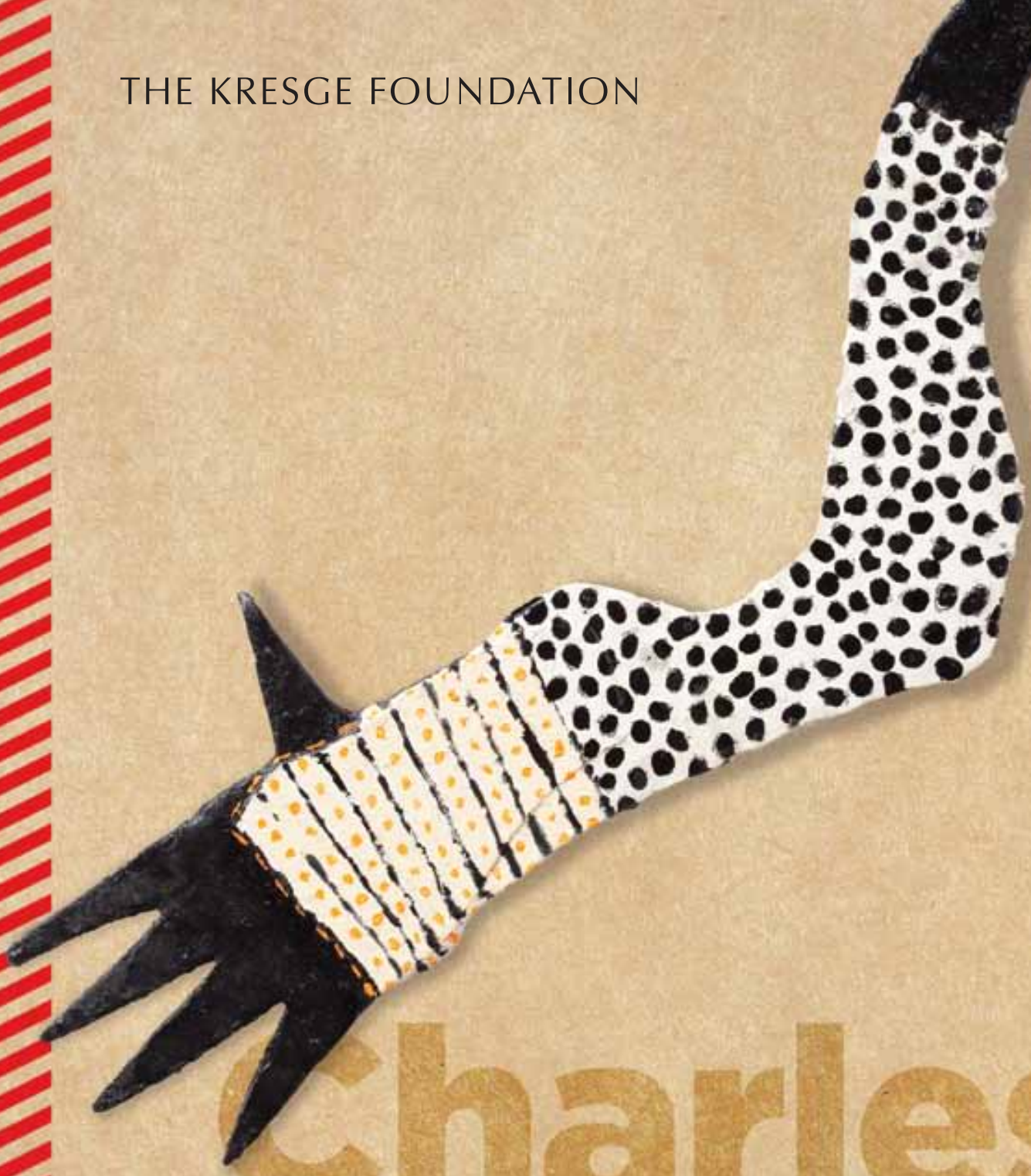
THE KRESGE FOUNDATION



Charles McGee

2008 Kresge Eminent Artist

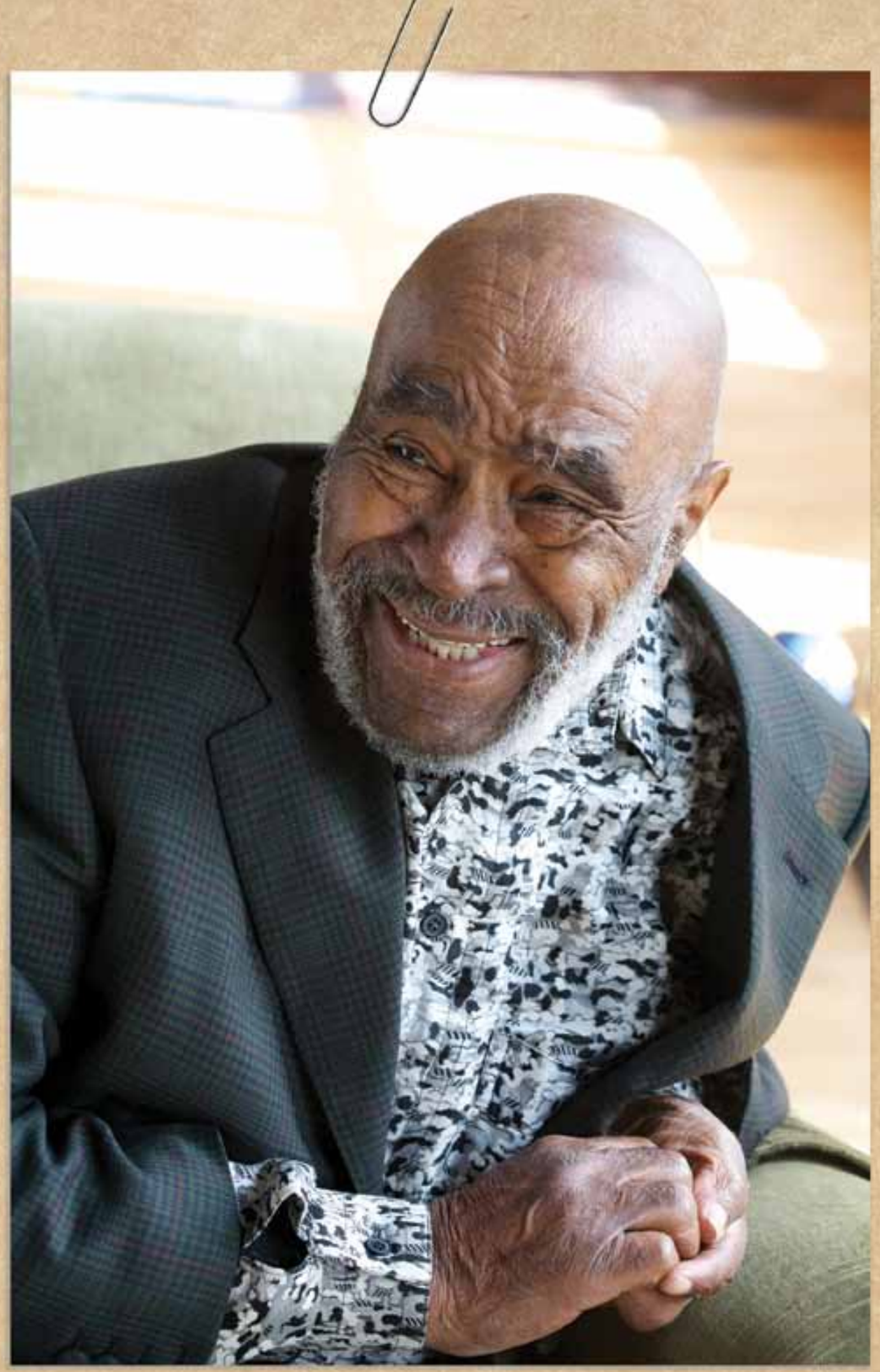
Contents

The Kresge Eminent Artist Award honors an exceptional artist in the visual, performing or literary arts for his or her professional achievements and contributions to Metropolitan Detroit's cultural community. The award, which includes a $50,000 prize, is unrestricted and is given annually to an artist who has lived and worked in Wayne, Oakland or Macomb Counties for a significant number of years.

Charles McGee was named by The Kresge Foundation as their first Eminent Artist Award winner in 2008. This monograph has been created to commemorate this honor and is being published in 2010.

Cover:
Arm Race Arm, 1984
Fiberglass reinforced plaster material on armature
Collection of Janet and Jim Pallas

Left, detail from:
Red, Yellow, Blue, c. 2006
Collection of the artist



Foreword

"The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance." - Aristotle

The Kresge Foundation is proud to honor Charles McGee as the inaugural recipient of the Kresge Eminent Artist Award. He is an American artist of international renown who many years ago made the City of Detroit his home.

In establishing Kresge Arts in Detroit and its Kresge Eminent Artist Award, we celebrate local artists of the first order who have chosen to pursue their careers as residents of Metropolitan Detroit. The benefits of their presence are tremendous. Artists elevate our awareness; they unify, provoke, challenge and inspire us. And, by making their lives here, they validate continuously our decisions to do so as well.

As a community, we celebrate the creative brilliance of Charles McGee and cherish his unwavering artistic leadership in the region.

– Rip Rapson
President and CEO
The Kresge Foundation

Artist's Statement

"I am mandated by nature to do this, to make art."

"I have no choice, you know. I breathe it. I sleep it. It's one of the only things that I really worship.

If you look at nature, it is necessary that we have people. It's necessary that we have frogs, snakes, water, all of these things and how they all work in concert with each other to carry out the mandates of nature – which is creating a kind of equilibrium in the universe.

The fact that you are born and exist in a particular geographic location is going to cause a chain of events that starts from birth or even before birth – what happens along the way is you take the purity of where we came from and it starts to metamorphosize as we grow and as we assess information, process the information.

I feel like the path that I have taken created my alphabet, it gives me a uniqueness that I employ readily because I feel convinced that I have been fed the truth and that nature has given me the opportunity to edit things as I have come through life."

– Charles McGee in "Charles McGee Nature," the 2009 award winning short film by Tim Nagae.

Composition: the Nature of McGee

Far left: Detail* from
Noah's Ark: Friends, 1984–5
Mixed media on masonite board, 96.25" x 48.063"
Private collection
**Artwork altered with permission of the artist. Original artwork shown on pg. 24.*

Play Patterns, 2009
Enamel, fabric, mixed media collage on dibond, 5' x 10'
Collection of the artist

Drawing for **Play Patterns**
Collection of the artist
(Finished piece on pg. 7.)

The Mystery of Genius

by Marion Jackson

One has the impression that McGee sees himself not as a "genius" but as an ordinary person, his extraordinary accomplishments linked not to extraordinary ability but rather to industriousness and hard work throughout his lifetime.

"The secret of genius is to carry the spirit of the child into old age, which means never losing your enthusiasm." – Victor Hugo

Charles McGee spent much of his early childhood with his grandparents on their sharecropper's farm near Clemson, South Carolina. When Charles moved to Detroit in 1934, he was ten years old, unschooled and unable to sign his name except with an "X." His mother — then living in Detroit with her sister and brother-in-law and employed as a domestic worker — brought Charles and his sister to Detroit, hoping to offer them a more promising future than that available to poor blacks in the rural South of the 1930s.

Detroit, however, was in the depth of the Great Depression and people were struggling here too; life was not easy and circumstances not propitious. Add to this that Charles' mother suffered from tuberculosis and was frequently hospitalized and that Charles found himself unprepared socially or academically to keep pace with his new school classmates.

Few could have predicted, at the time, that the young Charles McGee would grow strong and flourish in this environment and that he would become a forceful and widely beloved teacher with his own art school, an influential gallery director, a respected university professor, and an artist of such regional and national prominence that his art and his actions would significantly influence the Detroit arts community and contribute even more generally to the broadening inclusivity of American art in the late-20th century.

