

Michelle Charles was born in London in 1959. With a Jacob Mendelson Fellowship in memory of the painter David Bomberg, she moved to the United States in 1982, finally working for thirteen years in New York where she was represented by the John Weber Gallery and where awards included Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowships in 1993-94 and 2001-02. She returned to London in 2001 where she now lives and works.

**KETTLE'S YARD**



MICHELLE CHARLES

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# Michelle Charles

essays

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Dore Ashton

Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge



Knitting - still from a film, 2008

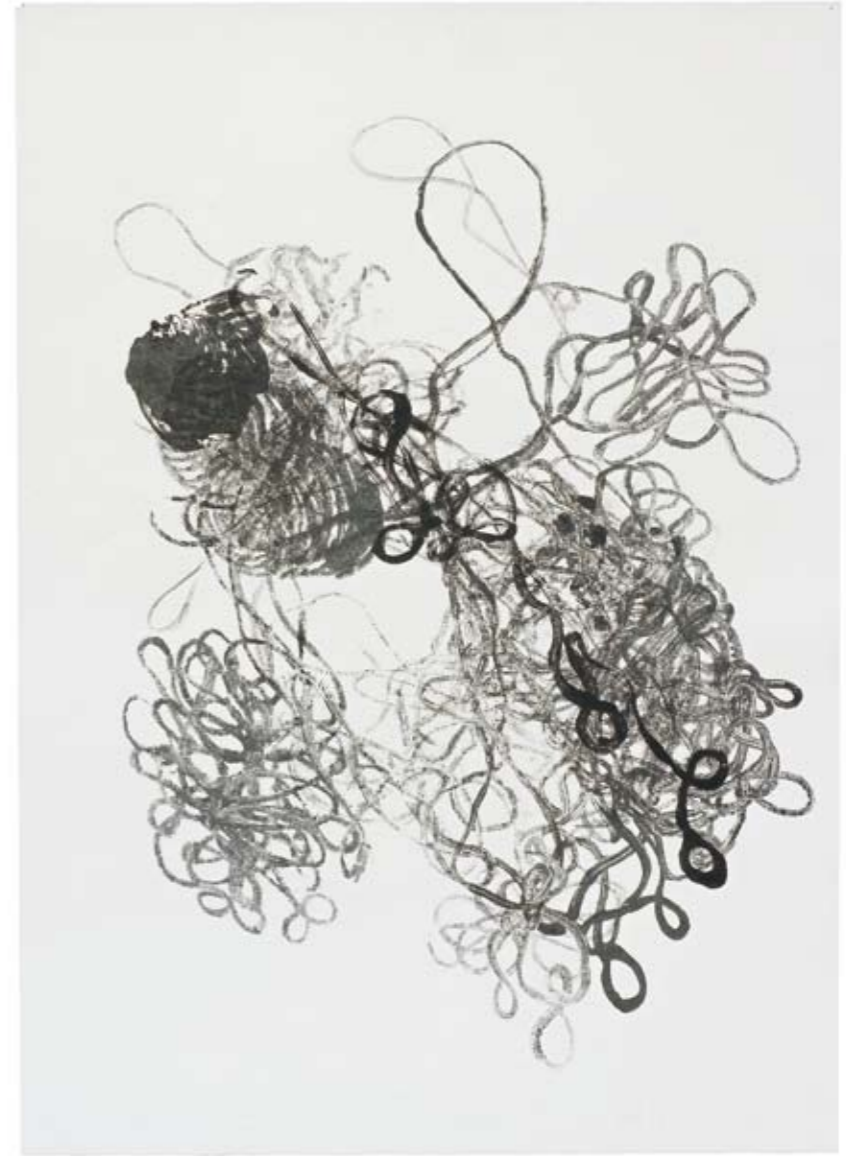
## Preface

Michelle Charles' career as an artist has followed a particular course. For almost twenty years she lived, worked and exhibited in the United States. She returned to London only in 2001 and this is the first chance that a British public has had to discover her work in substance.

