



THE HORSE'S MOUTH

Charlie Miller can't help himself, he started drawing when he was 4 months old and has never stopped. He gets up in the morning and makes one quick stroke on a paper hung on the wall—"holy shit, I'm still here!" The odor of oil paint first thing "smells like victory"—or, as his alter ego, Gulley Jimson, exclaims in *The Horse's Mouth*: "Paint. Lovely paint. Why I could rub my nose in it or lick it up for breakfast." An interviewer once approached Charlie: "So you're an artist—is that your hobby?" His reply: "Do you breathe?"

Charlie comes from a blue collar Irish Catholic background so to be an artist felt like a betrayal of his class, but his daytime jobs weren't—in factories, as janitor, houseboy, dishwasher, on renovation crews. As a husband and father he would come home from work to a planned neighborhood cookout ("watching people burn animals," he calls it) and have to excuse himself. It wasn't that he didn't like the other people, he just had to paint, to return to the one constant truth of his life, feed it, cultivate it. "It is lonely sometimes."

He paints in series. He's also a jazz musician, percussionist, and has done many large black and white canvases of his musician friends, sometimes seen from behind, his point of view at the drums. Working on a number of paintings at once is like learning to play music, he says, you've got to learn the melody first, then you are free to explore, improvise like a jazz musician. He paints until the cycle is finished "just like a love affair, your insides tell you it's over, will it ever happen again? it's always scary."

During the height of the Vietnam War he did 14 large canvases of the *Stations of the Cross* dealing with brutality, some friends thought too much so. But he grew up with that stuff, a picture of Jesus over his bed. Even now without the picture, he can remember waking up fearful, being watched, "What did I do?" He had to confront that feeling in the paintings. Later he did a string of imaginary environmental disasters, vast electrified landscapes, beaches with tiny figures, where the buildup of chemicals in the air explodes. Some said that was too depressing, he said that's what you get. He's angry about "the way we wipe our feet on this magnificent planet."

As a kid he was always intrigued by the stars, planets, galaxies, and then he noticed that they started creeping into his works, an isolated planet by the head of one his musician friends. When Charlie moved to his current digs he was overwhelmed by the sunlight and so he started painting sunspots. He needs to buy a shield for his large telescope so he can observe the new solar eruptions. Now a series of paintings runs around his apartment floor, from room to room, as though they were on a conveyor belt. They are the result of a year or more spent studying Mars, the hot red planet, "Mars is hell—we couldn't survive it." He wants to call attention to the otherworldly, and travel through this group of images until he can let it go, to make and paint his own planet. When people ask him what he's painting he likes to say "the universe" which he thinks scares them, or at least shuts them up, "they blanch and look for the exit sign." He goes on, "We're all made out of stardust, that's comforting to me." Yes, he's full of contradictions, admits he wants to keep himself off balance, curious. "If I ever did a painting I really liked, I'd faint."

For Charlie, painting is a physical, sensual act, brush and canvas, pulsing back and forth. Photographing him painting is like photographing him making love, he says. He uses bristle brushes, "like basting chicken," trying to get inside the painting, "I'm best when I'm inside it." He paints for hours and is snapped back to life by the sound of large shuffling feet, his own. "What's the matter, why is it dark outside? Oh, it's late in the day."

"I love my work, that's when I'm 100% whole and happy." And then for a moment he doubts himself, wondering if that feeling really is so good, but he continues, "peace of mind is the most difficult thing to achieve in life. The world won't often let that happen." He has a small Zen sand garden that he tends throughout the day. Charlie sometimes says he would like his art to lift our eyes above the grit and grime on earth to the larger universe around us. But he also knows that his paintings are just as likely to piss us off. Is there a difference? Does it matter?