



“PORTRAIT OF CHARLES” BY JEROME CAJA

JEROME HAD ME OVER not long after Charles died to look at the ashes. He inspected the chips of bone. “I wish they were larger,” he said, “easier to paint on.”

“Can I?” I asked.

He encouraged me, undoing the twist-tie that held Charles’s ashes in a heavy plastic bag. I reached in, and the density surprised me, like shattered mortar.

“No urn?” I asked, a little disappointed.

“Just the box” — heavy like a hatbox, and oblong.

That had been two years before Jerome’s exhibit, *The Remains of the Day*, opened at Southern Exposure Gallery and five years after Jerome met Charles Sexton at the San Francisco Art Institute. The Remains were a series of portraits of Charles, created by Jerome, over a surface of resin blended with Charles’s ash. In other works, Jerome has included his own body: strands of his long, blond hair, the accumulated toenails on which the *Foot of Christ* is painted. There’s no reverence in his use of the body. Jerome is a taskmaster and the body is forced to perform — in Charles’s case, even after death.

“So here,” showing a portrait, “the ash is mixed with a red resin with glitter in it. I mixed glitter with the ash because she was such a princess.”

Admiration and vengeance both had their hand in that project, in the ennobling and satirizing portraits that Jerome later gave away to those closest to Charles.

“Before the show, I decided that those paintings were for his friends and his family, why else bother making them? They’re a memento, they mean something to the people who knew him. They may be nice, and people who didn’t know him might appreciate them, but not nearly as much as the people who knew him. I don’t do stuff for the dead, but I do fulfill promises.”

“So this was a promise you made?” I asked.

“Of course, well, we decided whoever died first, the loser would have to make paintings with the other’s ashes. Charles really pushed the ashes idea. He loved the idea of being spread out around the country. So now, with the ashes I have left, I can sell her, make her work for a living.”

When I asked if it was a great responsibility for Jerome to have agreed to, he responded without hesitation, “No. It’s a fabulous surface to paint on. It’s a wonderful experiment. The texture’s gorgeous. I’m still making new ones.” How, then, was Jerome evaluated as the loser? “I lost my place in the mortality line. Charles and I were going to the same place, but he got there sooner.” So Jerome became the inheritor of this memorial project. His challenge: to make a phoenix of these ashes.

The Remains of the Day, for its material use of ash and bone, was noticeably lacking in sentimentality. The show was not about honored remembrance, but honest remembrance, and if Jerome had painted Charles as Saint Theresa in one piece, he’d also painted Charles as the devil in another.

He pulled out a painting, explaining, “And the *Happy Face* one, that’s a very important one, too. Because that queen hated happy faces so much. I used to have these big, Happy Face earrings. She would not let me wear them in her house. I had to put them in my pocket. So I decided to make her into a Happy Face for eternity.”

Painting as payback. But art is always a cannibalism of some sort, and Charles Sexton’s work is also an unflinching testament to that idea. In *Dog Boy*, a body is viciously attacked and eaten by a ravenous blue God, which Charles saw as AIDS. It is one of many images in which Charles transformed his own illness into the raw materials of his art. Jerome, who was willed Charles’s art supplies and had been using them in preparation for the show, also incorporated their mutual themes. Many of the images in the paintings were shared and developed while they worked together, which they did into the early stages of Charles’s CMV retinitis, a complication of AIDS leading to blindness.

“My concept of him is the burning temple, the incinerator. It’s one of his constant themes. Saturn eating his children is another theme. That’s why I painted Charles eating himself. I love that concept of devouring, and for him, self-devouring. I think self-pity is a devouring thing, to feel sorry for yourself all the time. I always thought Charles was a little crybaby. But he was a noble man, too. He had an exquisite mind, brilliant talent.”

For both painters, painting extended well beyond the work that would sell in galleries or hang on museum walls. Their inventiveness transformed their living environments. Both painters were collectors, admirers of the readymade, skillful with appropriation and recontextualization while happily avoiding the titles postmodern, or neo-geo — only to be placed in the dubious realms of “outsider art.” Jerome, for example, who paints with make-ups and nail polish, is by virtue of his materials difficult for an art critic to categorize. He doesn’t spend his time wracked by such considerations. Asked why he paints with nail polish, he answers without pretense, “Because it’s easier to clean up. You never have to wash your brush, just put it back in the bottle.”

