



CS4

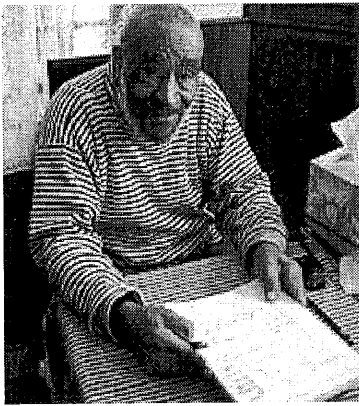
Learn more >>

METRO TIMES | 1/4/2006

The art of seeing art

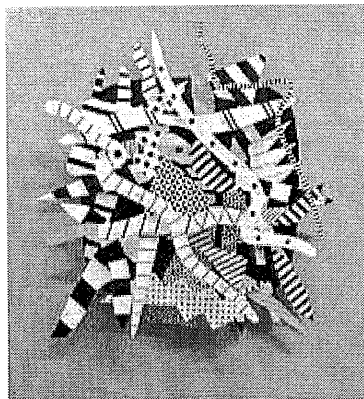
For Charles McGee, inspiration is everywhere

BY NICK SOUSANIS



MT PHOTO: NICK SOUSANIS

Charles McGee, nine decades on and still inspired.



McGee's "Time Structure," 2001.

Sure, if you ask him, artist Charles McGee will share plenty from his rich life. At 81, the incredibly sharp-minded and dynamic artist has a long list of accomplishments as an educator and community leader, and shows no sign of slowing down anytime soon.

But all McGee really wants to riff on is art. You can pry him about the various details of his life, but no matter how hard you try to get the details, his stories eventually turn philosophical about art and ideas, and his need to constantly create.

McGee's paintings, assemblages and sculptures are in prestigious national and international collections, and are on permanent display in such formidable local institutions as the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. His work is in Troy Beaumont and Detroit Receiving hospitals, and it's on constant display for riders of the downtown Detroit People Mover who pass through the Broadway station. It's hard to believe that after decades of working, he still maintains a feverish exhibition pace. Over the last few months alone, his work has been on display at the Birmingham Bloomfield Arts Center (BBAC), Huntington Woods Gallery, Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit, Flatlanders Art Gallery and the Scarab Club, where he was recently honored. The small, sturdy man climbed a ladder to reach the Scarab Club's historic beam and scrawl his signature next to those of Diego Rivera and Norman Rockwell.

"The important thing to me has always been about tomorrow, about getting back in the studio," McGee says. His energy is reflected in his art. McGee makes use of abstraction to show the passage of time and a passion for life. Whether in colorful painting or black-and-white sculpture, he creates a constant dance of movement through snaking, elongated shapes, through zigzags and curves, letting circles and solid stripes provide resting points for the eyes. You might imagine you're looking at tribal markings or protozoa zipping through a microscopic soup, but his pieces are often inspired by far more ordinary things.

His art expresses his surroundings. The stripes on his shirt, the intricate lacework in his curtains or the invisible path made by a squirrel bounding across the lawn look like design elements in his pieces. Glowing bulbs in traffic lights become dots that are compositional punctuation marks. Bricks, fences and highway lane markers give him shapes and patterns to work with. His work is active and alive, but never busy, as McGee works carefully to balance each element of a composition.

Charles McGee may be a fastidious and studious worker in his northwest Detroit studio, but when he was a boy, he arrived in Detroit from rural South Carolina, where he hadn't been to school a day in his life. At age 10, he attended elementary school for the first time in Detroit. At that age, the only thing he could write was an

"X" to sign his name, and that's when he first understood his family was not as privileged as some others. The incident has motivated his art-making ever since. He says the experience was character-building, allowing him to understand "I was better than that 'X.'"

The dramatic change also sensitized him, in his own words, "to a totally different sound and vision." He remembers seeing the bright lights and all the activity, and hearing city noises for the first time. Even his first trip to a shoe store — Fyfe's at the corner of Adams Street and Woodward Avenue in Detroit, with its rows upon rows of choices — left an imprint on a child who'd been barefoot until then.

Seven decades later, this wide-eyed worldview still defines him. He's what psychologist Howard Gardner calls a creative thinker: "Someone who possesses a mind that is young and mature." It's that duality that has given him the passion and knowledge to move forward with lofty goals.

McGee, who went on to study under artist Guy Palazzola at the Society of Arts and Crafts (now the College for Creative Studies), founded his own school in 1969. With a volunteer staff, he founded the Charles McGee School of Art and taught children and adults until the school closed in 1974. He spent 18 years teaching art at Eastern Michigan University, has taught at the University of Michigan, and currently shares his experience with his students at the BBAC. For his career as an artist and educator, CCS recently awarded him with an honorary doctorate.

Over the years, McGee has curated several exhibitions, including *Seven Black Artists* at the Detroit Artists Market in 1969. That show was pivotal in his career, leading him to establish Gallery 7, an artists collective that lasted 10 years. In 1979, McGee, along with artist Jean Heilbrunn and

others, founded the Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit (CAID) in an attempt to invigorate the art scene. To this day, the organization continues to work toward realizing the original vision of a permanent contemporary art center.

It's not so much that his work is about his personal life. Rather, as he tells it, every life experience informs his work. "I think it's all integral — you can't have one without the other. If you touch something, it supplies experience. And that experience translates into imagery of some kind, if it's no more than memory imagery." In a recent work of art, McGee put dirt and splinters in a piece. "Whatever came into my hands or that I'd touched upon turned into a work of art. Now that is glorious! I feel like I could make self-portraits from now on in that regard."

Perhaps in his ninth decade, the artist should feel entitled to relax and enjoy a round of golf. (As it turns out, he is an avid golfer, which makes one look at some of the dogleg shapes in his work with a fresh eye.) But he's never been able to stop. "As long as I'm on the face of the earth, I plan to keep step as best I can. I think that the body certainly is going to slow down, has slowed down, but the mind, if you cultivate it, can keep on ticking. But it needs oiling just like a machine. And it all comes out of the type of person that you are too. I'm just so hungry for it that I don't know what it means to have my cup full."

The artist keeps his mind strong by constantly expanding his vocabulary, exploring new media and approaching every next move without trepidation. He's currently enrolled in Spanish class (a language that has been his passion since he studied in Barcelona back in 1968) and he's also learning his way around a computer — not to keep up with e-mail, but to see if he can find more efficient ways of making art.

In his comic book series *The Watchmen*, author Alan Moore writes, "We gaze continually at the world and it grows dull in our perceptions. Yet seen from another's vantage point, as if new, it may still take the breath away." McGee makes it easy for others to see a bright and buzzing world through his eyes and his art. For him and his audience, there is no disconnecting art and life.

© 2009 Metro Times