

Blind painter Blackwell: Notes from the Underground

BY ED BOWERS

In spite of common sense, I've decided to launch Art Beat by reviewing a series of paintings by Charles Blackwell that are no longer on display and that have departed the Tenderloin for other shores.

I feel this is appropriate because life in the Tenderloin is nomadic; here yesterday, gone tomorrow, leaving a few empty rooms and frail memories behind, fading tattered artifacts doomed to be born to be erased by time. I have seen men walking naked across the street, teenagers sleeping like babies in the gutter, and nuns sailing down the avenue as fast as wind spiders.

And they're gone like yesterday's breaking news.

The exhibition in question was on display from June 12-17 at the Community Arts Studio at Hospitality House, which presents itself as "a free, drop-in fine arts studio serving low-income artists in San Francisco." It is located at 146 Leavenworth at Turk Street in the heart of the Tenderloin. The exhibition was presented under the title, "New Paintings by Charles Blackwell: Jazz in the Tenderloin."

The title is fascinating. I don't know of one jazz club remaining in the Tenderloin.

I'm currently living next to what used to be the Blackhawk, famous for featuring Miles Davis, but which is now a parking lot.

The apartment I occupy was once co-owned by Miles Davis and B.B. King. I am living with musical ghosts. I believe that Miles is currently fussing and cussing around and about my front door but I can't prove it. He doesn't record on Earth much anymore.

As a jazz aficionado I am aware that compared to other musical forms, real jazz has never been all that popular. In fact it was so unpopular that a lot of musical geniuses died broke, consoling themselves with heroin and booze.

Yet, despite its relative lack of commercial success, jazz has influenced all other forms of music to an extent comparable only to the blues upon which it is based.

What is created underground often goes above ground in a simpler, safer, less difficult form.

But the Tenderloin is a rather underground kind of zone, a jazz band whose horns are the bodies and minds and souls of its citizens often expressing themselves via difficult chord changes, dangerous improvisations, and dissonance. A lot of people find the music of the Tenderloin unbecoming, and yet the lives of its citizens will continue to influence the whole in ways few people will ever bother to understand until it is too late.

As far as most folks are concerned, real jazz could disappear from the face of the Earth and no one would care. The older musicians knew what it was like to be ignored and held in contempt and used and ripped off and this resulted in many of them acting out in a rather suicidal manner as regards their personal lives.

It is the same with many of the citizens of the Tenderloin. Most people here will not be missed when they're gone. They're not popular music. No one above ground cares if they drop off the charts. They don't play popular songs in a popular way.

But I never forget a face I see in the Tenderloin or a good work of art.

The paintings I witnessed at this show were deeply spiritual and created by a man who is capable of expressing a vision that goes far beyond his ego.

One work, titled "Inside Streetcar On Sixth And Market," is an anarchic explosion of aggressive paint strokes appearing as though frantic tiny people were being eviscerated in a butcher shop, the little low-grade meats animated and dancing and bouncing off walls with a life all their own.

This painting is abstract but visceral. It

reminds me of the work of saxophonist John Coltrane.

Then there is a depiction of a shopping cart pushed by the giant hands of a homeless bag lady. I can feel the swelling of her finger joints, the strength and the loneliness of her fight to hang on to her last possessions in an indifferent city. Her body is bloated with loneliness.

But my favorite is "Another Lonely Night in the Tenderloin" in which a naked woman with the face of a rotten pumpkin is staring out of her window like a black widow spider in search of a mate. It is impossible not to have sympathy for this woman. She is obviously tortured by isolation and need, but there is a desperate ruthless quality conveyed by her portrait that indicates that she would kill every last man, woman and child on Earth if she could only get what she wanted.

There is nothing sentimental or judgmental about this painting. It depicts the schizophrenic predatory nature of desire, lust, and loneliness in all its nakedness.

"What inspired the name of your show?" I asked Blackwell. "There is very little jazz music played here in this neighborhood. There's a lot of it in human form, collective improvisation included, but what specifically inspired you to name your show 'Jazz in the Tenderloin?'"

"There is no jazz in the Tenderloin," he replied, "but I bring the jazz in with the pictures of the drummers and musicians and put the music together with the people like in 'Another Lonely Night in the Tenderloin.'"

"Your pictures move," I said. "The figures in them are like stars that melt and descend and then ascend. They dance. It's as though you're seeing people with a sixth sense."

That's when Blackwell informed me that he was legally blind. He'd lost his tunnel vision in his 20s when enrolled as a student in the late Sixties at Sacramento City College as a visual arts major. Blackwell is also color blind and partially deaf.

"Sometimes I grab colors at random and sometimes I'll ask someone at the art space what color I'm using," he explained. "When I work, I play off a thought I have and go through it and keep working towards it because eventually something is going to come out."

"Do you live in the Tenderloin?" I asked him.