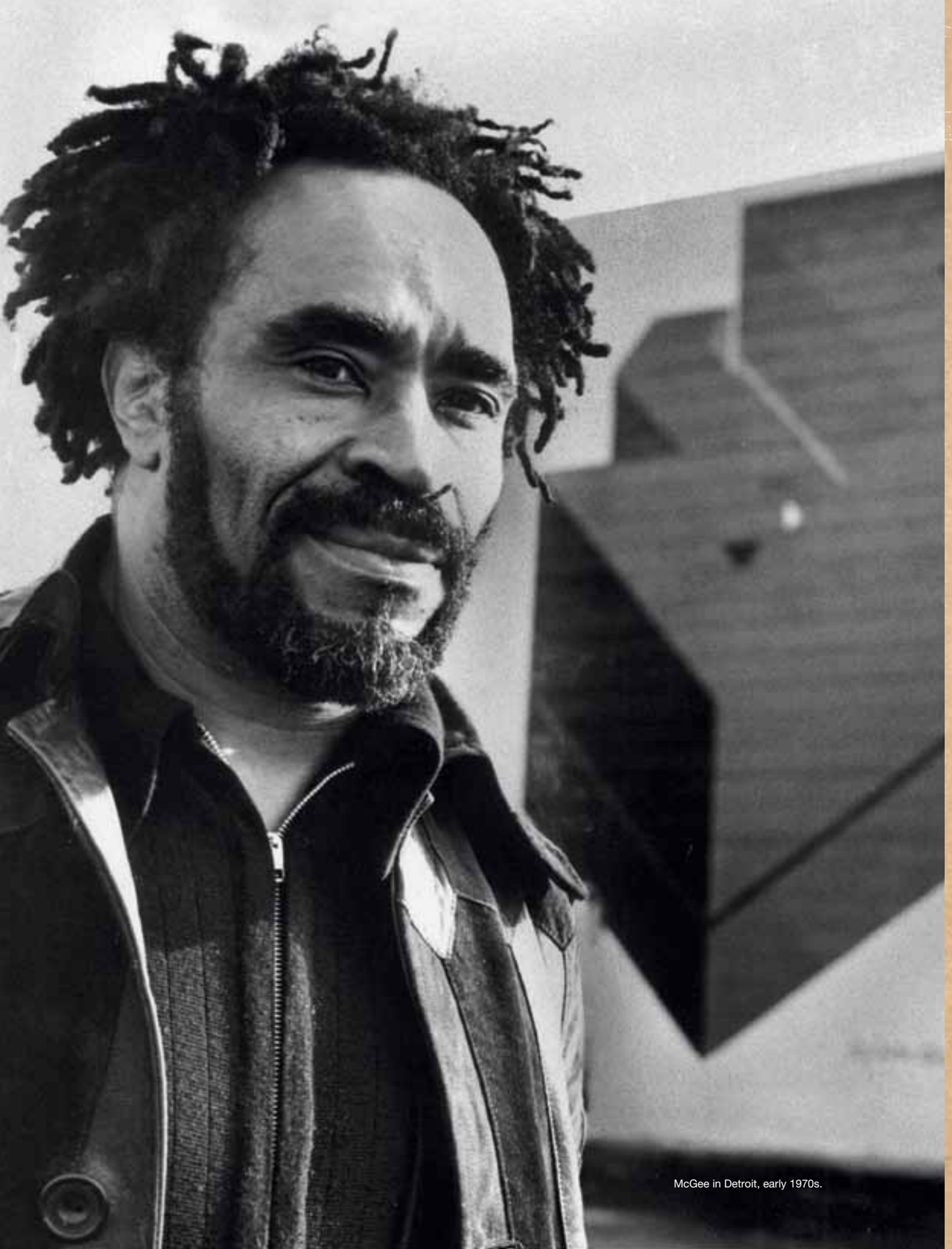
Charles McGee's story is a fascinating story … a story of triumph … a story of supportive family members and good teachers … a classic American story of a determined individual pulling himself up by the bootstraps … and a story of artistic genius. McGee himself is not, I think, comfortable with the notion of "genius," at least not in reference to himself nor perhaps in reference to the conventional idea that extraordinary achievement is linked to the lucky possession of a rare and natural gift called "genius."

When he first entered school at the age of 10, McGee embraced art as an area in which he might excel. He enrolled in drawing classes at a branch library and later the Detroit Institute of Arts and drove himself to what was to become a tireless and lifelong effort to understand quality and to aim for the highest standards in his own work. Drawing — and later painting and sculpture — became for McGee his tools for searching for truth and for understanding the world. Today, still driven by an intense passion for understanding the world, Charles McGee remains an inveterate observer with a consistent desire to integrate his vision of the world into his art.

The view that talent relates more to persistent and disciplined effort than to a mysterious natural gift is corroborated by recent research of Swedish psychologist Anders Ericsson. From his studies of world-class achievers, Ericsson has concluded that outstanding achievement is a result, not of superior abilities but of persistent and deliberate practice over a period of many years. Ericsson posits that becoming world class in any field requires a minimum of 10,000 hours of deliberate practice — focused practice that pushes the practitioner beyond what is known and comfortable for hours a day and years on end.

The grueling demands of disciplined practice require passion and extraordinary drive but have extraordinary rewards as well. Continually pushing beyond what one can comfortably do makes an automatic response impossible, sparking the same energy and freshness of discovery that fuels the enthusiasm of children. It is this persistence of effort and this drive toward excellence that has marked the artistic career of Charles McGee, the child from South Carolina who has shared his creative life and energy so freely with the City of Detroit and with the world.

Marion (Mame) Jackson is Distinguished Professor of Art History at Wayne State University. Her original essay was written expressly for this publication.



McGee in Detroit, early 1970s.

A Legend in His Own Time

by Michael Hodges

Press Charles McGee on the origins of his artistic obsessions, and he's likely to take you back to that ax handle. McGee was nine, and still working with his grandfather on a sharecropper's plot in South Carolina when the ax broke one day.

"I just felt I could fix it," says the longtime Detroiter, now 85, "and my grandfather let me. From that moment on, I carved all the new ax handles."

From such humble beginnings, McGee fashioned a life that would ultimately make him one of Michigan's foremost artists, and one of the most beloved. A longtime teacher, his courtesy toward and support for younger artists are the stuff of legend.

So too are some pioneering steps in his past. Forty years ago, when African-American artists were routinely fenced out of galleries, McGee pulled together Detroit's first group show of black artists, and then opened his own place, Gallery 7, to promote black and white artists alike.

Not bad for a guy who didn't go to school until he was 10.

At an age when most careers are long over, McGee — with pieces at the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History — is still working at the top of his powers. In recognition of that, in 2008 the Troy-based Kresge Foundation named McGee its first-ever Eminent Artist, an annual award that comes with a $50,000 stipend. The award was created to honor a Michigan artist who, as foundation President Rip Rapson says of McGee, "has selflessly contributed to the artistic growth of others, and who creates art of the first order."

McGee's plans for "United We Stand," a large installation at Wayne State University are already in the works. Closer to home, McGee's also wrestling with a layered collage slowly taking shape in his unheated studio across Six Mile Road from Detroit's Marygrove College.

But back to that ax handle.

"That was the beginning of my understanding," says McGee, speaking one snowy morning in his Rosedale Park kitchen, dressed in black wool cap and a heavy gray vest, "my first introduction to my abilities."

A new life in Michigan McGee's mother had tuberculosis, and was hospitalized for much of his youth. So McGee came to Michigan to live with his aunt and uncle in 1934. "My aunt came and got me from my grandparents," he says. "My mother was at Herman Kiefer Hospital in Detroit. She knew she was sort of dying, and wanted my sister and myself to come up." McGee's mother would die two years after her children's arrival in Detroit. By that time, she'd been transferred to a sanitorium in North Carolina.

In Detroit, the budding artist's focus emerged early, spurred by a very practical concern. He couldn't help but notice that an artistically talented pal at Cleveland Middle School got special treatment from the teacher.

"He would skip a class and make art," McGee says, "and get away with it. Because he was that good. And I decided I wanted some of those favors, too." So the young McGee buckled down, and soon found himself in the same privileged position. Eventually, his role at school evolved into something like resident artist.

"I got to be the art guru," he recalls, "until my uncle died in 10th grade. Then I had to go to work to help my aunt." Life accelerated from there. McGee joined the Marines, and served in the occupation of Japan at the end of World War II. Once back in Detroit, he used the GI Bill to enroll in the old Detroit Society of Arts & Crafts — now the College for Creative Studies.

With a full-time job, it took him 10 years, until 1957, to finish his degree. "It was such a labor of love," he says of his studies, "I didn't even know it was work."

In the early years, McGee was single-minded, deliberately seeking out no-account jobs that would leave him time and energy for his art. His first was as a welder with Briggs Manufacturing. “I would get a menial job — anything to free my art,” he says, “to make sure that whatever I did, I didn’t have to kiss butts to do it. You know what I mean?” The remainder of the day was his alone, with no work-related stress to cloud his artistic focus. “I would draw,” he says, “just about every minute of my life.”

In those years, McGee was still an active churchgoer, and had to get special dispensation to duck out of choir practice to attend art classes. “I was religious at the time,” he says, “though life has weaned me of that.”

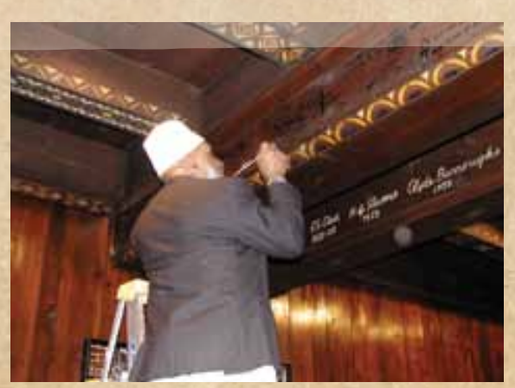
At the Society of Arts & Crafts, McGee fell under the influence of two great painting teachers — the realist Guy Palazzola and Sarkis Sarkisian, whose work was more abstract. McGee deeply admired both men, and some of his early pieces — like a still life of jade-colored pears — have a distinctly classical feel to them. But he quickly veered towards abstraction.

“Eventually my work separated from the realist tradition epitomized by Palazzola,” McGee says, “until it got flatter and flatter. Palazzola was sort of imprisoned by representationalism, although his work was great. I can’t deny that. But on the journey to learn what art is and what it’s about, I almost got asphyxiated by the elements, with the process itself. You put it out there and you organize it — that’s what makes the work important. It’s almost like me listening to Christina Aguilera — My gosh, can she sing! — or listening to Charlie Parker. You know what I mean?”

Boiled down to its essence, McGee says his journey of discovery has been one of “deconstructing what I think I know” until he arrives at new understanding. “I create art out of shapes that come naturally to me,” McGee adds. “I have no idea what’s going to come out.”

Styles across the board Stylistically, McGee’s adult work ranges from the primitive to the utterly abstract, from the color-suffused to canvases composed of tangled black lines bristling with energy. He is in many respects an artistic pragmatist, with an allergy to what he calls “isms.” It doesn’t matter whether work is representational — that is, if it’s a recognizable object — or abstract. “If it’s good,” McGee says, “it’s just good. If not, its energy is lethargic, and it doesn’t work.”

Valerie Mercer, the curator of The Detroit Institute of Art’s General Motors Center for African American Art, says McGee’s work over the past 20 years has developed what she calls “a very distinct, abstract, biomorphic vocabulary” — a blend of the natural and the abstract. Over and again in his work, she notes, his forms take shapes “that are mindful of snakes and insects and things like that.



McGee adding his signature to The Scarab Club’s historic beam alongside that of Diego Rivera and Norman Rockwell in 2005.

After all,” Mercer adds a bit puckishly, “he does come from the South.”

As for his huge signature piece at the DIA, “Noah’s Ark,” Mercer says that visitors ask for it all the time. “People come looking for it,” she says.

Cledie Collins Taylor, who owns Detroit’s Arts Extended Gallery, says she and McGee go back all the way to the 1960s, almost farther than she wants to contemplate. One of three Kresge jurors that chose McGee as Eminent Artist, Taylor calls McGee “the ultimate. He has evolved the way Picasso evolved.” As a young man, Taylor says McGee’s eye was sensitive and camera-like, but he veered toward greater and greater abstraction. “There are periods of Charles’ work that I really prefer — I call them the ‘active inanimate objects,’” she says. “Charles is able to put life into shape. He has a wonderful sense of design and a wonderful eye.”

Indeed, an eye for color. To arrive at precisely the hue he was seeking in an early painting acquired by Taylor and her husband, McGee torched it at a friend’s home. “Charles almost burned down some friend’s bathroom doing this,” Taylor says. “He set the painting afire. That’s how he got the color he wanted.”

All the same, Taylor warns you that McGee will bristle when asked to explain his work. “He doesn’t like to be questioned, particularly about his work,” she says. “Someone will say, ‘What do you mean here?’ And Charles will say, ‘I meant nothing — I just wanted to have that line touch that line there, and that value touch that value.’”

The current project consuming McGee is a 5-by-10-foot painted collage, slowly taking shape on the floor of his studio, surrounded by neat piles of exotic fabric that may, or may not, get integrated into the work. He’s also built the mock-up for an enormous

McGee in his studio with a work in progress called “Patches of Time.”

Noah's Ark: Genesis, 1984
Enamel and mixed media on masonite panels, 120" x 180"
Permanent collection of The Detroit Institute of Arts
Gift of Joan Lovell and James A. Tuck

assemblage, "United We Stand," that will go in front of Wayne State University's Old Main Building whenever the funding comes through.

Pushing black artists Beyond the hundreds of exhibitions of his work over the years, McGee organized "Seven Black Artists," the first all-black group show at the Detroit Artists Market in 1968. For a time, he ran his own business, Gallery 7, helping to promote dozens of artists, both black and white. His now-closed Charles McGee Art School gave free lessons to legions of Detroiters while, at a higher level, he taught at Eastern Michigan University for 18 years.

Jennifer Clark, an artist living in Half Moon Bay outside San Francisco, studied with McGee 20 years ago at EMU and calls him one of the "really significant" people in her life. "Charles is very much one of those people who lifts you up," Clark says. "He's very encouraging, in a way that inspires people to find their own voice. I not only learned a lot about art from Charles," she says, "but a lot about life — in the way you look at things, the 'honing of vision,' as he would always call it."

Now retired from college teaching, McGee still gives weekly art classes at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center. Teaching seems to be in his blood, almost as if it were a necessary complement to his work in the studio. "Not only is Charles very talented," says the DIA's Mercer, "but he's influenced generations of artists through his example, his dedication and commitment to his craft."

An easy pick Taylor says that as far as the Kresge jury was concerned, McGee's mix of artistry and outreach to young artists easily put him over the top. The jurors, who included Taylor as well as former Cranbrook Academy of Art director Gerhardt Knodel and art historian Dennis Alan Nawrocki, voted unanimously for McGee. And then, says Taylor, "These three old people jumped up and high-fived one another."

