

UNFINISHED WORK

GORDON D. CHASE IS FAR FROM RETIRED

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, many galleries are keeping artists' work in the forefront by converting exhibitions to a virtual format. Not viewing Gordon D. Chase's exhibition of charcoal drawings, "High Contrast," at the Lamont Gallery, in person was a disappointment, but it was amply compensated for with an engaging conversation with the artist. Chase, a graduate of Phillips Exeter Academy (class of 1966), recently retired after 40 years as an art teacher and administrator.

The text and artist's statement on Chase's website set the stage for the visual appreciation of his beautifully rendered drawings. Evocative, metaphoric and unsettling imagery steers us to the intellectual content of the works, conveying Chase's view of the artist as seer, messenger and witness.

"My interest in art was galvanized by events in American society in the 1960s – the Civil Right Movement, the Women's Movement, the Gay Rights Movement, the Vietnam War," stated Chase. "Anyone in high school or college then was deeply affected by those movements. The goal was achieving justice for those who had not had it, and moving in a forceful way to a greater concept of human rights. I made work about how life can be unfair for many, and for some, particularly unfair." Chase made "art with a social conscience" a main theme of his art and his teaching, and feels artists have the responsibility to call attention to questions of right and wrong.

The exhibit "High Contrast" includes Chase's large-format charcoal drawings, both his most recent and earlier works, in which he delves into these very questions. Over the last 20 years, he has gravitated toward using charcoals for the extreme high contrast that can be achieved and the range of possible effects. "I find the



effects dazzling, and challenging and wonderfully tempting, from something that can be completely exacting and scientifically precise to the other end, where, with the sweep of the hand or a gesture on paper, a mark can become as rough and violent and untamed as a mark can be."

"In both my teaching and in my work, I've tried to make the work come alive in a way that was not representational per se, but was topical, symbolic, metaphorical, evocative, emotional, dramatic and direct in visceral terms without being illustrative or just an imitation of what we see in the most

readily available way." For Chase, art possess a real power to communicate information, truth and sanity, but it doesn't have to do that in ways that just replicate exactly what we see.

Chase increasingly encouraged his students to leave their drawings unfinished. To him a drawing that is complete, that is finished off too much, has answered all the questions. "Out of something that seems chaotic and primeval can emerge

REVIEW

HIGH CONTRAST: THE CHARCOAL WORKS OF GORDON D. CHASE '66

LAMONT GALLERY VIRTUAL EXHIBITION
PHILLIPS EXETER ACADEMY

EXETER, NEW HAMPSHIRE

SEPTEMBER 15 THROUGH
DECEMBER 31

[EXETER.EDU/ARTS-EXETER/
LAMONT-GALLERY/](https://EXETER.EDU/ARTS-EXETER/LAMONT-GALLERY/)

Kill the Messenger, charcoal,
30" x 44".

a work that is precise and to the point and utterly wonderful in its exactitude. That makes a drawing more like a live event, a performance. In these days when performance reigns supreme, it's tough to make a work of art, a still work, compete. It needs to have a sense of energy, a sense of movement, a sense of action and I think charcoal brings electricity to light/dark contrast that maximizes the energy of a moment of crisis or intense interaction."

"Kill the Messenger" is a provocative drawing in which a runner approaches a group of warriors high on a cliff, bringing them vital information. With their spears readied and directed toward him, you know whatever he's trying to communicate is being violently rejected. "To me the notion of messenger could not be more timely or important. I see repeatedly the phenomenon of the messenger being disregarded or denied. The pandemic is now all over the world. Here, the main health expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci, is a messenger. He is being denied, set aside and disenfranchised. We resist the truth – we don't want to hear it, we don't want to see it, we don't want to have anything to do with it. "Kill the Messenger" is an image in very raw terms of human beings as their most primitive and simplistic, not accepting the truth – the truth the messenger brings that others need to hear, but refuse to take."

In "The Firestarter," Chase focuses on the threat of nuclear war. With the United States about to undertake a trillion-dollar upgrade to its nuclear program and with world politics today, Chase sees the nuclear threat as not any less than during the Cold War, but greater. Influenced by his volunteer work with the organization Physicians for Social Responsibility (twice awarded the Nobel Prize for its work educating against the threat of nuclear war), Chase created images trying to make sense of the threat. For him, personal responsibility comes into play. "The image shows someone running away, looking terribly guilty, the guilt represented by his hands. They are on fire and that fire



The Problem of Evil, charcoal, 30" x 44".

matches the distant fire of a nuclear explosion. He is like an arsonist playing guiltily with fire and who has let the fire get out of control in an irrevocable and overwhelming way."

Using the trope of a dot-to-dot drawing, Chase creates the imagery of a menacing dragon in "The Problem of Evil." "It's drawn like a connect the dot puzzle to represent something not finished," explained Chase, "and it provokes the viewer to follow the problem, follow the puzzle. So, what is unfinished here? What is missing here? The questions address our assumptions. When asking students to consider issues of race and gender and social inequality, what gets us into trouble the most are assumptions we make about other people."

"The apparent truth in the drawing is that something dangerous and terrible, an evil force, a dragon-like creature is here, when in fact the dragon turns out to be a nursing mother, surrounded by small offspring. Off to the right we see a human-like figure. We relate to the human and assume it is a force for good. Our initial reaction? Here is an evil dragon and here is a human being, who may not survive a possible encounter with the dragon. The truth is the dragon is a harmless mother and the human being is a hunter intent on killing either the mother or her babies. Our first impressions, our first assumptions are frequently wrong."

As Chase thoughtfully concluded our conversation, he stated: "Art evokes questions about our assumptions. It's not just about answering the questions, it's also about asking the questions. Any work of art that is truly alive has something unfinished and open ended about it. It's an exploration."

Flavia Cigliano



The Firestarter, charcoal, 30" x 44".