We are especially grateful to Frances Carey of The British Museum, who introduced us to the artist and her work. A first studio visit revealed an artist whose work embodied, as the best work does, all manner of contradictory – complementary – qualities: restless but calm, apparently simple yet rich in implications, consistent though constantly questioning and expanding. Subsequent visits saw new chapters opening, most recently a film of someone knitting, observing the movement of those hands of which we are conscious elsewhere, whether making a brushmark, holding a glass or a book, or touching a surface.

We are privileged that two long-time admirers of her work have written for this catalogue, the distinguished critics, Dore Ashton in New York, and Guy Brett in London. We are grateful to Arts Council England, London who supported Michelle Charles' preparations for the exhibition through the 'Grants for the arts' programme, and particularly to Lee Milne and Teresa Drace-Francis. The artist is also grateful to Kip Gresham for his collaboration on new prints and Denisa Nenova for her tireless generosity as studio assistant in the last months. Gail Persky, formerly of the New School for Social Research and Beverly Brittan of the London School of Economics provided the artist with withdrawn library books. The film was made with Lloyd Gardner, Michael Linehan and Kimaathi Spence at Artikal films, Santhosh Chandran, and with the help of Aim Image. Our thanks to them all.

Michael Harrison, Director





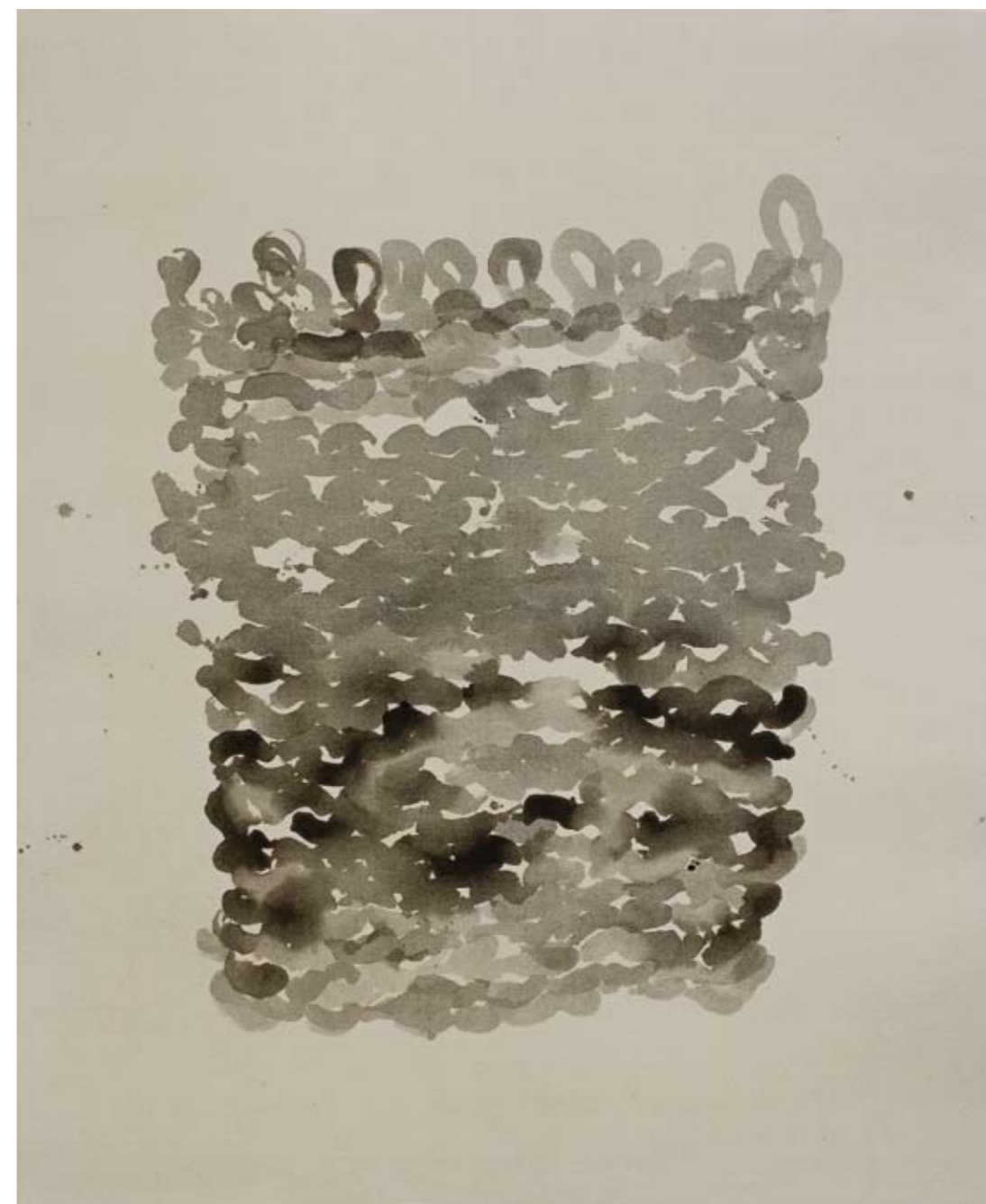


pp 6-8  
Knitting, Series 1, 2001-02  
oil on paper,  
p 6: 76.2 x 56.7 cm  
p 7: 70.2 x 50.1 cm  
left: both 57 x 76.5 cm



opposite:  
Knitting Painting on Canvas # 2, 2006  
paint on canvas, 141 x 170 cm

pp 10-11  
Long Black Knitting, 2004  
oil on paper, three drawings from a set of six, each  
comprising six sheets, 57 x 76.5 cm







from Even a Fly has a Soul, Series 2, 2007  
ink and paint on paper, 28 x 38 cm

## 'Painting what is not there'

**Guy Brett**

Michelle Charles has painted glasses or bottles countless times over the past twenty-one years. No, that is not the way to put it. It's not about that. The words 'glass' and 'bottle' come out too strongly in their materiality and facticity, and the word 'painted' has no vitality, or suggests a rather mechanical activity. The two players in the equation are not related properly.