In discussing the Kresge prize, McGee characteristically turns the spotlight from himself toward the wider community, noting that the award's real value is in the encouragement it can give to younger artists — a message that somebody out there is paying attention, and will reward excellence in Michigan. Still, for all his self-effacing politeness, anyone who's dealt with McGee knows he's no pushover.

That sets Taylor to laughing. She admits that in negotiations to hang McGee's work in her gallery, she's found herself repeating, time and again, "Why sure, baby," to any conditions he laid down. "One does not argue with Charles," Taylor says. "He has a very clear notion of where he's going. Charles was always the complete artist, from the bone out."

Michael Hodges covers the visual arts for The Detroit News. This essay is expanded from his original story which appeared on February 7, 2009.

Nagasaki, 2005
Mixed media and collage on plywood, 31" x 24"
Collection of the artist

Paths of the Traveled Artist

by Bill Harris

Consider the title again:

PATHS: STILL SEARCHING.

Reconsider “still”,
the word in the middle.
See it for what it is,
the point of balance,
the connection between paths & searching
between what comes before
& what follows. Equal in importance
in conception & connotation
to its companions.

Still

Is the assurance of an unspoken commitment
to witnesses of the works of
Charles McGee.

Read “still” not for its adjective or noun denotations
of “inanimate or silent”. No.
To the converse –
It is to be taken in its adverbial implication:
“more than ever”;
“and with greater reason”.

Was & is. Still. A continuing assurance
validated by our awareness & acknowledgement
of the distance, the energy, vigor & fortitude
of this traveled artist, who continues to be
the point of balance
on the quest he began
decades ago.

Charles McGee
is
on a path
through space-time
along trodden tracks
& least traveled trails
to gain or retain or
explore & explain
the course of action
or succession of events
of his ever evolving philosophy & identity.

&
in the process,
this master of materials,
manufactured & natural,
mixed & matched,
leaves visual journals of the journey,
a marvel of maturity
& craftsmanship
& the magic of the conscious & unconscious
whose surfaces,
in two and three dimensions are,
an ever intriguing interplay
of form, rhythm, & harmony.

In McGee’s work everything leads to
everything else. Every possibility
leads to a question, every question
to a choice,
every choice to a possibility.

Even
The supremely chaotic
example of NAGASAKI,
the ultimate anti–art
anti-human occurrence
of nature in disservice to itself
& man to man
is not an end
or
a beginning
but a witnessed site
stored,
like all of the other instances gathered over a lifetime,
& presented as a point of information
synthesized & displayed for our edification. LINEAGE
becomes a squiggled & scrawled pencil line
given dimension, TIME MODULES I & II
offers a glimpse of a given moments density…
The ruthless rhythm
of the certainty & the
chance of time’s push
& pull,
encourage this
pathfinder
through the unexplored regions
of person &
universal existence.

&
knight-errant like,
he slays
or tames the dragons he encounters,
he records his deeds,
and continues,

still searching,

with no end in sight.

Bill Harris is a writer and professor of English at Wayne State University. “Paths of the Traveled Artist” is his revision of “PATHS; STILL SEARCHING Charles McGee at The Scarab Club” September 14–October 15, 2005.

Detail from Urban Extract, 1979,
Mixed media, wood and plaster, 48" x 32"
Collection of Susan Tait

Evolution: Signature McGee

Left:
Detail* from **Noah's Ark: Time Modules,** 1987
Oil marker on masonite board, 24" x 36"
Collection of Jennifer Yanover
**Artwork altered with permission of the artist.*

This page:

1 **Untitled,** 1997
Enamel on 400 lb. watercolor paper, masonite board, 28" x 41"
Collection of Lorenzo J. Taylor

2 **Ritual Icon I,** 1993
Painted hydrostone, 67" x 35" x 22.5"
Collection of Elie and Eileen Aboulafia

3 **Spectral Rhythms,** c. 2004
Enamel on masonite board, 23.5" x 23.5"
Collection of Victor and Maxine Moore

4 **Spring,** 1951
Oil on masonite board, 5" x 11.75"
Private collection

5 **Trilogy: Yellow,** c. 2002
Acrylic, mixed media on masonite
Collection of Daniel S. Hoops Revocable Trust

6 **Patterns of April,** c. 1968
Charcoal pencils and kneaded eraser on illustration board, 60" x 40"
Private collection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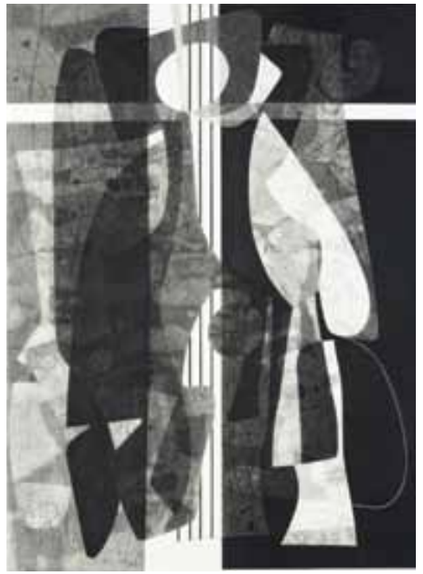
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Charles McGee

by Marsha Miro

The context is critical to understanding Charles McGee's art. Always ahead of his time, his work reflects his relationship, as an African-American, to social, anthropological and ethical circumstances. He is passionate, committed to what he believes in, and is unafraid of being out there in art, on his own. You can trust that the ideas his art abstractly relays, are felt deeply by McGee and the messages come from wisdom, perceptive observations, and foremost, his heart.

Those early pencil drawings of African-Americans, particularly women and children, were gorgeous; statements of adoration of the female during a period when the black woman was struggling to assert her identity and there was little recognition of the African-Americans as a people of strength and character. Though other artists were working in similar territory, McGee distinguished himself both by his superb technical skills and the sense he conveyed of the person, the individual he was drawing. While he was giving artistic form to the "Black is Beautiful," message of those decades of the 1960s and '70s, McGee was also seeing and thinking abstractly — in the compositions' sense of space and scale.

During the next period of his work, he was preoccupied with the exploration of abstract structure. Always a master of the drawn line, in these drawings and paintings line was used as a notation, a marker of time elapsing, of the person's hand making the mark and the order of linear, geometric forms. McGee was absorbing the lessons of the art being made in the art world in general by important artists of the 1970s. Looking back it is clear that this was a transitional phase for him, where he was learning how he could make figurative works that were also abstract. And he understood how to build large-scale sculptures using the basics of geometric construction. It seems like he was shifting his art, seeking a language of his own.

And this he found, very successfully, in his mature work: sculpture and paintings that still carry his voice

Prisms, 1971
Acrylic on canvas, 60.75" x 44.5"
Collection of Marlene Chavis

today. This art is rich with invented imagery grown from traditional African and indigenous peoples' beliefs and fables, images abstracted from any sense of modulated, realistic form, instead painted in flattened color and built up layer by layer. The images are full of patterns and colors that make the paintings and sculptures active, engaging and playful. During his years as an art dealer, McGee sold classic African sculpture with its superb patterning. He spent time with the African traders and learned much about the rituals and history on his own. This strand of history, along with his early figurative work, informs the current art. But his imagery is more universal now, always a celebration of the creative nature of humankind. The relationship of people to animals to vegetation, the sense of wonder that knits all of us who inhabit this planet together, animates the work. McGee is preoccupied with the global universe of today that begins from our shared early roots.

Marsha Miro is a founder of MOCAD: Museum of Contemporary Art of Detroit and former fine arts critic for The Detroit Free Press. Her original essay was written expressly for this publication in April, 2010.

Above: **April,** early 1970s
Charcoal pencils and kneaded eraser on illustration board, 40" x 60"
Collection of Dena Johnson

Below: **Celebration,** 2007
Enamel, paper and fabric collage on dibond, 60" x 84"
Collection of the artist

Charting the Course of Time:

The Work of Charles McGee

by MaryAnn Wilkinson

Charles McGee at 85 continues to change, reinvent, and experiment with every aspect of creative expression.

At a time when many artists would be content to simply get around the golf course, his studio practice is as vibrant and intense as at any time during his long career. Since his early days as an artist in the 1950s, the scope of his work has encompassed intimate figurative charcoal drawings, abstract mural paintings, and large-scale public sculpture. His protean approach to making art eludes traditional formalist labels and owes little allegiance to the styles of others. McGee's journey from genre painting to works that challenge the accepted definition of words such as "figurative," "abstract," "painting," and "sculpture" has been the steady, cumulative progression of a personal aesthetic vocabulary. His works never seem to follow a neat linear evolution. Rather, they develop with an uneven cadence, sometimes through the methodical honing of skills, sometimes with abrupt shifts in approach. A complex set of motivations, social as well as aesthetic, resonates in this work and guides the artist's formal approach. To understand the evolution of his body of work, one must consider McGee's art as both a continuum and a totality, a synthesis of observations and understandings accumulated over a long life.

The Group, c. 1969
Charcoal pencils and kneaded eraser on illustration board, 45" x 34"
Collection of Stuart Chavis

McGee began to get attention as an artist through charcoal drawings and paintings in the 1950s. These works demonstrate the increasing assurance of his use of supple outline coupled with a strong interest in the range of tones from light to dark. His subjects were most often portrait studies or urban scenes taken from life as in which scrupulously rendered and carefully chosen details suggest, rather than describe, a commonplace scene. The charcoal drawings introduce formal devices that would reverberate throughout the rest of his work: groups of figures intertwined both physically and psychologically; a tendency toward flat patterns with little or no modeling of the figures; the inclusion of words or letters with images; the negotiation of space and the picture plane in different ways on different parts of a single composition.

Even in these early works McGee was moving away from the realist style that was prevalent in local painting at the time. His investigation of art-historical masters such as Artemisia Gentileschi, Rembrandt, and Titian, helped him free his brushwork and develop a brighter palette. Fascinated by process, he admired the work of 16th-century Flemish master Pieter Brueghel because he could see in it all the stages of the creation of the painting, from the gesso layer to the linear structuring of forms to top layers of paint. He also looked at modern masters. Careful observation of Cezanne's paintings helped McGee think through such compositional problems as the creation of shallow and deep space on a two-dimensional surface and the articulation of form through color. Picasso and Braque's examples of Synthetic Cubist collage and assemblage with the attendant interest in modifying perspective would help him to reorder his surfaces. Ben Shahn's "Composition for Clarinets and Tin Horn," in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts, had particular influence on his evolving ideas about the importance of process and combinations of tone, color, and shape to imply depth. The abstract shapes that seem to float just behind the surface of this painting impressed McGee. The contrasting layers of color upon color and the juxtaposition of figurative images and abstract shapes affected his thinking about the nature of realistic and nonrepresentational form. The subject, so clearly based upon the rhythm and intensity of jazz music, also helped McGee to crystallize his ideas about the relationship between color and tempo that would inform his later work.

Art © Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

Ben Shahn, born in Lithuania, American, 1898–1969
Composition for Clarinets and Tin Horn, 1951
Tempera on panel, 48" x 36"
The Detroit Institute of Arts
Founder's Society Purchase
Friends of Modern Art Fund

Travel, especially to vibrant, colorful locales, such as Morocco and his beloved Spain, has remained an inspiration for McGee. While photographs of the Michigan landscape were the basis for much of his realistic painting of the 1950s, by the end of the 1960s travel photography served a different function. These later photographs read less like a sightseeing chronicle than as a sketchbook, capturing color combinations, repetitive patterns, and the effect of light.

The combinations and shifts in medium that characterize McGee's current work make an appearance in the 1970s, when he first created collages and constructions and explored the possibilities of physically opening up the picture plane. In a series entitled "All Awl," McGee used an awl to puncture the surface of sheets of white watercolor paper with tiny holes in ordered patterns. Inspired by the keypunch patterns of computer tape, the works imply a symbolic, enigmatic language.

The "Urban Extract" series of the late 1970s ordered the world more directly and with a powerful emotional charge. Segments of walls with hanging, broken wiring and empty window frames were salvaged from abandoned, partially destroyed buildings around the city. McGee recombined these elements into freestanding or relief sculptures, rueful allusions to the cycle of decay and regeneration that characterize the urban landscape and the effects of the passing of time. This new sculptural vocabulary assertively moved the work away from the wall for the first time in the artist's career, although many of the pieces retain the frontality of painting. The openings in the porous wall sections and unglazed window frames allowed new considerations of the effects of light and shadow which differed from the two-dimensional representation of form defined by light characteristic of his charcoal drawings.

By the early 1980s, McGee's ideas had begun to coalesce and his work turned in a vigorous new direction. McGee credits an important shift in his personal life to the change in his art from the raw and austere "Urban Extract" works to the sensuous whimsy of the "Noah's Ark" series. Happy and with a renewed faith in the future, he approached his work with an upbeat mood. He began to paint again, combining painted surfaces with collage. He continued to experiment with light, color, and pattern. Most importantly, he reintroduced realistic imagery into his works. The most ambitious and dramatic examples of his return to figuration are the large-scale works created after 1980. In both painting and sculpture, McGee had long felt comfortable working on a large scale; in the early 1970s he completed his first outdoor mural at the corner of Wyoming and Curtis Streets in Detroit (now lost). His four-year appointment to the Michigan Art in Public Places Commission led him to reconsider the implications of working in three dimensions in the public arena.

Composition, 1976
Acrylic, hydrocal and metal on masonite board, 48" x 48"
Collection of Detroit Receiving Hospital

Noah's Ark: Friends, 1984–5
Mixed media on masonite board, 96.25" x 48.063"
Private collection

During the last 20 years, he has planned and built a number of large-scale sculpture projects.

