance intuitively, with deep emotion. His "landscapes" can be read as a joyful mode of expressionism, in the full glory of its lyrical and sensual nature.

The Falling and Flying Marks

Some of Burger's most recent and dramatic artistic works are large black and white paintings on paper. Letting the gravity of paint perform has a long history. Jackson Pollock's (1912-1956) choreographed release of paint created macro and microcosms of nature. By veiling his forms, Pollock achieved a world moving through space and time. The elements of chance also supported

the artist's intended ambiguity.

Burger's use of the splash and spray that animates the surfaces are metaphors for the physical space of the natural world and its imprint in his art, the traces of the environment. He uses templates taken directly from nature: leaves, grasses, pods, etc. In this self-contained environment, with sounds of summer flying and buzzing on Burger's paper, the entire scene is alive. Insects, wings and flora abound, and are woven into space with flickering strokes within a shallow visual space.

Burger's studio is within nature itself – his atelier is set under a small grove of trees in a vast field in northwest New Jersey. Surrounded by the humming of the insect world and the breezy motion of grasses, bracts and pods, the artist's elements of flora are transferred directly to and deposited onto the paper. Burger is not *sur la motif*; he is *in la motif*, impassioned by his surroundings, inventing a symbolic and interpretive view of intimate landscapes, of arcadia in miniature.



Beyond Earth, 2004, oil on canvas, 54 x 48 in.

His pictures evoke the watercolors of Charles Burchfield (1893-1967), and, like Burchfield, Burger is committed to an animistic approach, positing the supernatural force of nature. Its presence is felt and experienced in Burger's pictures in relationship to the natural world. Like Burchfield, Burger's paintings vibrate with the sounds of the natural world, though in a purer, graphic style.

Fragments

In expressionism, color is non-nominative; hues are emoted and are not of the natural world. Excluding high intensity color on his most recent canvases and championing muted colors and a range of blacks freed Burger to interpret the natural world in a lucid, nature-infused space. Assertive marks – painted splashes, stains, drips, blots – reveal the artist's experience of the environment.

The color spills and dribbles out from described outlines.

Burger works from the subject, applying fragments of form with an immediacy that portrays an isolated landscape of pictorial and textural pleasure. Expressionism, not reality, is the quest here, a vehicle to interpret reality. Detached fragments of color hover and skid across an implied, nameless topography. By accepting and mastering the method, Burger embraces all possibilities of natural motif.

Expressionism is born at the moment those splashes of color meet canvas or paper. Whether dripped or stained, the paint has no true boundary, expanding beyond one's field of vision. Evoking the watercolors of the Expressionist Emil Nolde (1867-1956) or the Fauve Raoul Dufy (1877-1953), Burger synthesizes fast splattered and slow stained hues into loosely defined stenographic edges that sensitively describe the forms of houses and trees in the landscape. The paint has an air of history to it, soft, hazy, sensuous, but at times exploding with a gestural jazz of intense color. Here, paint transcends, imbued with a sense of time and timelessness. Burger's "fields" demand both time and commitment from the viewer.

A Demanding Art

Burger begins his landscape pictures by building, not with an underdrawing in the traditional manner or even a preparatory drawing, but rather a loosely defined horizon or a series of stratifications and transparencies bridging the gap between sky and land. The artist merges the two to ensure the underlying, wispy structures – trees, architecture, and passageways – are interlaced with color.

He also makes use of the element of displacement. Where Cezanne used areas of *passage* to knit forms together, Burger's pictorial syntax displaces and liberates color from form. This technique exacts a keen sense of observation by the artist, as well as absolute trust in memory and chance. A false move in either direction and the bleed or the mark can destroy the work.

There is also a heavy demand on the viewer. What can one read into this field? Why can't these colors be named? Why can we not resist looking?

The Pleasure Element

Burger's pictures evoke a sense of elation in nature, the pleasure in looking, striking our imagination, in conceiving an authenticity of style. Not constrained by mimesis, Burger allows his marks to dance, not as signs for art, but rather as ideal fantasy

– with joy and delight in the painted gestures. There is no agenda here; time is suspended, and only the art remains. The experience of the picture is immediate and assured, a visionary field of fictive yet recognizable impressions.

A Perpetual Struggle

What is an idea? Where does it begin? W. Carl Burger's art springs from a tradition where, as George Kubler¹ asserts, art is invested in the "complete life." Gauguin and Van Gogh are paradigms for that tradition – art as being. Kubler goes on to say that "they are neither ruminative and patient...but solitary men to



Over Cherryville, 2004, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 in.

who totally occupy the positions given them upon their particular entrances."² Burger's focus is just that – art as a vehicle that can take both the artist and the viewer on a journey through uncharted territory.

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¹ Kubler, George *The Shape of Time*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962, p. 90

² *Ibid.*, p. 90