"Oh God no! I couldn't handle that. But truly by the grace of God I'm not homeless. They took my house in Sacramento in a court battle."

This potentially disastrous situation, he explained, caused him to have a great deal of empathy, respect and concern for the homeless nomads in this zone.

At the exhibition I also saw a painting titled "Portrait of Charles Blackwell" in which Blackwell depicts himself as looking sad, bent over and almost defeated.

The key word here is "almost." Because that is exactly what Charles Blackwell has "almost" done. He has overcome almost all obstacles to his artistic and spiritual vision.

That's what all real artists do. They work within their limitations so they can go beyond them. And when they go beyond them they often end up achieving far more than someone who is unaware of the obstacles.

So the next time you are feeling sorry for yourself and believe that the odds are

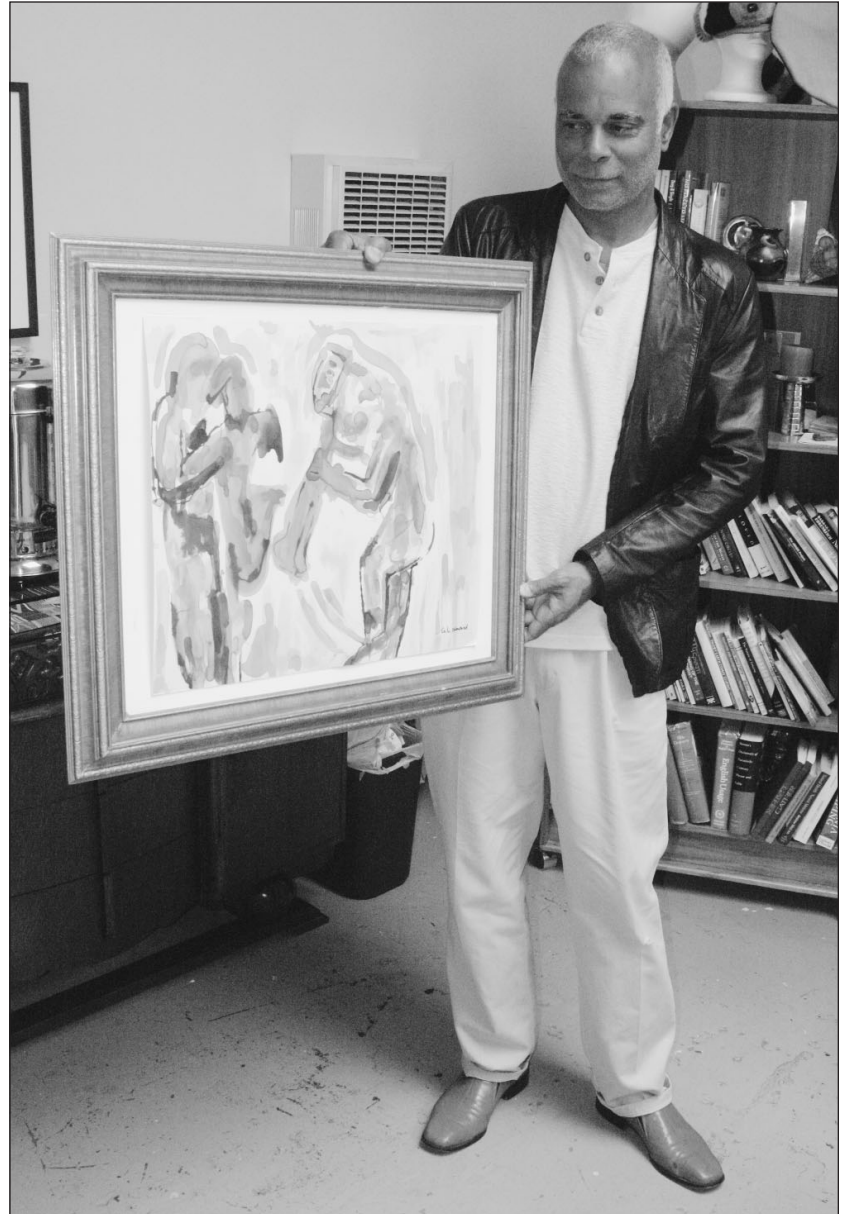


PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Charles Blackwell shows one of the paintings in his Hospitality House exhibition, "Jazz in a Sunny City."

against you, take a lesson from Charles Blackwell.

One of the functions of an artist is to alter consciousness and take others with him on his journey.

Alas, the days when a painting could cause a riot, a revolution, or inspire someone to quit his job and move to Paris are gone. We have become sophisticated and numb.

But the paintings of Charles Blackwell are beautiful, transcending ordinary vision, revealing the light beneath the surface of darkness, the meaning between the lines.

The next time you have the opportunity to view them please do so. They really are portraits of the Tenderloin.

And that's jazz.

Further information regarding Charles Blackwell can be obtained by calling Hospitality House at (415) 749-2104. ■

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