McGee's vision has found its fullest expression in the works in his ongoing series, "Noah's Ark." These dynamic works are bound thematically by this biblical tale, while setting aside any sense of narrative. A single figure or a group anchors most compositions, flatly painted in black with long, slender limbs that echo the body types in the earlier charcoal drawings. Their Egyptian-style heads are turned in profile like an old-fashioned, cut-paper silhouette and their gestures are at once dramatic and whimsical. These abstracted figures share the stage with collaged and painted shapes of animals, completely abstract shapes, areas of pattern, words, and found objects, all woven together in a rhythmic, expressive dance. Textures and patterns are both painted and applied, confounding the distinction between literal and figurative. Assemblage is sometimes seen as a late 20th-century Detroit tradition because of its widespread use by Detroit's "Cass Corridor" group of the 1970s; McGee's work ran parallel to this movement and his goals are vastly different.

McGee speaks fondly of his early years on the farm as "living in Nature's Corner," vividly remembering the variations of terrain, the colors of soil and sky, and the animal life — snakes, rats, insects — common to a rural landscape. The early memories of living on the land have found particular resonance in the "Noah's Ark" works. The presence of both wild and tame animals in an environment shared with humans underscores McGee's belief in the equality of all living creatures. Insects are both literally and figuratively included in his painted collages, held in a formal balance by sinuous, boldly patterned snakes and plump, crawling rodents. In many of the works, wilding galloping horses, spotted felines, and various birds are readily identifiable, but other animal-like, biomorphic forms are not so clearly defined. Each shape, however, retains a sense of individualism, clearly on a par with the human forms in the composition, and has equal visual weight. For McGee, these works present nature as a continuum from "the highest in the sky (birds)" to "the lowest on the ground (snakes)," indicating his rejection

Patches of Time, 1988–1990
Acrylic, mixed media on masonite board, 48" x 32"
Collection of April McGee

of the notion that man is a superior being. An abiding interest in and a keen understanding of the unique nature of each animal and shape underscores his formal inventions. His creatures and organic forms are energized to such a degree that they seem able to exist even outside the composition and indeed, many run right off of the edge of the canvas.

Although not personally devout, McGee was well aware of the importance and tremendous influence of religion and its traditions. The Old Testament story of Noah's Ark — simple, unenigmatic, and widely known — appealed to him as a theme that need not be treated as a narrative to be understood. The story, rich with possibilities for developing imagery, embodied many important personal issues for McGee. His love of community, his concern about racial strife, and his ebullient sense of optimism could all be expressed in explorations of the biblical tale. Like the story, McGee's works are easily understood, yet the underlying ideas are profound and all encompassing. He has infused each piece with love and hope for humanity. The theme of "Noah's Ark" has become a forum for the resolution of problems that have preoccupied McGee for a lifetime: his evolving ideas on formal methods, a willingness to embrace nontraditional media, and an unwavering belief in the fundamental importance of art to life. These works are the confident expression of a man who has found his place in the world.

Essence: Concavex, 2009
Aluminum, 60" x 88" including base
Collection of the artist

Seen against the backdrop of the diverse experiences of his life and a restless imagination that continually changes his work, McGee's ongoing development of this series suggests that he has found an idiom that allows both continuity and room for experimentation. In recent paintings, McGee's formal vocabulary remains while the imagery continues to evolve. Alongside ambitious "Noah's Ark"-derived works, such as "Play Patterns" (2009), are more purely abstract works that connect to other ongoing themes for paintings, the "Patches of Time" and "Time Modules" series. Connecting all these ideas are his interests in overlapping flattened forms and broad

Time Modules, II, 2005,
Mixed media on dibond, 33" x 71"
Collection of the artist

areas of textures and colors. Color has taken a dominant, expressive place in his recent paintings and he shows more mastery than ever in creating mood through the application of areas of strong color and dense black. The crowded, pulsating compositions of the late 1980s have been condensed and streamlined into linear gestures that are not quite language, not quite image. As always, his two-dimensional work is reflected in his sculpture, as in "Essence: Concavex" (2009) in which this powerful, reductive gesture takes on new resonance in freestanding aluminum.

Charles McGee's enormous body of work, done over more than 60 years in the studio, has been a continuous synthesis of lessons learned and ideas pursued. In 1994 he wrote, "art charts the course of time," feeling himself always moving forward. In the process of reordering, juxtaposing, and layering to find a new way to express his inner peace and desire to connect with the rest of humanity, he has created works that are moving, fresh and vibrant, reflecting his attitude of never resting, never looking back.

MaryAnn Wilkinson is the former department head of Modern and Contemporary Art at The Detroit Institute of Arts. This essay is adapted from "Art in Nature's Corner," in "Charles McGee: Seeing Seventy"; The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1994.

Urban Extract II, 1979
Mixed media, 96" x 72" x 24"
The Detroit Institute of Arts
Gift of Gilbert and
Lila Silverman

The McGee Dynamic

by Dennis Alan Nawrocki

Progression, 2005
Polychrome
William Beaumont Hospital
Royal Oak, Michigan

From the start of his long, ongoing career Charles McGee has known — unerringly — how to engage viewers in both figurative and abstract compositions. His spirited murals and sculptures, abounding with animated figures and shapes, populate indoor and outdoor Detroit locales. Nearly a dozen enliven sites ranging from the Detroit Institute of Arts ("Genesis," 1984) to a Detroit People Mover station ("The Blue Nile" at the Broadway stop, 1985) to the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History ("Play/Ground," 1994) to three recent reliefs in Detroit hospitals: Detroit Receiving, "Time Mutation," 2001; Beaumont, "Progression," 2004; and Henry Ford, "Regeneration," 2007.

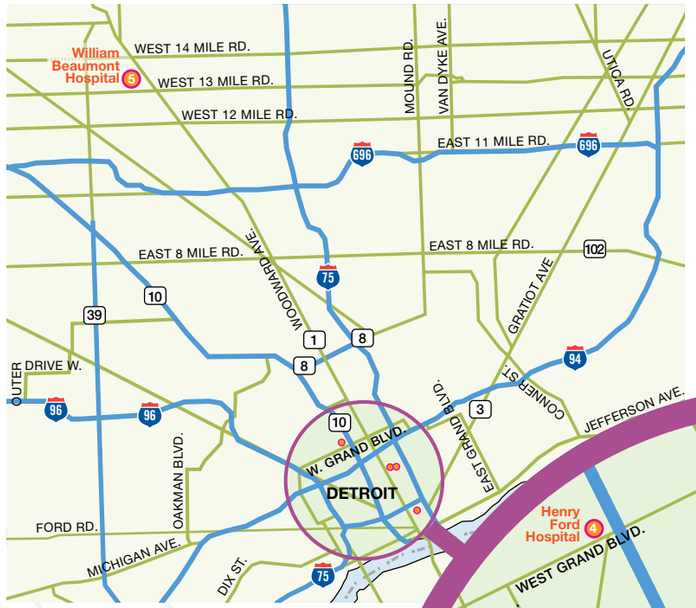
The latter three employ contrasting hues of black and white because, as McGee asserts, a reductive palette, rather than conventionally bright, cheery hues, is likelier to calm a worried patient's psyche and vulnerable body. Whether the limited colors actually temper the rousing, jostling forms that lope across a viewer's field of vision in "Progression" provokes an intriguing question vis à vis its installation at William Beaumont Hospital.

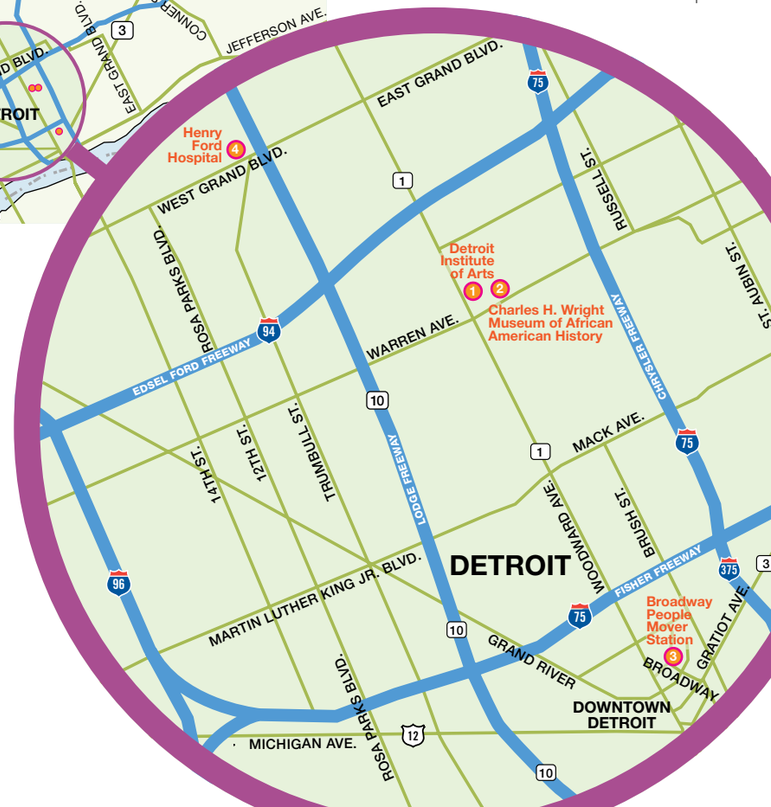
Indeed, the zany, rhythmic shapes of "Progression" appear to move swiftly across the twenty-four-foot, stretch-limo length of this mural decoration. The work's stark, boldly contrasting black and white forms, punctuated by painted circles and polka dots as well as thick and thin stripes disposed vertically or horizontally, overwhelm even one's peripheral vision. This three-dimensional aluminum relief is a large-scale example of the "Noah's Ark" series that the artist initiated in the 1980s, in which he has used either a representational or abstract style. The Old Testament account of Noah's Ark and its deliverance from the flood is, for McGee, an allegory of society's escape from imminent destruction so that human progress might continue. The artist has also likened the cataclysm of the Deluge to the Detroit riots of 1967, which also necessitated a fresh start in its aftermath.

McGee's multilayered installation at William Beaumont Hospital "speaks," the artist explains, "to the spirit of healing and renewal made possible through medical science." Twelve organic forms suggestive of microorganisms, chromosomes, and microbes interact and overlap with fourteen amorphous human figures. Nine underlying black rhomboid panels denote the laboratories and research institutions that produce medicine. McGee has indentified the syncopated rhythms of jazz as an influence on his sprightly, seemingly extemporaneous compositions. "Progression's" propulsive dynamic, anchored by the familiar tale of Noah and the Ark, reveals how the artist has married ancient and modern to fruitful effect.

Other examples of public art by McGee — eight in all — grace such Michigan sites as East Lansing, Flint, Mount Pleasant, Traverse City, Ypsilanti, and Wilberforce, Ohio.

Dennis Alan Nawrocki is an adjunct professor of art history at the College for Creative Studies and Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan.





Charles McGee's works are available for viewing at many public locations throughout the Detroit metropolitan area. Five of his best-loved artworks may be seen at the venues listed below.

1. Noah's Ark: Genesis
The Detroit Institute of Arts
5200 Woodward Avenue, Detroit, Michigan

2. Freedom Bound
Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History
315 E. Warren Avenue at Brush Street
Detroit, Michigan

3. Blue Nile
People Mover Mural
Broadway Station *(Corner of Broadway and John R)*
Detroit, Michigan

4. Regeneration
Henry Ford Hospital
2799 W. Grand Boulevard
Detroit, Michigan

5. Progression
William Beaumont Hospital
3601 W. Thirteen Mile Road
Royal Oak, Michigan

Seven Black Artists

by Gloria Whelan

Charles McGee at Gallery 7 in the early 1970s, pottery piece by artist Robert Stull in background.

Almost from its inception the Detroit Artists Market exhibited the work of black artists. For years one of the Market's best-known and most popular artists has been Hughie Lee-Smith. His carefully painted surreal studies of man isolated in, but transcending, a decaying urban area might stand as a symbol for many of the city's black artists.

In the late 1960s the cumulative effect of the civil rights movement, the Detroit riots, and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., created an increased awareness of the position of black Americans in our country. Museums and galleries across the country were discovering black artists. Lacking funds and opportunities for formal art training as well as access to major galleries, the black artist had often been invisible. The growing number of exhibitions of black artists suggested, "Look again."

The Market felt that Detroit, with its large black population and its tradition of excellent black art, ought to have its own show. In the winter of 1968, I contacted Charles McGee, whose paintings and drawings had been exhibited at the Market for many years, and asked him to participate and to help in the selection of the other artists. He was enthusiastic about the possibility of such an exhibition. It was agreed that the criterion for selecting the artists would be excellence; anything less would be condescending and would weaken the statement the Market hoped to make.

Frances Alexander and Margaret Conzelman added more names to the list of potential exhibitors, and Charles McGee and I began visiting artists' homes and studios. If there was any initial concern that we would not come up with a sufficient number of strong painters, it was soon laid to rest. We found more work than we could hope to show. Excitement grew, and the rationale for such an exhibition seemed stronger than ever. Seven artists were selected: James Strickland, Lester Johnson, Robert Murray, James King, Jr., Charles McGee, Harold Neal, and James Lee. An eighth artist, Robert Stull was featured, and it was a lucky addition for his pots were singled out in all the reviews as outstanding.

