

CHARLIE HUNTER

The Humor of Decline, Memory and Time

A LARGE, AIRY STUDIO SITS IN THE HULL OF A 19TH-CENTURY BRICK WAREHOUSE. THE OLDEST CANAL IN THE COUNTRY, CHARTERED IN 1791, RUSHES AT ITS FEET. A FEW PACES FROM THE WAREHOUSE IS A TRAIN DEPOT WHERE THE MAZE OF RAILS OFFERS A VAST INDUSTRIAL DREAMSCAPE: RUSTING, GHOSTLY BOXCARS SHARE SPACE WITH THE RUMBLE OF TRAIN WHISTLES CUTTING ACROSS THE WATER, RESOUNDING NOW JUST AS THEY DID GENERATIONS AGO.

Here, in Bellows Falls, a small mountain village of 3,200 along the Connecticut River in Vermont's southeastern corner, plein aire alla prima painter Charlie Hunter paced about with his trademark limp, brow furrowed in enthusiastic concentration, rambling about Mondrian.

"He formalized negative space," he said of the artist who revolutionized Hunter's love of painting at age 5. "That was his jumping-off place into abstraction; the interplay between line and negative space was an entrance point into reality. He made me realize that abstraction was the next logical point from realism."

It may be strange for a seemingly monochromatic painter of rotting American infrastructure and hazy, lonesome trailways to speak of Mondrian's color fields as a primary influence. The worlds Hunter creates are populated by scenes like those from his studio windows — New England's hollow, post-industrial corridors and their gentle actualization of memory, rendered in a warm burnt sienna mash-up pregnant with veridian, yellow ochre and white undertones. Yet the philosophy behind these snapshots of human endeavor point to an understanding of Mondrian's geometric experiments with focal point and our eye's way of perceiving reality.

"In my work, there are a lot of abstract elements, though many people may not think so," Hunter explained while pulling out a piece he'd completed two days prior: "1899," an eerie study of a train tunnel as viewed from a steadily departing back platform. "The eye wants to believe fictions. I think it comes from the human need to not be eaten by predators. For example, take primitive perception of a rustle of leaves; the eye needed to make sense of what it saw and led the brain to perceive 'tiger.' Give the eye an anchor, and it will fill in the rest of the story. It's similar with painting."

Pointing to the angular upper right corner of the tunnel in "1899," he continued, "This is the only sharp detail in the painting, but if a person's eye focuses on it, the eye will make near-photographic realities of other areas of the painting, even though it's just a hazy area of drips." There is a similar effect in "Locomotive and Fuel Tank, White River," wherein a white pool at the base of rusty railyard structures references their weary history. What emerges is a lonely journey along the rails, as if stolen from a memory we didn't realize we had. Thus, Hunter imbues actuality in his works through the fogged negative space blanketing our sense of time and locality. And in Hunter's



estimation, time and locality are more interesting when they represent a complex tale of long ago.

Growing up in Weathersfield Center, Vermont, Hunter experienced the decline of the area's tool industry and saw how it impacted the way of life. "I don't want to romanticize nor claim that the way things were was somehow better. But I do think the huge changes in economy and how folks make a living are terribly important. Some handful of people worked hard to build these things (abandoned gas stations, warehouses, train yards, etc.), and now nature is reclaiming them; they're an afterthought to society, but they hold a story involving many lives." From his older, colorful and more defined style of rendering infrastructure ("Go Gulf," 1999) to the bleak whisper of "Armory Block" (2007), Hunter's oeuvre maintains his feeling that something naturally falling away is more beautiful than something meticulously preserved.

"There's humor here because the morbidity of death can be goofy," Hunter said. The natural world is something much more beautiful than anything man can create. So what nature does to these silly little creations is endlessly fascinating."

Vermont Artisan Designs/Studio 2 in Brattleboro, Vermont presents "Recent Plein Aire Works," a solo show of works by Charlie Hunter, from December 4 through January 1, 2010; Hunter's paintings can also be seen at West Branch Gallery and Sculpture Park in Stowe, Vermont; and several pieces will be on view in the Putney Painters & Friends group exhibition at Susan Powell Fine Art in Madison, Connecticut from November 20 through December 30.

Clara Rose Thornton



LEFT PAGE FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: Trailer, Goodyear, 2006, oil on canvas. 1899, 2009, oil on canvas.

THIS PAGE ABOVE: Go Gulf, 1999, oil on canvas.

THIS PAGE BELOW CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Armory Block, 2007, oil on canvas.

Railway Express Building, Bellows Falls, 2009, oil on canvas.

South Royalton Freight House, 2009, oil on canvas.



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