This simplicity brings to mind a story Jerome once told me

of a visit by one of his ten brothers. They had gone to Golden Gate Park, to the Rose Garden, when they noticed a lesbian couple lying together on the grass, embracing and kissing. Jerome's brother bristled, and when Jerome inquired about his response, his brother used the classic line of those most removed from it, "It's unnatural." To which Jerome responded, "If it happens, it's natural." This philosophy, which implies that nature does not conform to our wishes, informs his work, and is apparent in its inclusive content, and its defiance. Jerome employs images canonized in art history, but they are either fetishized or playfully debunked. Often his use of Catholic imagery and saints is perceived as either academic or political, but, in fact, Jerome has had a brief but startlingly intense relationship with the Church. Not only was he "born again," but he also worked for the Church as an arts and crafts teacher for retired nuns.

Jerome knows his saints, and listening to him explaining their presence in his paintings and particularly, in his relaying the stories of their persecutions, it's easy to assume that his excitement is probably what passed as his conversion experience. Jerome has produced a number of shrouds, manufacturing histories that include *The Shroud of Buddha* and *The Shroud of Bozo*; he's preparing to market them with assurances of their genuineness.

Other images, equally important to Jerome, may not be as easily embraced by the museums, galleries, and arbiters of taste who often wind up on judges' panels and selection committees. I've seen Jerome make some genuine efforts at directing the "right" images to the "right" viewers, but he always seems, somehow, blinded by his adoration of his own work and oversteps the boundaries he attempted. Recently courted by the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston for a show with drag as its theme, Jerome sent slides of some of what he must have deemed appro-

priate work, to have only one piece — the least offensive, *The Shroud of Glam-O-Rama* — settled upon for inclusion.

The last time my parents came to visit, Jerome brought along several miniatures for them to look at. I was looking over my father's shoulder when he came upon a glittery painting of an engorged penis. "That looks like mine," my father said, laughing with surprise and calling my mother over for a second opinion. Perhaps they should have curated the ICA show.

I mention these incidents to communicate the difficulty Jerome has in observing his work from anyone else's perspective. I think this is why he insists upon having his friends do regular "beauty contests" of his work, persuading them to identify the winner and runners-up from his stacks of paintings. No one is forced to justify their decision making, but I always have the sense that Jerome is deeply interested in how the people closest to him evaluate the work. As with Mapplethorpe, it is not uncommon to go through a stack of dick paintings executed in make-ups on black velvet paper, and then be offered another stack of tenderly rendered still lifes of flowers. Jerome, however, does not feel compelled to make elegant or formal paintings. Raunch also has a place in his heart and work. Sometimes it appears overtly, as in the painting I am the proud owner of, *Bozo Fucks Death*, in which Bozo is a middle-aged man engaging in anal sex with a masturbating skeleton, both figures wearing little boy's briefs around their ankles. Sometimes he is more sneaky, for example, his numerous Virgin Marys painted on used condoms (the shape works perfectly; the head is painted on the reservoir tip).

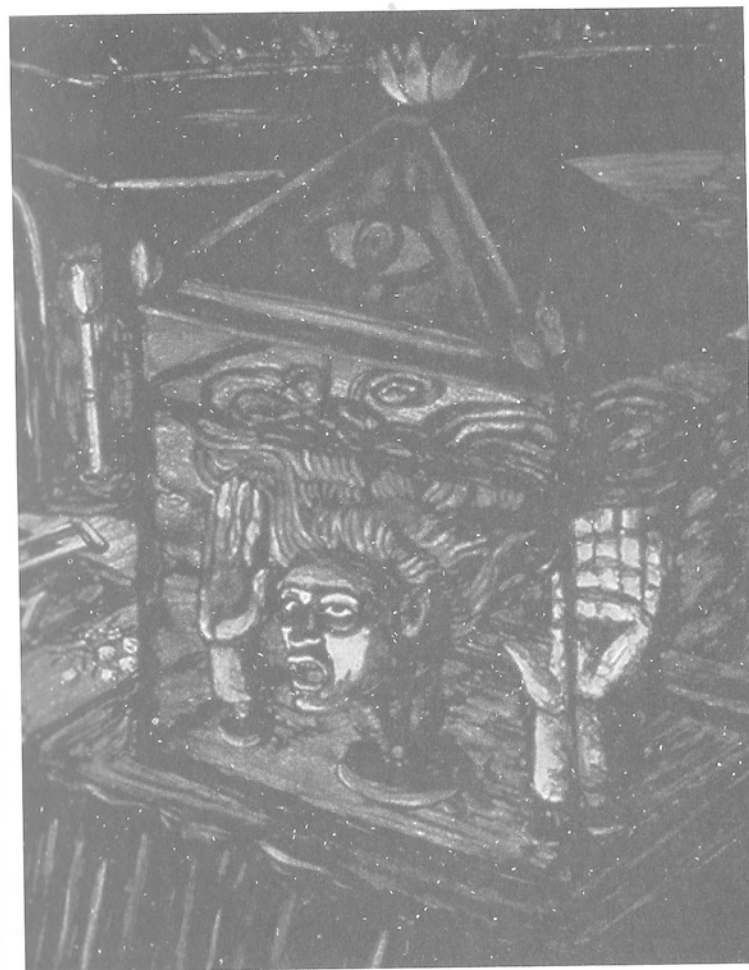
Jerome makes no attempt to self-censor or justify his process. One need only see his live-work space to understand why he paints primarily miniatures. His room, as well as the other rooms of the apartment, are like display cases created by overzealous

agoraphobics, laden with treasures found and created, constantly evolving environments. In Charles's apartment, too, one confronted the possibilities of an afterlife in hell in Day-Glo dioramas, a foreshadowing, and perhaps a preparation for the truly oppressive purgatory he was soon to enter.