I remember the Market Chairman, Peggy Mesritz, her husband, Bim, and I helping the artists hang the show. Many of the artists had full-time jobs during the day, most of them outside the arts — there were few black artists on university faculties in those days — and we worked late into the night. It must have been 10 or 11 p.m. when, with great trepidation, we breached the long-standing rule: "Don't move the jewelry case." It was midnight when the last picture was hung.

Even those of us who were most enthusiastic about the show were unprepared for the strength of its statement: the bold color and subtle effects of Charles McGee's abstracts; Harold Neal's carefully modeled portraits, some lyrical, others full of rage; Lester Johnson's precise geometric paintings in cool, stark colors; Robert Murray's ingenious arrangements of patterns; James Strickland's translucent collages; James King's sensuous forms; Robert Stull's elegantly molded pottery; and James Lee's inventive prints. The cumulative impact was stunning.

A handsome catalogue, designed by Richard Kinney, accompanied the show. The statements made by the artists in the catalogue give an idea of the diversity of their approaches. James Strickland spoke of the desire to capture "the universal spirit of mankind." Robert Murray said that black art was shaped by "environmental conditioning." Lester Johnson dedicated his 10 paintings to the black musician Miles Davis. Harold Neal said, "I am angry and it is only natural that this would influence my work." James Lee wrote, "I am a black person so I make black art." Charles McGee echoed the wish of everyone connected with the show: "Hopefully the quality of the work presented here will transcend ethnic barriers, and final judgment will rest in artistic merit commensurate with the best art being produced in our time."

The exhibition, which opened on March 21, 1969, was a great success. Two hundred people attended the reception, and sales that evening amounted to $3,000. Ann Johnson and Louis TeWalt did a fine job with publicity. Through their efforts, WDET carried a 45-minute discussion with the artists. In her enthusiastic and perceptive review for the Detroit News, Joy Hakanson Colby said that the collection expressed "a particular kind of elation and pain," that it blended "tough sensuality with an almost spiritual fervor." "For the first time," she wrote, "blacks are exhibiting together and teaching together not as artists or as blacks, but as black artists." She called it "one of the most vital and compelling shows I've seen anywhere."

For me the most exciting event occurred on the Saturday morning after the opening. Art teachers in the Detroit public high schools had each been asked to select three or four students who they felt would be interested in attending a reception at the Market. They would see the show and meet and talk with the artists about opportunities for education and careers in the field of art in Detroit. Laura Hager was in charge of the reception. Eighty students and a number of their teachers attended. I would like to believe that the black students who were there were stimulated and encouraged by what they heard and saw, and that there are now artists working in Detroit who recall that morning.

There was another reverberation from the show, one that unquestionably added to the richness of Detroit's own community – Gallery 7. The summer following the Market show, Gallery 7 opened under the aegis of Charles McGee at 8232 McNichols, with most of the artists from the Market show represented. The gallery, both at the McNichols location and later in the Fisher building, was to be a focal point for Detroit's black artists for many years.

Looking back on the exhibition, Charles McGee says, "The show had that energy that appears whenever one finds excellence in the arts. It brought together Detroit's black artists and engendered among them a comradeship that made it easier for them to continue in their work."

There are those who might believe an exhibition of black artists patronizing, or divisive or even irrelevant. In retrospect, given that particular time and our particular city, "Seven Black Artists," even in some of its angry statements, was unifying, for if art is good art, it is universal art; it underlines the commonality of our humanity. It tells us there are no "others," there is only "us."

Writer Gloria Whelan served as chair of The Detroit Artists Market Board from 1958 to 1961. Her essay "Seven Black Artists" is excerpted from "The Detroit Artists Market, 1932–1982 A Partnership in Creativity," pgs. 39–40. Published by Wayne State University Press for the Detroit Artists Market; Detroit, 1984. Copyright © 1984 by the Detroit Artists Market.

Environment:
McGee in Public

"I think the reason for making art, or at least for my trying to make art has to do with trying to create a better world. Making it so that one does not have to discriminate between the haves and the have nots."

— McGee in conversation with biographer Nick Sousanis.

Left:
Noah's Ark: Gateway, 1989
Painted aluminum, 20'
Central Michigan University
Mount Pleasant, Michigan

Artist of and for the People

by Sue Levytsky

"Art should come to the point to where it's integral to the vocabulary of daily life. We should not make it precious beyond its capacity. The average person looking at these things should be able to enjoy it, and that's the joy of making it as far as I'm concerned. It's that communication with the public." – Charles McGee in the film "Art in The Stations, Detroit People Mover."

Making art available to everyone has long been the cornerstone of Charles McGee's personal philosophy.

"The community aspect of it (art) drives my work," says McGee. "If you look at my imagery, it talks about connectivity, how all of these elements come together." It's the reason McGee, still vibrant at the age of 85, persists in the creation of new artwork and continues to "connect" in his role as educator and community leader.

The work of this 20th-century master artist is part of prestigious collections nationally and internationally, and on permanent display in The Detroit Institute of Arts, Troy Beaumont, Henry Ford and Detroit Receiving Hospitals, The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, Michigan State University, Central Michigan University, The Detroit People Mover and countless other public venues.

Indeed, McGee seems ubiquitous of late. His recent retrospectives at Eastern Michigan University and Detroit's College for Creative Studies enjoyed glowing critical reviews and wide attendance. He's acting as curator for an upcoming show in Saginaw, judging numerous exhibitions, and still teaching a popular mixed media class once a week at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center.

"I see it all synthesizing into a total energy – for the people and for me," says McGee.

"Everybody loves *Progression,*" says Joyce LaBan, Chair of the Committee for Site Specific Art at Royal Oak's Beaumont Hospital, of McGee's majestic relief sculpture. "It has humor; it has syncopated rhythm. It allows everyone to give his own interpretation."

A passion for teaching McGee has been steadfast in his commitment to "bring art to the neighborhood rather than taking the neighborhood to the art" from his earliest days at Gallery 7 and The Charles McGee School of Art.

"My concentration on teaching a lot didn't happen until 1969 when I got the idea to create Gallery 7 so there would be a forum in the neighborhood," remembers McGee. The Charles McGee School of Art was formed as the educational arm of his nonprofit artists collective at 8232 West McNichols. The school "gave minimal-cost and free lessons to the children. I felt it was important to get black children involved in art."

Many sessions at the school literally put the classroom in the street, "having the children pick up what they saw and bringing it back to the studio and making art from it," says McGee. "I wanted the children to learn that art is everything and everything is art."

Ce Scott, now the Director of Residencies and Exhibitions at the McColl Center for Visual Art in Charlotte, North Carolina, remembers "the directness and the immediacy, and the simplicity of how he taught one to look at things…how to translate what you were looking at onto paper. I never did have another instructor that found a way to teach in such a direct and uncomplicated way."

33
2008
Kresge
Eminent
Artist

Blue Nile, 1985
Enamel on alucobond, 12' x 17' mural
Broadway Station, People Mover
Detroit, Michigan

McGee's instinctual ability to communicate with young artists was duly noted by the head of Eastern Michigan University's art department, Kingsley Calkins, who convinced McGee, with his 10th grade education, to join the faculty at EMU in 1969, where he went on to teach for the next 18 years. McGee soon became Director of the university's Sill Gallery as well, a position that allowed him to showcase the work of the school's emerging artists.

In the civic service of art Choosing to retire from EMU in 1987 wasn't a difficult decision for McGee. "I had been operating the gallery there, teaching my classes and the world was crowding in on me," says McGee. "I was 62 years old. I needed a hiatus from full-time teaching to make my art."

The choice also afforded McGee the opportunity to resume a critical role in the Detroit arts community — that of public arts promoter. "The Michigan Council for the Arts was very active right about that time, late 80s, very early 90s — before many of the public arts programs in Michigan were cut. I was asked to conduct a free class for interested students at Detroit's Northern High School. I wound up asking (artist) Allie McGhee to help me because there were too many students to handle myself. One was Tyree Guyton." Guyton would later become famous as the creator of the Heidelberg Project in Detroit.

Service to the cultural and educational arts has been a constant in the course of McGee's distinguished career, beginning with his turn as curator for "Seven

McGee outside the Pontchartrain Wine Cellars building with his mural created as part of the New Detroit Inc. initiative, Detroit, Michigan.

Black Artists" at The Detroit Artists Market. The triumph of the 1969 exhibition revealed the authority of McGee's vision for the arts in Detroit and he was soon recognized as a respected leader within the community, moving to brighten Detroit's blighted neighborhoods with art through New Detroit, Inc. in the early 70s, introducing disadvantaged children to African art and culture at "Your Heritage House" in 1977 and holding weekly classes for prisoners through an innovative arts education program at the Wayne County Jail in the same year.

McGee's vision for a vital and invigorating Detroit arts scene went on to include the founding, along with Jean Heilbrunn and other artists, of CAID – Contemporary Arts in Detroit. Established in 1979, the organization would serve to unite Detroit's contemporary artists, providing showcases, exhibitions, and a critically acclaimed "artists showdown" in one staging at a donated Detroit warehouse. McGee's pioneering work with CAID certainly fueled the groundswell of desire to establish a significant space for modern art in Detroit. MOCAD, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit, opened in 2006, and has since become one of the city's most popular and engaging public exhibition spaces.

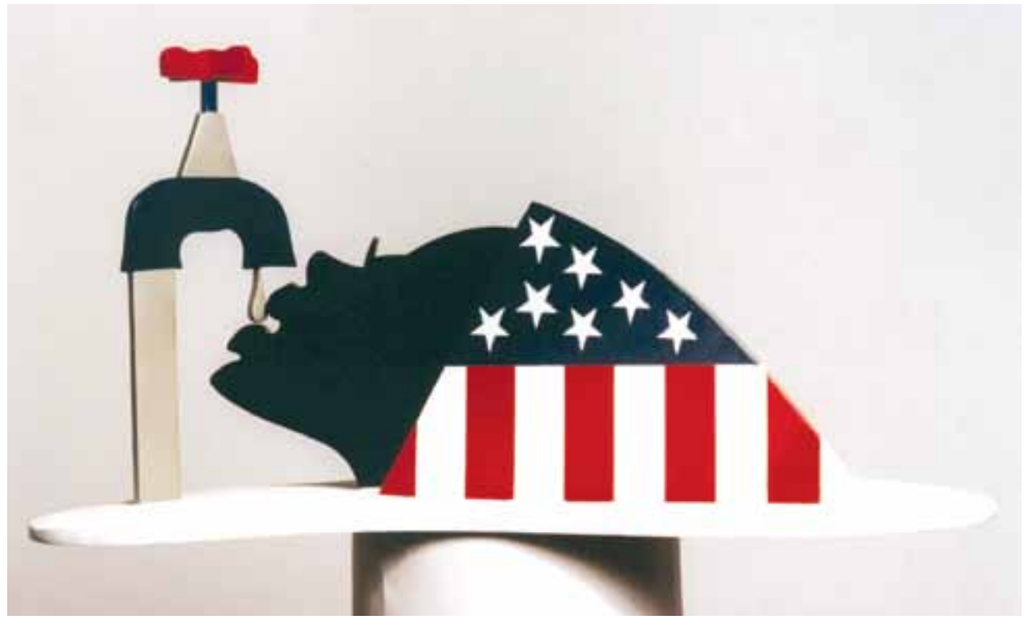
For the ages Today, the paintings, sculptures and assemblages created by Charles McGee enrich and beautify the day-to-day lives of ordinary people who pass through Michigan's public spaces.

Making artwork which will meet the rigors of public exhibit, however challenging, is a task that does not daunt the ever intrepid McGee.

"I've always been very involved in creating art in public places, very involved," says McGee.

He tackled any number of problems in developing the techniques that would serve "Blue Nile," his piece in the Broadway Station of Detroit's People Mover, and ensure its durability in Michigan's severe climate. After much trial and error he chose to work with "alucobond, guaranteed for over 100 years without any problems. The paint that I chose to use was industrial enamel," he explains in a documentary on the making of the People Mover Art.

Experimenting with cutting edge technology to provide a new medium for interpreting his art is an enduring McGee characteristic. "My brain is not lame," laughs McGee. "I'm not afraid to try something new."



Maquette for **Noah's Ark: Life Source,** 1993.

"I admire that about him," says fellow artist and long-time McGee friend, Al Hinton. "He always wants to push for the new. Not that he's eclectic and jumps around in terms of his images. He's just always looking for new tools that he can make useful."

"He's fearless," agrees Jack Butler of Butler Graphics, who has worked with McGee to visualize his two-dimensional drawings as finished 3-D sculpture via computer generated vector graphics. McGee's collaborative efforts with Butler are manifested in "Regeneration," his relief sculpture at Detroit's Henry Ford Hospital.

"I'm always racing ahead," says McGee "I can't be satisfied with where I am or where I have been because that's already discovered. The felicity for me is what is there beyond now."

What lies ahead for McGee and his public is the promise of even more art — a splendid abstract sculpture cum outdoor seating to be installed amidst swaths of green near the DIA — if funding becomes available.

"What I'm doing is trying to create a sense of place," says McGee in explanation of the conceptual piece "and by that I mean, a place that you can go and not think about anything but how beautiful this environment is, how logical the construction is and how engaging the aesthetics are … so you can take your mind off of your problems and be serene."

Sue Levytsky writes about the arts and popular culture. Her original essay was written expressly for this publication.

Artist George Rogers at work with young students in the early 1970s at The Charles McGee School of Art in Detroit, Michigan.