What actually happens is that the glasses or bottles become light-traps, or light-vessels. Michelle Charles has not yet finished exploring all the possible inflections and subtle nuances that a single, simple object can be invested with. Or, that could be put the other way round. She has shown and continues to show us the extraordinary freedom and inventiveness of the brush stroke that issues from and returns to a single form. There could be a further way of describing it; her works conduct a dialogue between representation and the play of light, a phenomenon fluctuating and wandering, whose immateriality is gathered and condensed or contained in the vessel. The solid object is only held together by the brush strokes which themselves are equivalents for light.

Painting had a paradoxical birth. While its subject was often the fleeting, the changeability of things, its actual materials were developed over thousands of years to be lasting and not to fade. In Michelle Charles' paintings of empty glasses there is a further refinement of this paradox. To render the transparent she must make use of a material that is opaque. How the opaque is transformed into transparency is one of the sources of the magic in her art. The change is not in the material, which remains dense, but occurs in our understanding, our perception. In its simplest form this is seen in her series of single glasses or tumblers painted in ink on paper, one to a sheet. The unmarked paper is



clear or empty. It is only the interference in that clarity, the partial coverage of the paper, that produces the sensation of transparency of the glass. This is achieved differently in each painting and never becomes monotonous. In fact the standardisation of industrial mass-production, responsible for producing the identical glasses in the first place, is turned on its head by Charles' form of serial painting. Her images are ceaseless returns to a source, rather than repetitions.

In his painting *A Bar at the Folies Bergère* (1882), in the Courtauld Institute in London, Manet foregrounds on the bar top a small glass containing flowers. He gives this object a singular identity. It sings out in its clear transparency among the vari-coloured unopened bottles of beer, liquor and champagne, seeming to belong to another order of being. We can compare directly, in Manet's handling, glass that retains its commonplace functionality and glass that becomes a vessel of light.