"Hospitals leave a residue on your mind," Jerome explained. "Charles always hated it. She was always so grateful to see me, because I brought decorations for her room, like lights and pictures. No one can live in an empty room, how could you ever get better? So I would go decorate — that's how she got most of the paintings of mine. I said, 'Godammit girl, can't you just die, you keep getting sick and I'm losing all of my best paintings.' She was such a greedy cunt."

Charles's work began to reflect the cold procedural probings of the hospital in works like *Diagnosis*, a dark monoprint of a stigmatized patient either locked in an airless, pyramidal aquarium, or constrained inside a reliquary box. The Remains of the Day are reliquiae, though no longer protected or enshrined, but exposed to light and air, used, forced to work. Jerome muses over the tradition of reliquary boxes: "Some were made out of gold and gem-encrusted, with little windows through which you could see the decay." He seems delighted by the elegant intricacies of a box that makes us privy to our decay. "My favorite story is Saint Bernard's. He became a missionary when he saw some German boys and thought, God must really want them in heaven because they are so beautiful. He was attacked by thieves who wanted his box. Saint Bernard fought for it and was killed. The thieves got the reliquary, but when they opened it, there was nothing inside but hair and bones."

In contrast to this tradition of making the dead precious and preservable are Charles's images of voodoo and dolls, of replica



"DIAGNOSIS" BY CHARLES SEXTON

and symbol. Charles's painting *The Supplication* is full of a primitive and hypnotic power; priestess and supplicant are doll figures, their relationship an archetype between the protector and the vulnerable, the care-giver and the sick. Jerome's painting *Charles as King of the Broken Dolls* recasts these themes. Charles, portrayed as a crowned jack-in-the-box, looks out over the ruins of broken toys. The body is breakable, finite, simple. The doll, possessing Charles's face, is again imprisoned in a box, a toy that is toyed with and discarded. And though Jerome was never sentimental about the cruelty of Charles's illness — the opportunistic infections like vicious and individual brutes that form a gang — the jack-in-the-box conjures up an innocence, an innocence shared by anyone who suffers needlessly, anyone so brutalized.

The ugly irony of retinitis, for an artist who loved color and texture as much as Charles did, meant a fight to the end. Jerome remembered painting with Charles, after his roommate, Tina, went to bed. "We'd go into his room and start to work because there was a place where he took intravenous things. He had little ports everywhere, in his chest, because his veins were destroyed from needles. She had her own intravenous center, which she painted. She was taking medication for her eyes: Foscarnet. And she sat beneath her painting of Saint Lucy holding out her hands, and when the Foscarnet wasn't working, she took a hammer and smashed Saint Lucy's eyes. She had a temper, that girl."

Jerome commented on Charles's frustration, but he certainly had his own. Of Charles, he said, "She drove me out of her life for months at a time. We were like Baby Jane, playing both roles for each other." The image is painfully perfect; Charles once and for all had the terminal role, wheelchair bound, a role for which he'd been applying the makeup for years, that white-face he eventually did work into the grave only to have his roommate, Tina,

dig it back out, more deranged than ever, and wear it regularly wherever drinks are cheap.

Charles actually hated drag, on himself, that is. I think he preferred to be seen as a specter, not a grim but a seductive reaper. I remember him at a party I'd thrown for Valentine's Day, the living room converted into a fallopian fantasy, a soft, pink lining of fabric, floor to ceiling, and mischievous cherubs bathing and diapering guests. And there was Charles in white-face and black suit. In retrospect, Charles's vampire drag at a party celebrating infancy was probably a knee-jerk reaction to the innocence of the theme. Queers have become the snake in Eden, the corrupting influence. AIDS is exile and nudity. Charles came dressed in the theme ascribed to him: the mythic, romantic predator.