OFTEN WE COME TOGETHER AT THIS TABLE TO TALK ABOUT ART AND TO TALK ABOUT LIFE.

I'M LOOKING FOR CLUES - SIGNS TO HELP ME UNCOVER THE SOURCE OF HIS CEASELESS VITALITY.

a CONVERSATION with CHARLES by Nick Sousanis

VIBRANCY IN THE MAN

COMES OUT IN THE DANCES OF LIFE THAT ARE HIS COMPOSITIONS

WE LAUGH A LOT.

HE'S A TRICKSTER

THE TWINKLE IN HIS EYES REVEALS A LIVELINESS NOT HELD DOWN BY THE WEIGHT OF AGE.

HIS STORY STARTS WITH HIM AS A BOY IN THE SOUTH, MAKING HANDLES FOR AXES.

BUT, AS HE SAYS, "EVERYTHING METAMORPHOSIZES OVER TIME."

WHICH OF COURSE IS A SYMBOL OF METAMORPHOSIS.

IN MY THOUGHTS, AXES TRANSFORM INTO A DOUBLE AXE - "LABRYS" IN MINOAN CULTURE, WHICH ALSO GAVE US THAT FIRST LABYRINTH, IN WHICH THE DOUBLE-HORNED MINOTAUR WAS CAGED.

LABRYS ALSO SYMBOLIZES THE BUTTERFLY.

OUR CONVERSATION IS ARIADNE'S THREAD, GUIDING ME THROUGH.

THE LABYRINTH REPRESENTS THE WORKINGS OF THE MIND I'M TRYING TO UNRAVEL.

CHANGING OVER TIME, ANOTHER SYMBOL, "X" REPRESENTING THE UNKNOWN VARIABLE, X IS UNCHARTERED POSSIBILITY...

WHICH MARKS THE SPOT OF HIS ARRIVAL IN DETROIT AT AGE 10. (THAT IS "X" IN ROMAN NUMERALS.) AT SUCH TIME, THE ONLY THING HE COULD SIGN FOR HIS NAME WAS AN "X"

"TO ASK FOR A MAP IS TO SAY 'TELL ME A STORY.'" -PETER TURCHI THIS STORY IS A JOURNEY FILLED WITH TWISTS AND TURNS.

EVERYTHING, EVEN A FIRST TRIP TO A SHOESTORE, LEFT AN IMPRINT ON A BOY WHO'D BEEN BAREFOOT UP UNTIL THAT TIME.

AS CHARLES SAYS, "EVERY TIME YOU GO AROUND A CORNER YOU RUN INTO SOMETHING THAT PUTS YOU ON A DIFFERENT PATH." AND HE TRAVELED FAR IN SPACE AND MIND.

LAYERS OF EXPERIENCE ACCUMULATE, ALL WEAVING TOGETHER IN A SHIFTING, UNIFIED WHOLE.

"NOT THE MAPS TO GUIDE WHERE WE GO FROM HERE THE ROAD TWISTS AND BRAIDS OUR HAIR UNTIL WE ALL GET THERE." -SPEECH

HE SPINS, MEASURES, CUTS - SPLICING EXPERIENCE TOGETHER - FREEING FORMS AND BRINGING THEM INTO EXISTENCE, INTO LIFE.

ALL BEARING HIS DISTINCT SIGNATURE, HIS STAMP OF QUALITY

SO NOW, AS CONCERNS THE NEW ALGEBRA OF HIS IDENTITY, FOR THE EQUATION THAT IS CHARLES McGEE,

SINCE ARRIVING IN DETROIT, "EVERYTHING IS ON THE MOVE AND IT HASN'T SLOWED DOWN YET."

HE'S ALWAYS KEEPING STEP WITH THIS QUICKLY CHANGING WORLD.

CONSTANTLY ACTIVE IN MIND AS WELL AS IN BODY.

THIS VITALITY COMES FROM UNDERSTANDING THAT THERE IS NO DISTINCTION BETWEEN ART AND LIFE. IT'S ALL A PART OF NATURE'S ORDER - THAT IS HIS "PREACHER" AND HIS "TEACHER."

A LOOK AROUND HIS HOME REVEALS IT'S ALL HERE. IT'S ALL BECOME ELEMENTS OF HIS COMPOSITION. A VISUAL FEAST.

IT'S ALL ABOUT SEEKING THE NEW. "I'm JUST SO HUNGRY, I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS TO HAVE MY FILL."

THIS HOLY GRAIL OF VITALITY IS CONSTANTLY BEING RENEWED.

HE'S ALWAYS THIRSTY TO GAIN MORE.

? ? ?

THE QUESTION THEN IS NO LONGER ABOUT WHERE WE'VE BEEN, BUT ALWAYS, "WHAT'S NEXT, CHARLES?"

TURN THE PAGE

HIS EYES HAVE REMAINED WIDE OPEN, ALERT TO ANY POSSIBILITY, SINCE COMING TO DETROIT.

THAT PROFOUND CHANGE OF ENVIRONMENTS "SENSITIZED ME TO A TOTALLY DIFFERENT KIND OF SOUND AND VISION."

HAVING SPENT TIME ENGAGED WITH CHARLES IT'S HARD NOT TO SEE THROUGH HIS EYES.

ART MAKING IS SEEING POSSIBILITIES.

WE GAZE CONTINUALLY AT THE WORLD AND IT GROWS DULL IN OUR PERCEPTIONS. YET SEEN FROM ANOTHERS VANTAGE POINT, AS IF NEW, IT MAY STILL TAKE THE BREATH AWAY." - ALAN MOORE

THE SEEDS OF HIS ARTWORK ARE EVERYWHERE, IN EVERYTHING.

IT ALL BECOMES VISUAL MATERIAL.

AND LONG AFTER WE'VE GOTTEN UP FROM THE TABLE,

THIS CONVERSATION WITH CHARLES

THIS CONVERSATION WITH ART, WITH LIFE...

...CONTINUES.

What's Next, Charles?

by Nick Sousanis

Rhapsody in Red, 2002
Acrylic and mixed media on masonite board, 48" x 48"
Collection of Linda Allen

At the heart of McGee's lifelong quest for greater understanding is that single question "What's next?" It keeps him hard at work seeking answers in his studio and restless to get back when he's away. Having reached an age when others often slow down, McGee is, if anything, picking up speed, accelerating in his relentless pursuit of new possibilities. With the vast changes he's seen over the course of his lifetime, he feels, "You gotta keep moving or you get run over." McGee is adamant that "As long as I'm on the face of the earth, I plan to keep step as best I can."

In 1987, at the age of 63, McGee retired from teaching at Eastern Michigan University. What came next was not a stop. Instead it signaled the launch of a reinvigorated career. Stuart Shedletsky, the curator of the national traveling exhibition "Still Working: Underknown Artists of Age in America" that would feature McGee in 1994, wrote of this next phase for McGee in the show's catalog: "Since his retirement his art has erupted into a volcano of renewed energy. His work has taken on physical dimension as his personal exuberance has broken the limits of the painted spaces that characterize his past." After decades of constantly extending outward into the community, McGee deliberately withdrew somewhat in order to devote more attention to creating his own work. He felt that was necessary in order to focus "the remaining time that I have on the planet to try to do the very best that I can to deliver the very most that I can in good health." While this didn't mean that he stopped giving of himself, it did mean traveling a narrower path and being more selective in what he put his energy into. "All I want is to try to live in peace for the rest of my days. Because I feel that this way I'll be able to produce without a lot of consternation."

Part of this intensified involvement in his work included a need "to be alone to do what I do." McGee found that having the space to think about his work and become entirely engrossed in it "purifies my life and keeps it very simple." Ultimately, he says: "I think that my mission is very clearly defined by virtue of my talent. So I don't question that, I just obey. There are a lot of people who would be bored to death to do what I do … But I find in making art or making anything, there's a necessary amount of time and devotion and commitment that takes you outside of other people, where you need that single time to think clear thoughts without any immediate influence. I find that so-called "vacant time" or time out from what I do, is just as torrid and just as demanding, if not more so, than the time that I spend after applying."

For the first time in his life, McGee was able to devote all of his time to his art. That explosion of energy and ideas in his studio soon translated into a steady stream of exhibitions. He was being featured in solo exhibitions, retrospectives, and group shows around the state and beyond. Joy Hakanson Colby said that his participation in the exhibition "Still Working: Underknown Artists of Age in America" returned him to national visibility. Organized by the Parsons School of Design in New York, the exhibition featured 32 artists over the age of 60 from around the country. It opened at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and traveled to multiple venues across the country. The show's curator Shedletsky, called McGee, "a light and a real force," relates Colby in her article of June 1994 for The Detroit News.

Prototype for Black Echo, c. 2007
Ultraviolet inkjet spray system on Dibond, 4' x 4'
Private collection

1994 was a big year for McGee. In celebration of his 70th year, he was the subject of a massive two-venue solo show. "Charles McGee: Seeing Seventy" debuted at the Dennos Museum in Traverse City in the fall, before opening at the Detroit Institute of Arts on his birthday.

In addition to exhibitions at galleries and museums, McGee had the opportunity to bring his vision to broader audiences through a slew of public projects, including the People Mover mural, his ongoing series in hospitals, and "Noah's Ark: Gateway" on the campus of Central Michigan University. Other prominent works include "Life Source" for the Water Management Facility at Central State University in Ohio, which he was commissioned to do after winning a national contest search in 1994. The words he wrote for the accompanying plaque reflect his passion for education: "Big is the head that thinks and drinks deep from the full fountain of eternal knowledge and quenches its thirst with everflowing fresh water." "Unity III" installed in 2007 at Michigan State University also bears his philosophy: "Universal order connects us all. Therefore to create a world where all things operate in the service of nature equally is a challenge." With these works, he continues to reach new audiences, and plans for further public installations are on the horizon. As I write this, multiple exhibitions are lined up in celebration of his 85th birthday. And again, he's not thinking about these as retrospectives, but as opportunities to exhibit new bodies of work. He's even starting to think about possibilities for a 90th birthday show! "What's next?" is ever a dizzying prospect.

Nick Sousanis is the co-founder and former arts editor of thedetroiter.com. ©2009. This essay is from his book under preparation for Wayne State University Press, tentatively titled: Signature: The Art and Life of Charles McGee.

Spectral Rhythms, c. 1971
Acrylic on canvas, 84.25" x 64.5"
Collection of The Detroit Institute of Arts

DETROIT
INSTITUTE
OF ARTS

5200 Woodward Avenue (313) 833 7900
Detroit, Michigan 48202 www.dia.org

A Letter in Tribute

The Detroit Institute of Arts was thrilled to learn The Kresge Foundation named Charles McGee its first Eminent Artist in 2008. We congratulate the Kresge Foundation for creating its Eminent Artist Award, recognizing the importance of visual arts to our city and region, and making its initial grant to McGee. As a long-recognized artist of national and international stature, McGee has nevertheless maintained his Detroit presence and devoted much of his life to teaching and mentoring. The DIA is proud to have nine of Charles McGee's works – including *Noah's Ark: Genesis*, one of the most popular works of art in the museum. We received our earliest McGee works – *Window Watchers* and *Seated Woman, 20th Century* – forty years ago.

African American artists have been part of the DIA's collection since the early part of the 20th Century. Our General Motors Center for African American art was established in 2000 to be a center of excellence for the enhancement of public knowledge of African Americans' contributions to the visual arts and to American history. It continues to showcase the rich artistic legacy of African American art and to provide programs to engage and inspire visitors from all walks of life.

We are indeed fortunate to have the benefit of Charles McGee's long and distinguished career as an artist, arts advocate and – even more importantly – an art teacher. I am pleased to join the Kresge Foundation and many others in recognizing the important contributions of this most respected member of our community.

Graham W. J. Beal
Director
The Detroit Institute of Arts

Many Voices

McGee at his home in the Rosedale Park section of Detroit, April 2010.

developing new methods of working have established his place as an exceptional artist.

He is a thorough professional. In the time that I have known him I have admired his ability to confront, accept and incorporate new ways and ideas which challenge our personal patterns, traditions and preferences.

He is an outstanding artist and art educator; he exerts a lasting impact on all those he comes in contact with.

I formed a high regard for his inventive energetic methods in mixed media. Charles McGee sets high artistic standards. What makes his work extraordinary is his integrated view of art and life. His work has uncommon intensity and as narrative, speaks with clarity and durability over time.

"My experience of Charles McGee is based upon observation and perception gained over a friendship of many years.

"Every piece of every artist's work is a marker along the path of his maturation." – C.M.

It was always apparent that Charles was a uniquely gifted artist and possessed a wide ranging curiosity coupled with a keen inquiring mind. As I got to know him I found that he is a thorough individual in crafting any art project, public or private, he is involved with. He always finds a suitable scale to serve his expressive ideas and needs.

In the 40 years I have known Charles McGee he has had an active commitment to the visual arts and art education. He has won awards, garnered honors and distinguished himself in innumerable ways. His work has been exhibited nationally, in one person, invitational and juried exhibitions. He is included extensively in many private and public collections and has done the visiting artist invitationals.

By all measure and criteria Charles McGee is a National Treasure as an artist and educator. Over the years I have always been impressed with the quality and quantity of his body of work, always. However I am most impressed by his spirit and commitment to excellence. His dedication, personal disciplines, introspection and ability to grow by

It is hard to convey the full richness and the impact Charles McGee has made on the arts. We are fortunate that he has spent the majority of his artistic and teaching career working, promoting and enriching the arts in Michigan.