A somewhat similar experience is given by Michelle Charles' paintings of single glasses and bottles directly on the covers of old books. There is a similar contrast between the dun colours of the book covers and the delicate transparency of the glassware, often marked by residues of milk or medicine. The first glass object to be painted on a book was a medicine bottle. The books are faded testimonies of intellectual effort, with titles like 'Studies in Social and Economic Process', 'General Science – Part I', 'The Nature of Price Theory', psychoanalytic titles, and so on. Many are superannuated from libraries, retired from an active life, and Charles' glasses and bottles, in the very freshness of their brushstrokes seem to re-nourish the dwindled intellectual energies. She achieves a deftness – a light touch – which cannot be equated with slickness or virtuosity, which draws no attention to itself, which is close to life. These painting-objects are marvels of tenderness.

When we speak of 'seeing' we often forget the time element involved, for example the difference between prolonged contemplation and the brief glimpse. There is the brilliant insect that is gone in a flash. We have only a second to admire it, and that perception is qualitatively different from having hours to study the same beetle stuck on a pin. Michelle Charles' paintings of glasses are conducive to meditation or contemplation, particularly the large series of

paintings on board which solidify transitory effects of light as rich, substantial pictorial structures. Charles discovers powerful colours within emptiness. When she comes to paint house flies, in a recent series, everything is connected with the momentary, even extending to attempting to paint flies' shadows. Her fragile ink-marks seem to correspond to the short lines of William Blake's poem:

Little fly  
Thy summer's play  
my thoughtless hand  
has brushed away

Michelle Charles moved back to Britain seven years ago, having lived and worked in the United States for the previous two decades. New York and London still exert contradictory pulls upon her: 'When I'm in one I want to be in the other', she confides. Yet this dual allegiance appears to have been remarkably beneficial. Her New York paintings have a decisive directness which it could have been hard to acquire in Britain: they are fuelled by the proximity of Abstract Expressionism, and the focus on commonplace, everyday objects associated with Pop. At the same time, if one compares her series of glass paintings over the years, a certain American ruggedness and monumentality has ceded to a subtlety and ambiguity which perhaps can be attributed to English light and sensibility.

Her recent paintings induce an unmistakable feeling of calm, they feed and calm us with an effect something like the milk or remedy whose traces remain in the glass. Yet at the same time, paradoxically, they re-vitalise the handling of paint to a degree that has become extremely rare in contemporary art. They re-ignite the active, reciprocal relationship between paint and the 'thing' painted – an extension, really, of the sense of touch – whose quality has been lost in the avalanche of photographic and digital imagery.



left:

Scrubbing Brush, 2001  
charcoal on paper, 56.7 x 76.2 cm

p 18:

Scrubber, 2004  
graphite on paper, 57.4 x 76.3 cm

p 19:

Yellow Duster, 2005  
paint on paper, 68.5 x 50.7 cm

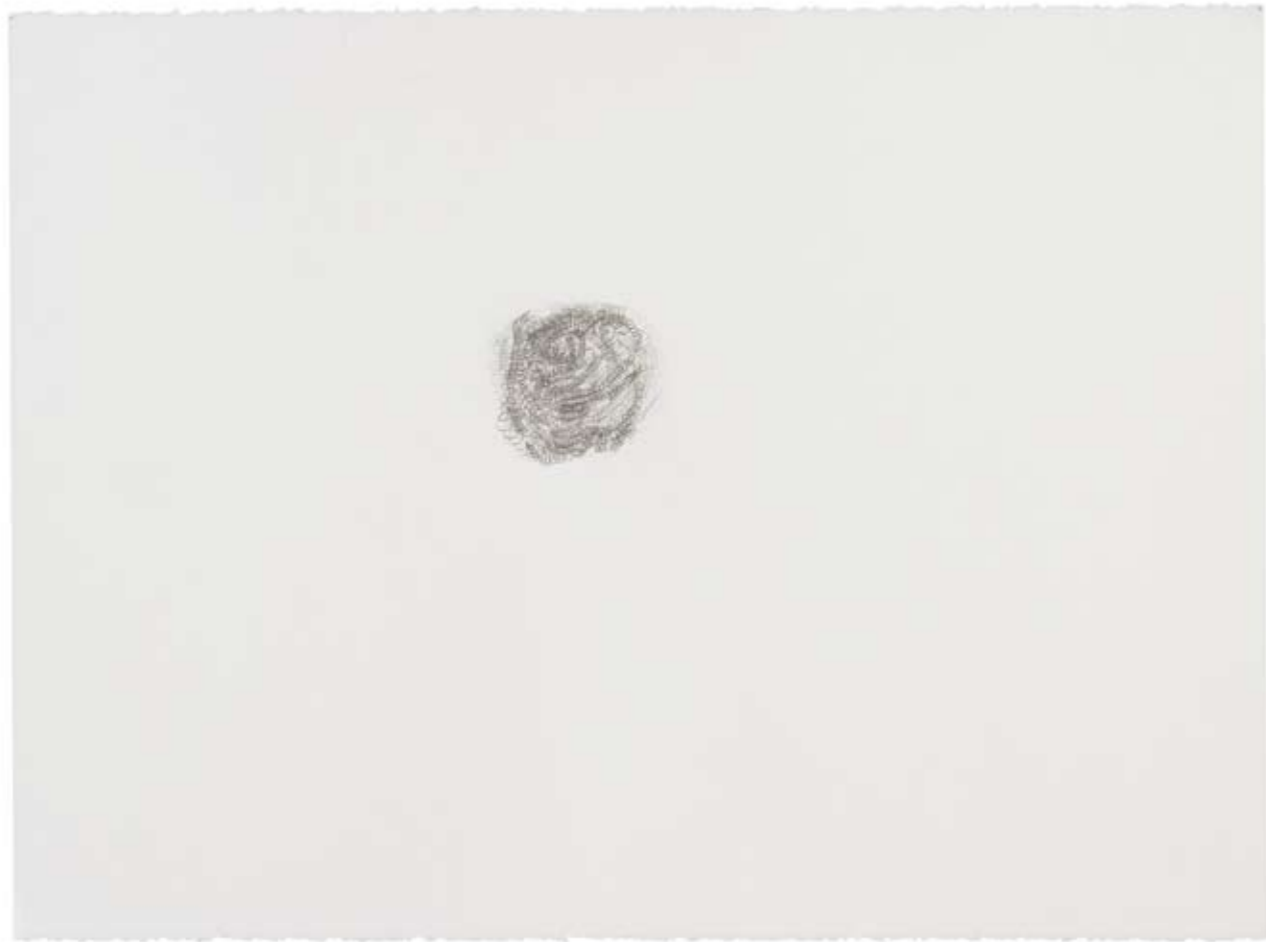
pp 20-21:

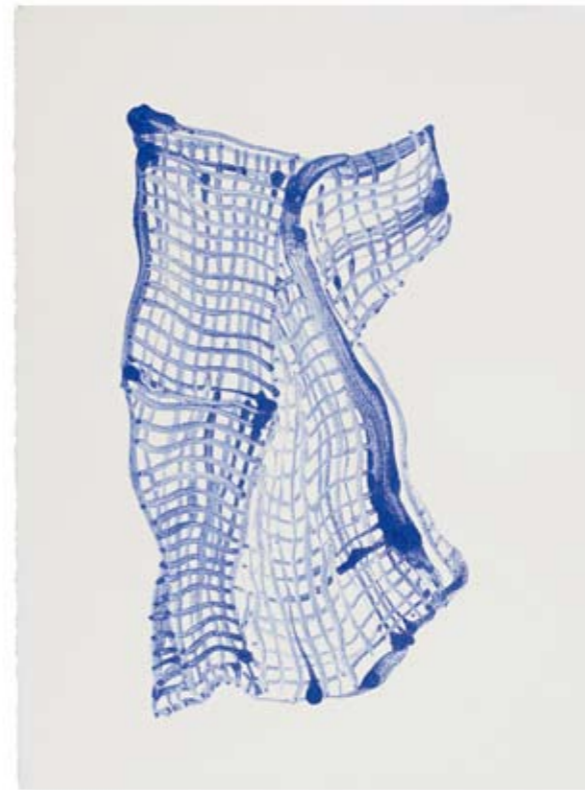
Blue Tea Towels, 2003  
oil on paper, each c76 x 56.5 cm

pp 22-23:

Plastic Scrubbers, 2004  
oil on paper, each 50.1 x 70.2 cm













The British Economy in 1975, from Medicine on Economic Books, 2001  
oil on the covers of books

## Michelle Charles

### Dore Ashton

*There are two ways of knowing a thing; the first turns around it, the second gets into it; the first type of knowledge is relative; the second absolute ...*

Henri Bergson, Introduction à la Métaphysique

I suppose that objects are everything that are not us. We live amongst them in profusion – often in passive unawareness. Yet, they inhabit, even constitute the texture of our world. Michelle Charles has for years reminded us of their ubiquity, their strangeness, their power to be. Most of her motifs concern inanimate things. But some, like her recent studies of flies, move stealthily into our ken; they, too, are things that are not us. Because Charles' imagination is haunted by metaphor, her painted things are compelling and allusive. The whole world in a grain of sand; the natural and unnatural world as it impinges; sight and insight, all there. If she paints knitted things, they are like the sea, like the winds, like landscapes in which a knitting needle is horizon. By the closest, most intense scrutiny, Charles not only inaugurates metaphors, she inaugurates form. It would not be too much to say that she 'gets into' her image, as Bergson noted, seeking an absolute like an unabashed metaphysician. (I stress the word seeking, with the knowledge I have of many painters who, like Penelope, weave and unravel, day and night, and are well aware that they will never finish with their quest.)

For a long time I have known that words are quite useless when it comes to painting. But sometimes the words of poets are analogous to the paint of painters, at least obliquely. If we find kinship, then we are one step closer to the painter's motives. When I think of Charles' work, that I have watched for

many years, I am often carried on her current to certain poets, above all Wallace Stevens, whose humour so often turns serious, as in 'The Comedian As The Letter C', an early poem with the line 'Here was the veritable ding and sich, at last'. And his title of a late poem, 'Not Ideas About the Thing, But the Thing Itself'. But above all, one of his most discussed poems, 'Anecdote of the Jar'.

I placed a jar in Tennessee  
And round it was, upon a hill.

There it was, 'gray and bare', as the poet says, and centered as so many of Charles' objects are: 'It took dominion everywhere.' Although Charles' universe is composed of light and shadow, as all painting is, the thing itself that she depicts is often like Stevens' Tennessee jar. It takes dominion everywhere.

Charles is not alone in the history of art, using objects to talk about the things of this world, or that world, or the universe itself. Above all, to talk about how light enlightens. And how color colors. You only ever catch a glimpse, she says. So often painters in history have labored to bid the glimpse to stay, and in the interest of clarity, have used objects that are, so to speak, still. Jars, glasses, urns, cloths, tables, windows, fruits, vegetables, chops, clusters, and all the spaces between. The history of still-life goes back and back, and offers the painter a great treasury of images of how things appear (and disappear). There is not a memorable still-life in art history that cannot be seen as allegorical. The imagination takes care of that. ALLOS: other. Despite the aplomb with which Charles' objects stand before us, they initiate thoughts of other things, sometimes as obscure as a distant light, sometimes as clear as a glass of water. Dubuffet told us that his love for common things in his art was an 'attempt to bring disparaged values' into the light. 'I cannot get over the feeling that the things closest to us, most constantly in sight, have also always been the least noticed, that they remain the least known, and, that if one is searching for the key to things, one has the best chance of finding them in the things which are most copiously repeated.'

Charles' work has sometimes been seen as obsessive, and sometimes as serial in intent. But I see it as her passionate attempt to gauge the place – literally

– of objects in our lives. Her focus is on how we arrange memory, or as she sometimes calls it, the 'residue' of memory. Each shimmering glass of milk or water is an autonomous reminder of how volatile our memory can be. And how, inevitably, our regard slips off into reverie.