I remember, also, the first time I went to Charles and Tina's apartment. There was a large painting of Charles's lover, Adolfo Lopez Luna, whom he lost to AIDS. This painting is striking in its emotional use of color: Adolfo's sorrowful face painted blue and green and dropping from a red sky. Also falling from the sky are images of the virus, glowing red with green tentacles. The face is emptying into a pool of blue-and-green water. Adolfo introduced Charles to the color and symbolism that were so much a part of his Mexican background. Charles inherited these gifts after Adolfo's death, and since he was not a native of the culture and had received them through love, they remained, for him, a sensual mystery. Charles liked colors that resonated against each other and maintained their individual integrity when placed side by side. Painting was a way of conjuring Adolfo after his death; not only the portraits, but the whole language of Charles's painting bore his influence. Perhaps it was this inheritance that encouraged Charles to enter into a pact with Jerome.

Most of Charles's work came after his AIDS diagnosis. He

traveled to Mexico and Rome, two sites of inspiration for him, bringing back lurid posters of Catholic saints with wounds being licked by stray dogs, and 3-D Jesus postcards. His work habits, always a complaint of Jerome's, must have improved — at last he was finishing pieces. Over Charles and Tina's couch, a dark monoprint, *The Birth of Religion*, showed a primitive figure, a hermaphrodite with three breasts, a bonelike erection, and an infant emerging from the birth canal. The infant's face is Charles's. The whole image is lit by a fire under a large cauldron in the background. The hermaphrodite shakes a bone. The images are shamanistic and self-procreative, and like many of Charles's paintings, the suggestion of creativity and metaphysics is hard-edged, often violent and full of horror. He made AIDS a muse, so his metaphysics didn't offer promises — they were about transformations of the present.

Charles entrusted his assisted suicide to his longtime roommate, Tina — his closest friend since high school. Like so many people dealing with their test results, he had firmly decided not to live once the quality of his life became severely impacted and there no longer seemed any possibility of improvement. He respected suicide in the way he respected choice in every aspect of his life. Art is a series of choices, of decisions; he was prepared to exercise choice over fate. Tina, remembering the moment when Charles asked him to assist in the suicide, portrayed someone planning a no-hitch event: Charles's parents and brother were called; Jerome and Miss Daniel were also invited. The morphine was easily accessible. But Charles's mother, taking a seat amidst his paintings in the living room, would not witness his final struggle. And Jerome was in New Orleans.

"You know how she died?" Jerome began her telling of the event. "Well, Miss Tina had to kill her, because she was trying to



DETAIL FROM "THE THREE DISGRACES"  
BY JEROME CAJA

poison herself and she was on these antibiotics, and this poison, this medication — I forget what it was. They had planned it, the whole family was there: his brother, his mother, his father, Miss Tina, Miss Daniel. That was a private little get-together, and he had decided that he wanted to go. They pumped in all that — whatever the drug was — but the antibiotics he was on neutralized the drug, so they had to order more drugs from the hospital, which they got right away. And they put more in, but it still didn't do the trick. So Tina's sitting there and she goes, 'You know, if she wakes up tomorrow, and she's still alive, she will be such a cunt, she just won't let me live in peace.' So she put the pillow over her head; she just had to put the pillow over her. She was so weak, she couldn't even move the pillow. So that's the painting I did of her, which Miss Tina now owns, *The Three Disgraces*. Do you remember that one? That's the one with Charles in the ashes burning, like the rising phoenix. The three disgraces are surrounded by toasters, that's the fire of the real world — it doesn't work too well — and Tina and Daniel, the murderers, are holding the pillow, and I'm praying because that was when I was in New Orleans. They kept begging me to call and I thought, I just can't. Well, she just wants to say good-bye. 'Bye!' I've been saying good-bye to her for years. But on the pillow are the new eyes, because I think that's what really terrified Charles the most, going blind. And the eyes are looking at Tina, and the Bird of Death is standing next to Tina, *The Guilty One*. And then, there's a dead cat beyond the toasters, because Charles loved cats and I just hate those things."

Charles died January 27, 1991. *The Remains of the Day* opened October 9, 1992. It marked the fulfillment of Jerome's promise, but it also satisfied another of Charles's greatest wishes — a show that brought both their work together. I remember Charles suggesting such a show, and Jerome's typically difficult



"TWO FACES OF CHARLES" BY JEROME CAJA

response that implied, If I had to work with you, we'd never get past our differences. Jerome was probably right — neither of them was a great organizer, both of them were opinionated, and the differences they chided in each other (differences that from outside looked more like a shared spinsterhood) would have had to be put aside for the larger project. Neither of them could be coerced to put personality aside, for unlike so many contemporary artists who regard personality as either illusory or untrustworthy, both Charles and Jerome, delighting in illusion and impermanence, had made personality the source of their work, complete with all its riddles, complexities, and imperfections. So the show, which brought the work of these two artists together, happily involved the aesthetic decision making of one only. Charles's wishes respected, he came in spirit and a new body that Jerome designed for him, exhibiting himself, once again, for our admiring eyes.