Recently I have been living and working out side of the country and from that vantage point I make this assessment: Charles McGee is a technical pioneer, a superior artist. His professional quality and aesthetic sensibility seen in context makes him a unique and valuable resource. I feel he is an essential part of the continued development of the arts in America."

Al Hinton *artist, Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan*

"Charles has influenced us by not standing still with one idea. When you look at Charles' early work, people loved his charcoal drawings so much that they were willing to pay him anything for a drawing, basically offering him a blank check. But his ideas have taken him in different directions and he's had the courage to go in those directions.

There are very few artists that have been able to sustain the quality of work that Charles has over such an extended period of time. He's of major importance to this community, and I guess as we all know, there's nobody like him, that's seen that kind of vision, of what he actually represents in his work."

Lester Johnson *artist, Professor of Fine Arts, College for Creative Studies, Detroit, Michigan*

"I was just thrilled when Charles McGee was named as the Kresge Eminent Artist for 2008. For many years, African American artists were not given the prominence or the support that has been true of recent years. I had been aware of his work for a long time and it was my personal goal — I have collected African American art for about 25 years — to have a Charles McGee in my collection which included Benny Andrews, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Hughie Lee-Smith, Richard Mayhew, Allie McGhee, James Porter, Shirley Reed, Gilda Snowden, Alma Thomas and William T. Williams. I now own Triad 2002, and Patches of Time VII. Collecting McGee is addictive, it really is."

Nettie Seabrooks, *executive advisor to Detroit Institute of Arts director Graham Beal, former chief operating officer of the museum.*

Tuesdays find McGee in his classroom at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center where he teaches a course in mixed media assemblage.

"Charles McGee joined the teaching faculty at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center in 1999, sharing lessons he himself states were '…learned…to a certain extent out of observations and deductions.'

I admire his spirit and drive to focus on his mission of creating and sharing his knowledge and perspective in a direct but gentle way with his students. His use of materials is admirable, and his forward-thinking nature allows him to use technology to his benefit when creating.

Charles McGee is one of the most passionate, caring and thoughtful individuals I have ever worked with. He is selfless in his interest in creating, teaching and exhibiting his art to connect cultures, history and humanity as a way to bring people together."

Jane Linn *former president and CEO, Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center, Birmingham, Michigan*

"Charles McGee's work always has been like music — most specifically the rhythmic and improvisational beat of jazz, and it has given him masterful insight into a broad range of art. McGee's energy is the essence of life in art, and it also defines his own artful life that has moved him through a long and important career."

Marvin Anderson *Professor Emeritus, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan, writing in thedetroiter.com*

McGee guides a student to a solution for her mixed media piece at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center in Birmingham.

"Charles McGee never doubted his own power, his own genius. He felt it and pushed it…but it still surprises him.

Charles was always very clear on what he wanted his art to do and how his art fit into the world at large. He was very clear on what his art was to him and what his art should be.

Since I have been involved in art in Detroit forever, I remember the early days of Charles' involvement with the community, and his work and the respect that people always had for him.

Charles has always been a leader, he's always had a following, and he's always organizing artists. It was sometimes a survival thing, very often a way to expose this group of African American artists in a very dignified way to the community.

Charles has nurtured a lot of artists in my opinion. He starts out as an artist but he allows his vision and his hopes and his standards to test the people around him. He doesn't keep them to himself.

He has grown, and grown, and changed. Charles almost completely forgets what he has done and comes back to it fresh. He's good at every stage, even when he goes to the geometric, shifting planes, the brilliant, almost psychedelic color, it still has the restraint and the excitement and the superb technical skill — it's all part of Charles McGee's caring about his work, and taking whatever time it takes to do it. Almost setting the house on fire because he put flame to his canvas to achieve a particular hue. 'How did he get this color?' you ask yourself. There's no color you can buy to get that intensity – that's Charles adding some extra spin.

He just has such joy from his art. He allows that joy in his own creations to show and it's like overloving your child. He allows the art to touch him and hurt him."

Dr. Cledie Collins Taylor *founder and director, Extended Arts Gallery, Detroit, Michigan*

"McGee: he is his work and his work is him.

Charles' impact in the community manifested itself in the galleries that he showed with and that he ran. People didn't talk about black artists at that time — 1969, when he curated "Seven Black Artists," his pioneering exhibition for the Detroit Artist's Market. Black artists were like women artists, people didn't pay attention to them and there wasn't any black history in those days about the artists' and the exciting things that had been happening. Charles led this community and made an extremely important contribution.

When he had Gallery 7 in the Fisher Building, he insisted there be no emphasis on the race of the artists whose work he was showing. He was only and ever about the quality of the art. When I would call him during Black History Month, he would say 'I suppose you want a quote for your newspaper about Black History Month. Well, people should be regarding the art not the blackness of it. I'm not giving you any quotes.'"

Joy Hakanson Colby *served as the art critic for the Detroit News for 60 years before retiring in 2006.*

Detail of a firescreen designed and fabricated by McGee.

"Charles McGee's work pulses with the energy of life. He envisions life as a wholly interconnected global thicket in which human beings are inextricably embedded. McGee sees no hierarchical distinction between the human and the worm or between the President and the plumber. Thus his work implies both the necessity of racial equality as well as the human obligation to treat all nature with respect. Through his work, he promotes peace, balance, and harmony, hoping to make the world a better place to live."

Julia R. Myers *Professor of Art History, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan, writing in "Energy, Charles McGee at Eighty-Five." Copyright © 2009 Art Gallery*

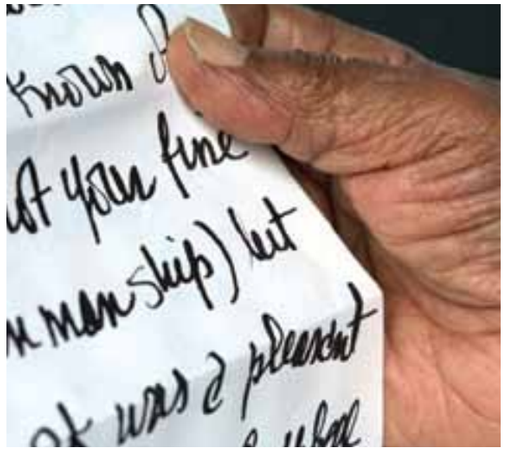
"My most vivid recollection of Charles goes back a long time, to the early 1970s, and an arts advocacy group we were both involved with — New Detroit, Incorporated. The group's advisors were Josephine Love (Your Heritage Youth Museum Director) and Gertrude Kasle (noted Detroit gallerist).

I was on the committee along with Charles and a number of other artists including Al Hinton and Allie McGhee. The mission was to place works of art around the Detroit community in neighborhoods as opposed to in the preeminent and obvious sites downtown.

It was the right time for art in the neighborhoods, for a community based push that would counter the charge that art is elitist, that it was always about big money, and controlled by big museums.

The group had a small working budget to authorize murals and small works of sculpture. Charles McGee was one of the obvious and outstanding committee members. He was just very thoughtful on who should receive these awards. He researched these artists, and he was extremely eloquent on why they should be chosen. For me as a new kid on the block, to see an established artist here lift the whole dialogue was just fantastic."

Michael Hall *sculptor, Hamtramck, Michigan*



McGee holding a treasured letter from Romare Bearden.

"I consider Charles McGee to be one of the major African-American artists of the late 20th century. I believe he's right up there with other national artists like Romare Bearden.

I think he's a significant artist for a number of reasons. He has remained productive and creative for the last 60 years. He's been consistent in his growth and development. He's been a professor of art who's generous with his work and with his information. He's shared his extensive knowledge and helped so many young artists coming along."

Dr. Marlene Shipp Chavis *is the author of "Ten Michigan Afro-American Visual Artists: A Commonality of Experience, Diversity of Expression." She is a long-time collector of African American art.*

"Life is a continuum, it never has that period to it. It's always a comma." – C.M.

"What is unique about Charles? It's not terribly unique that McGee is so brilliant, but the depth of his brilliance is what is so unique about Charles. He really goes deep down into his soul and his heart to find answers and solutions to things — then it all comes out very naturally. That's his real gift.

Charles has never been just about Charles the artist. From my perspective, I believe Charles has been strategically and historically important in getting other black artists to reach their rightful place in history. If you look at his career, he has provided so many opportunities for others, whether through Gallery 7 or all that he did at Eastern Michigan University, or in the City of Detroit. He has done so much for youth, provided so many opportunities. He has gone out of his way to establish places, stage events, and offer objectives all to encourage young artists to become great artists."

Marilyn Wheaton *is the director of the Marshall M. Fredericks Sculpture Museum at Saginaw Valley State University and former director of the Cultural Affairs Department of the City of Detroit.*

Metamorphosis: the Life, the Art of McGee

Biography

McGee in his role as educator at Eastern Michigan University.

McGee lecturing on color theory in the late 1970s.

McGee at 85.

Looking through "Essence: Concavex" to "Yellow" at McGee's 2010 show at College for Creative Studies.

Detail of "Nagasaki."

Born: December 15, 1924
Clemson, South Carolina

EDUCATION

1947–1957
Society of Arts and Crafts (now College for Creative Studies)
Detroit, Michigan

1968
Escuela Massana
Barcelona, Spain

1968
School of Graphics
Barcelona, Spain

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

Appointments

Anna Thompson Dodge Bequest Selection Committee, Hart Plaza
Detroit, Michigan

Center for Creative Studies Board of Directors
Detroit, Michigan

Detroit Artists Market Board of Directors
Detroit, Michigan

Detroit Focus Gallery Board of Directors and Exhibition Committee
Detroit, Michigan

Sill Gallery
Eastern Michigan University Director
Ypsilanti, Michigan

Michigan Commission on Art in Public Places

Michigan Council for the Arts Commission
Lansing, Michigan

Arts Educator

Your Heritage House
Detroit, Michigan

Ann Arbor Art Association
Ann Arbor, Michigan

1968–1978
Gallery 7
Director and Founder
Detroit, Michigan

1968–1978
Charles McGee School of Art
Director and Founder
Detroit, Michigan

1969–1987
Eastern Michigan University
Professor Emeritus of Art
Ypsilanti, Michigan

1999–2010
Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center
Instructor
Birmingham, Michigan

Curator

Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit
Detroit, Michigan

Detroit Artists Market
Detroit, Michigan

Detroit Institute of Arts Rental Gallery
Detroit, Michigan

Eller Sign Company
Detroit, Michigan

New Detroit, Inc.
Detroit, Michigan

Pewabic Pottery
Detroit, Michigan

Pittman Gallery
Detroit, Michigan

Consultant

Blue Cross-Blue Shield of Michigan
Detroit, Michigan

Detroit Council for the Arts
Troy, Michigan

Michigan Council for the Arts
Lansing, Michigan

New Detroit General Hospital
Detroit, Michigan

Residencies

Children's Museum
Detroit, Michigan

Detroit Public Schools
Detroit, Michigan

Ferndale Public Schools
Ferndale, Michigan

1975
University of Delaware at Wilmington
Artist in Residence
Wilmington, Delaware

1975
Mercy College
Detroit, Michigan

1984–86
Northern High School
Detroit, Michigan

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1962
Detroit Artists Market
Detroit, Michigan

1962
Howard University
Washington, D.C.

1964
Grinnell Gallery
Detroit, Michigan

1965
Arts Extended Gallery
Detroit, Michigan

1966
Arwin Galleries
Detroit, Michigan

1968
Oak Park Public Library
Oak Park, Michigan

1970
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan

1974
New Works
Gallery 7
Detroit, Michigan

1977
Pontiac Creative Arts Center
Pontiac, Michigan

1980
Life, Death and the Middle Ground
Midland Center for the Arts
Midland, Michigan

1989
A Sustained Vision
Detroit Focus Gallery
Detroit, Michigan

1990
Siena Heights College
Adrian, Michigan

1991
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan

1994
C. Corcoran Gallery
Muskegon, Michigan

1994
Seeing Seventy
Detroit Institute of Arts
Detroit, Michigan
Dennos Museum
Traverse City, Michigan

2002
Muskegon Museum of Art
Muskegon, Michigan

2009
Energy: Charles McGee at Eighty-Five
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan

2010
Energy: Charles McGee at Eighty-Five
College for Creative Studies
Detroit, Michigan

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1959
Pennsylvania Academy Biennial
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

1961/1967
The Butler Annual
Butler Museum of American Art
Youngstown, Ohio

1961
New Vistas in American Negro Art
Howard University
Washington, D.C.

1965
The Toledo Regional
Toledo Museum of Art
Toledo, Ohio

1967
Art in U.S. Embassies
Bangkok, Thailand

1968
The Joan Miró Drawing Exhibition
Palacio de la Virreina
Barcelona, Spain

1968
The Witherspoon International Art on Paper
Witherspoon Art Gallery
Greensboro, North Carolina

1969
12 Afro-American Artists
Lee Nordness Gallery
New York, New York
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.

1969
Seven Black Artists
Detroit Artists Market
Detroit, Michigan

1969/1971
New Black Artists
Brooklyn Museum
Columbia University
New York, New York

1969
Contemporary Black American Artists
Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) tour

1971
Contemporary Black Artists in America
Whitney Museum of American Art
New York, New York

1975
Michigan Survey
San Jose Museum
San Jose, California

McGee in Detroit, March, 2010.

Bowl, 1993
Glazed stoneware
Collection of Elie and Eileen Aboulafia

McGee installing his sculpture "Regeneration" at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit.