Her means: viscous paint, thin washes, impastos. Materials that respond to her impulse to establish the character of what she sees. If she wishes to seize the character of yarn, she wields her fluent paint, with all its richness of half-tones, to tell of meshing, woveness and enwoveness. If she becomes entranced with the shape of things, as she does in her witty evaluations of the common hot-water bottle, her brush can move from dense matter to the thinnest of washes, and her imagination moves from the thing itself to its metamorphosis into a pure shape. The transmogrification into an ominous black (fish? kite?) or into a fragile ancient glass vial, is quite marvellous, in the way that the poet André Breton enshrined that word. The same can be said of her airy renditions of the common pan scrub. Although Charles has said more than once that her work is about paint, I take it that it is shorthand for saying that it is about how paint can translate the universe – always a mysterious business about which words are hard to summon.

About light and shadow: Charles has experimented with photograms. This is the ultimate act of disembarassing oneself of obstacles. The photogrammist, as Man Ray demonstrated, gets straight to the point, and in the course of things, proves that there cannot be a straight-to-the-point attitude since even the absence of the machine – the camera – does not guarantee a pure image, only myriad degrees of lights and shadows, and the delightful surprises of emergence. Photograms are essentially about things as transformed by light into mirages, hallucinations, estranged from the customary.

But so are paintings.

In many of her recent studies of the common household fly, Charles deliberates on the fragile, translucent lights of the wings, and the density of the bodies. For me, her renditions of the fly are not exactly natural history, but also not exactly unnatural. When I conjure up a fly, I always see it on a windowpane, and am hypnotized by its meandering course. In that irregular journey, the wings reflect



glass reflections. For all their wonderful simplicity, Charles' images of a fly invariably suggest that strange trajectory in light and shadow. Here she uses all her painterly resources to tell us how very complicated this painterly vision can become, sometimes in sequences of tones and half-tones, sometimes accented, as when she economically introduces color to tell of the burning ember of the fly's head. Who but the ancient Chinese and Japanese brush painters would have thought of inspecting so closely the mysterious life of a fly? Or for that matter the quality of a plastic shopping bag? Whether a fly in transit or a glass resting uneasily on the shifting facets of a plastic shopping bag, Charles' objects, or shall we say subjects, often become phantoms. They haunt.

For a very long time I have listened respectfully to the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, so wise in the things of the world. He understood that for a poet or a painter, 'the world is not so much a noun as an adjective', quoting the poet Milosz. If I try to locate the most appropriate adjective for Charles' oeuvre, I come up with the word iridescent, like drinking glasses, flies wings, bottles. I could easily transliterate Bachelard's observations concerning the poet's imagery into the paintings of Charles:

The poetic image is an emergence from language; it is always a little above the language of signification.

Yes, that can be said of Charles' paintings. There is a language of painting, and when used poetically, as Charles uses it, it does always arise a little above the depiction of the objects she scrutinizes.

Finally, Charles' long experience with her painter's language is expressed in terms that suggest spontaneity; a rush of exceptional enthusiasm. (Her voice, in person, when she speaks, is also modulated by a rush of words.) It requires great skill, great craft, to reduce an object to its essence in just a few swift strokes of the brush. Charles succeeds – again and again and again and again.

left:

Fever Curer, 1998  
photograms, each 51 x 41.5 cm



pp 30-33:  
Even a Fly has a Soul, Series 1, 2003  
ink and paint on paper, each sheet 28 x 38 cm









left:

Striped Shopping Bag, 2008  
oil on paper, 56.8 x 76.5 cm

p 36:

Red Shopping Bag, 2008  
oil on paper, 68.5 x 50.7 cm

p 37:

Red Shopping Bag, 2008  
oil on paper, 69.9 x 50 cm







above:  
Empty Glasses 2008  
oil on the covers of books

right:  
Milk on Economics Books, 2006  
paint on the covers of books

p 40:  
Soaps on Economics Books, Series 2, 2002  
paint on the covers of books

p 41:  
Soaps on Economics Books, Series 2, 2002  
one of thirty-six  
paint on the covers of books













pp 42-43:

Evaporating Milk, 2007

oil on wood panels, 122 x 424 cm

left:

from Empty Glasses, Series 1, 2007

ink on paper, 38 x 28 cm

pp 46-47:

Empty Glasses, 2008

oil on wood panels, 122 x 483 cm







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