

Charles White, who made some of this country's greatest art, transcends labels

By [Philip Kennicott](#)

Charles White was one of the great American artists of the last century, yet his legacy remains caught up in repeating cycles of discovery and rediscovery. His achievement is qualified, subtly, with the label “African American artist” in the same way that African American writers, poets and composers are somehow delimited into a subset of America by the fact of their race. One always encounters his work in relationship to something else: He was socially conscious and politically active, so his art is caught up in the history of left-wing struggle; he was a teacher and inspirational figure, so his name is often attached to that of his prominent students and those who cite him as an influence; he worked as a figure artist and made portraits, so his art is seen in service to promoting ideals of African American power, dignity and beauty.

All of that is true, yet the impression left by a retrospective of his career at the Museum of Modern Art transcends those individual accounts of his importance to the history of American art. Given his talent, his creativity, his vision, his range and his inventiveness, White should be a household name, even among people who don't closely follow the art world. Among his works are images, including the 1964 drawing “Birmingham Totem” and the 1972 etching “Cat's Cradle,” that should be as instantly recognizable as Grant Wood's “American Gothic” or Andrew Wyeth's “Christina's World.” It shouldn't be possible to tell the history of American art without White figuring squarely in the middle of it.

But he remains, if not marginal, a respectable figure on the sidelines of 20th-century American culture. Race was a major factor in the egregious failure to calibrate the real worth of his work, not just because he was black, but because he took up black life as his subject. He also worked counter to the prevailing artistic trends of the time, making drawings and paintings, working meticulously with charcoal and ink, limning faces and bodies, capturing the intensity of pain and anguish, and fitting his human subjects into backgrounds that were at turns abstract, minimal or teeming with the social strife of mural art. Black bodies become monumental in some of his best-known works, including the 1972 “Mississippi,” which shows a black woman shrouded in a pyramid of fabric, with a bloody handprint just above her head, and in the 1969 “Seed of Love,” which depicts a pregnant woman from the side, solitary and statuesque against a shaded background. Images he made of workers in the 1940s and 1950s have both muscularity and soulfulness, a sense of the full human being that surpasses similar images by Thomas Hart Benton or John Steuart Curry 20 years earlier.

His lifelong interest in the human figure, and his commitment to social causes including civil rights, the rights of workers and the equality of women, were connected. He might have addressed his political topics

through a conceptual or abstract process, but he found greater freedom and clarity in representational art. It connected him both to the people for whom he struggled and to other artists, including the Mexican muralists, who worked along similar lines. It also allowed him to take up history in a direct way, making images of Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln and Harriet Tubman.

One of the earliest paintings in the exhibition, a 1939 watercolor called “Kitchenette Debutantes,” shows two women framed at an angle in a window, their clothes loose and disheveled. They might be sex workers, although the painting’s title refers to the substandard kitchenette apartments in which many African Americans were forced to live in the 1940s, when racism drove poverty, forcing those who had fled the murderous South to live in Chicago’s overcrowded neighborhoods and overcrowded subdivided apartments. “Kitchenette Debutantes” sets up a sequence of glances that speaks to the humanism at the core of White’s work: One woman holds up a mirror as if to observe herself but looks away from it to the other woman, who looks out the window. The narcissism of self-observation has been turned into observation of another human being, and that, in turn, has been directed outward to observation of the world.


White’s art takes black life as a universal subject, while America has resolutely insisted that the Venn diagram of black life overlaps only in places with the larger trajectory of American culture. The human figure allowed White to challenge racism at the instinctual level, disrupting viewers at the precognitive moment of how we identify ourselves and others. When he paints children, his images stir the viewer’s sense of wanting to protect and nurture them; when he paints workers, we are inclined to admire their strength and competence, rather than their use-value to capitalism; when he paints women, they are not only beautiful, but project a powerful sense of intelligence.

A 1956 drawing, “I’ve been ‘Buked and I’ve Been Scorned,” shows a woman standing in a doorway, with a view through a narrow shack to an open window beyond. She is, perhaps, a grandmother: Her hair is gray, and her clothes hang on her loosely. The title seems to refer to her personal history of suffering, while with one hand she is gesturing as if to explain something. She is, perhaps, telling us her history, and by extension the larger history she has lived. She is both intimidating and maternal, and she clearly doesn’t suffer fools gladly. But there is an extraordinary nuance in the image, in the form of the window seen behind her. The promise implicit in the image seems to be the hope that drove White as an artist, and it’s something we might cling to today: that if we listen carefully to this fellow human being, we might get through to the other side.

Charles White: A Retrospective is on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York through Jan. 13. For information, visit noma.org.



Philip Kennicott

Philip Kennicott is the Pulitzer Prize-winning art and architecture critic of The Washington Post. He has been on staff at The Post since 1999, first as classical music critic, then as culture critic. Follow 

The Washington Post

The story must be told.

Your subscription supports journalism that matters.

[Try 1 month for \\$1](#)



The Washington Post

Our journalism keeps watch on Washington and the world.

[Try 1 month for ~~\\$10~~ \\$1](#)

[Send me this offer](#)