Rhapsody in Black and White, 2008
Ultraviolet inkjet spray system on Dibond

1976
Works in Progress II
Detroit Institute of Arts
Detroit, Michigan

1979
At Cranbrook: Detroit Artists
Cranbrook Art Museum
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

1979
Light Installations
Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit
Detroit, Michigan

1986
Charles McGee, Painter
Robert Murray, Sculptor
Buckham Fine Arts Project
Flint, Michigan

1987
Still Working
Corcoran Gallery of Art
Washington D.C.
Traveling exhibition

1987
Signs, Times, Writings from the Wall
Ongoing Michigan Artists Program
Detroit Institute of Arts
Detroit, Michigan

1994
Still Working: Underknown Artists of Age in America
Parsons School of Design
Traveling exhibition

2005
Contemporary Art Festival Nebula
The Museum of Modern Art
Saitama, Japan

SELECTED HONORS

1958
Donald Morgan Prize
Outstanding Painting
Annual Michigan Artists Exhibition
Detroit, Michigan

1968
First Prize
Central Business District Association
Detroit, Michigan

1968
Second Prize
Afro-American Exhibit
Detroit Institute of Arts
Detroit, Michigan

1978
Artist of the Year Award
Arts Foundation of Michigan
Detroit, Michigan

1985
Individual Artist Grant
Michigan Council for the Arts
Detroit, Michigan

1988
Distinguished Service Award
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan

1988
Spirit of Detroit Award
Detroit City Council
Detroit, Michigan

1988
Studio Club Award
Center for Creative Studies
Detroit, Michigan

1988
Individual Artist Grant
Michigan Council for the Arts
Detroit, Michigan

1989
Governor's Michigan Artist Award
Concerned Citizens for the Arts in Michigan
Detroit, Michigan

2003
Honorary Fine Arts Doctorate Degree
College for Creative Studies
Detroit, Michigan

2006
Honorary Humanities Doctorate Degree
Marygrove College
Detroit, Michigan

2008
Kresge Eminent Artist Award
The Kresge Foundation
Troy, Michigan

PUBLIC COMMISSIONS

1974
Urban Wall Mural Program
New Detroit, Inc.
Detroit, Michigan

1978
Michigan Arthritis Foundation
Detroit, Michigan

1978
Michigan Foundation for the Arts
Midland, Michigan

1982
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan

1982
Martin Luther King Community Center
Detroit, Michigan

1984
Detroit Institute of Arts
Detroit, Michigan

1985–86
Northern High School
Detroit, Michigan

1987
People Mover Mural
Broadway Station
Detroit, Michigan

1989
East Lansing City Hall
East Lansing, Michigan

1990
Central Michigan University
Mount Pleasant, Michigan

1990s
Karmanos Cancer Center
Detroit, Michigan

1994
Central State University
Wilberforce, Ohio

1993
Bishop Airport Authority
Flint, Michigan

2004
Beaumont Hospital
Royal Oak, Michigan

2007
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan

2007
Henry Ford Hospital
Detroit, Michigan

2008
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Atlanta University
Atlanta, Georgia

Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History
Detroit, Michigan

Cronk Recreation Center
Detroit, Michigan

Dennos Museum
Traverse City, Michigan

Detroit Board of Education
Detroit, Michigan

Detroit Children's Museum
Detroit, Michigan

Detroit General Hospital
Detroit, Michigan

Detroit Institute of Arts
Detroit, Michigan

Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan

The Engineering Society of Detroit
Detroit, Michigan

Holtzman & Silverman
Detroit, Michigan

Howard University
Washington, D.C.

Links, Inc.
Detroit, Michigan

Maccabees Corporation
Southfield, Michigan

Michigan Bell Telephone
Detroit, Michigan

Miller, Canfield, Paddock & Stone, P.L.C.
Detroit, Michigan

School of Graphics
Barcelona, Spain

Shaw-Walker Company
Muskegon, Michigan

Smith, Hinchman & Grylls
Detroit, Michigan

University of Michigan
Dearborn, Michigan

U.S. Embassy
Lima, Peru

The Willistead Art Gallery
Windsor, Canada

Ypsilanti State Hospital
Ypsilanti, Michigan

On the Kresge Eminent Artist Award

McGee with work in progress at his Detroit studio.

Beginning in 2008, The Kresge Foundation honors each year an exceptional artist living and working in Metropolitan Detroit whose body of work, contributions to his or her art form and demonstrated commitment to the Detroit cultural community are widely recognized. The Kresge Eminent Artist Award, which includes a $50,000 prize, acknowledges artistic innovation and rewards integrity, depth of vision, and singularity of purpose as judged by the Kresge Eminent Artist Panel.

The Eminent Artist Award together with the Kresge Artist Fellowships and Kresge Arts Support constitute Kresge Arts in Detroit, a coordinated effort to showcase and support Metropolitan Detroit's tri-county arts and cultural community — Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties.

Kresge Arts in Detroit is one facet of the foundation's Detroit Program, a comprehensive community development framework that identifies key building blocks of the city's long-term health and vitality and aligns the public, private and philanthropic sectors at the local, state and national levels to rebuild the region for prosperity in the 21st century.

The College for Creative Studies administers the Kresge Eminent Artist Award and Kresge Artist Fellowships on behalf of the Kresge Foundation.

Letter from Richard L. Rogers

The College for Creative Studies is very proud to partner with The Kresge Foundation to administer the Kresge Eminent Artist Award. It is truly inspiring that The Kresge Foundation acknowledges the individual artist as a potent force in bringing about the change Detroit needs and deserves. At the College for Creative Studies, we believe that engaging the creative community is key to revitalizing the region. Kresge Arts in Detroit allows CCS to reaffirm its mission to nurture creativity and support the ambitions of artists whose innovative work makes a difference in how we envision ourselves and our community. Charles McGee's work sets a standard for all aspiring artists. CCS congratulates him.

– Richard L. Rogers
President
College for Creative Studies

Tribute from Michelle Perron – Charles McGee: Trailblazer

"Do not go where the path may lead,
go instead where there is no path
and leave a trail."

Ralph Waldo Emerson's words are especially stirring when considering the life and work of Charles McGee, the inaugural recipient of the Kresge Eminent Artist Award. McGee blazed a trail for art and artists in our community early on and, at the age of 84, he shows no sign of slowing.

Considered by his fellow artists, curators, collectors, teachers and students as the benchmark for artistic excellence, McGee's distinguished career spans six decades and encompasses the kind of doing that astounds in its quality and volume: his work has been celebrated in hundreds of exhibitions from Detroit to New York to Bangkok; he has been a teacher and mentor to thousands of young artists; he has founded galleries and arts organizations, creating opportunities for others to share their work and ideas; his work has been commissioned and collected by institutions and individuals around the world; he has advised the State of Michigan, the City of Detroit and our arts institutions on countless cultural initiatives; and he has done it all with humility, reverence and a sense of wonder at the power and triumph of art.

Charles McGee is, indeed, an eminent artist and it is with great honor that Kresge Arts in Detroit announces him as the recipient of this prestigious award, the first of its kind in Michigan. The 2008 Kresge Eminent Artist Award was selected by a panel of three influential members of Detroit's art community: Gerhardt Knodel, artist and former director of Cranbrook Academy of Art, Dennis Alan Nawrocki, art historian and author of the recently published third edition of "Art in Detroit Public Places" (Wayne State University Press) and Dr. Cledie Taylor, founder and director of Arts Extended Gallery. Kresge Arts in Detroit is grateful to the panel for shepherding this important task and for setting the standard for this award in future years.

"The creative mind," McGee has written, "continues always to test the parameters of conventional knowledge, forever in pursuit of new vistas." His extraordinary life in art is a model of continuity and change; his unerring dedication to his practice and community serves as an example for all of us to mark our own trail, one that will awaken us to new vistas and the freedom that art bestows.

– Michelle Perron
Director
Kresge Arts in Detroit

Kresge Arts in Detroit – Advisory Council

KRESGE ARTS IN DETROIT

Kresge Arts in Detroit is guided by the expertise of a volunteer advisory council, made up of members of the Metropolitan Detroit cultural community. The council selects review panels, nominates candidates for the Kresge Eminent Artist Award, and provides external oversight to Kresge Arts in Detroit. The following is a list of the 2008–09 members under whose leadership Charles McGee was chosen.

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The Kresge Foundation Headquarters.

The Kresge Foundation is a $3.1 billion private, national foundation that seeks to influence the quality of life for future generations by creating access and opportunity in underserved communities, improving the health of low-income people, supporting artistic expression, assisting in the revitalization of Detroit, and advancing methods for dealing with global climate change. The foundation works in six program areas: arts and culture, community development, education, the environment, health, and human services.

In 2009, the Board of Trustees approved 404 awards totaling $197 million; $167 million was paid out to grantees over the course of the year. For more information, visit **www.kresge.org.**

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Acknowledgements

With very special thanks to Marion Jackson and Marsha Miro for their original essays; to Michael Hodges, Bill Harris, MaryAnn Wilkinson and Dennis Alan Nawrocki for revisiting their previous work on McGee; to Nick Sousanis for his many contributions to this project; to Al Hinton for reaching across numerous time zones to write of an admired friend and colleague; with additional thanks to Marvin Anderson, the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center (BBAC); Jack Butler; Dr. Marlene Chavis; Joy Hakanson Colby; College for Creative Studies; Dr. Cledie Collins Taylor; Gloria Whelan and The Detroit Artists Market; Graham W. J. Beal and The Detroit Institute of Arts; The Detroit News; Treena Ericson; Michael Hall; Lester Johnson; Danielle Kaltz; Gerhardt Knodel; Joyce LaBan; Sue Marx; Julia Myers; Tim Nagae; Nettie Seabrooks; Irene Walt and Marilyn Wheaton for their kind contributions.

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www.kresge.org
ISBN: 978-0-615-37379-9

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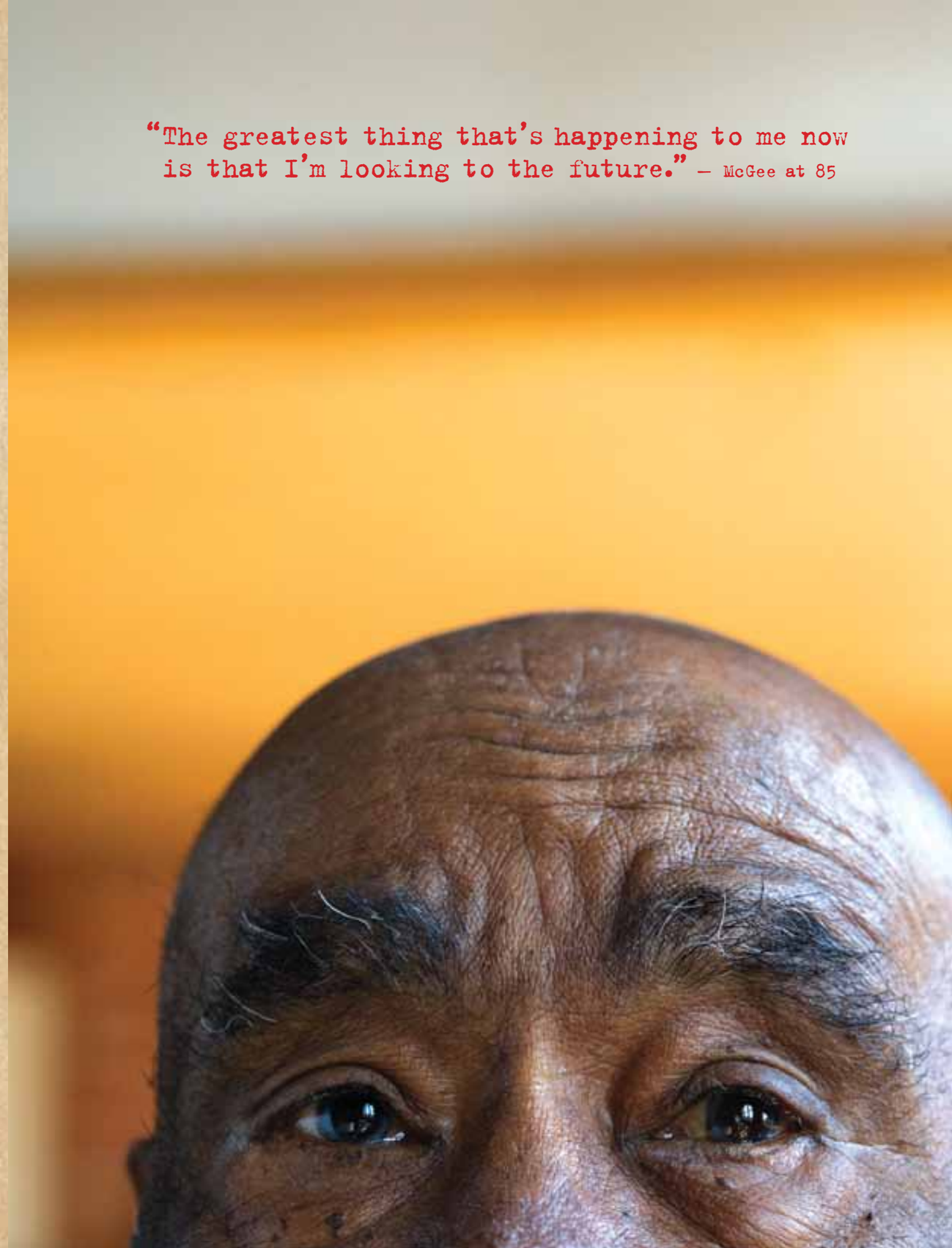

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