

Getting to know Charlie Leal

Charlie Leal is a Los Angeles based painter whose contemplative pieces explore our ability to connect and relate to transformative moments in our lives. His works in "The texture of constance and change" is his first showing of work in the United Kingdom. Here, we ask Charlie to tell us more about his origins and journey in art practice.

TSG: When did your relationship with painting begin?

CL: My relationship with painting began in my first year of high school with an art teacher named Katie Harper. From a young age, I was continually making art and interested in visual mediums. Katie was a huge encouragement to pursue art as a career. I'm so grateful to have had someone in my life that could see something that had yet to come into focus for me as a young person. At the time, I wouldn't have imagined how influential her lesson would become. I have offered to teach painting in my home studio and Katie's generosity plays a key role in fostering talent in others when I reach out to communicate and collaborate with other artists today.

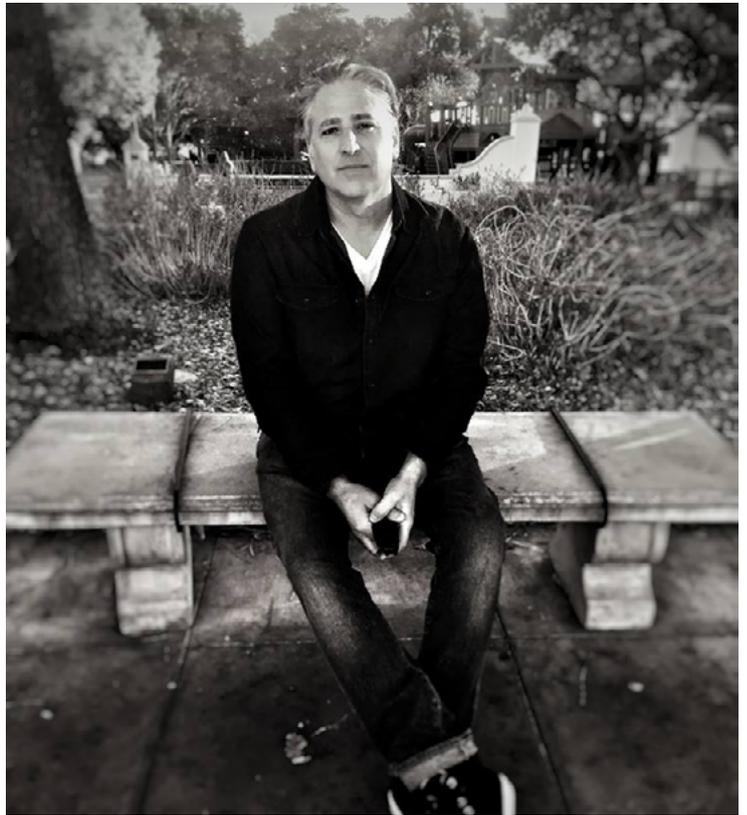
TSG: Have you had formal training in painting?

CL: While I was in high school, I spent time during the summers in Santa Cruz, taking art classes at University of California Santa Cruz and Cabrillo colleges. I studied with plein air painter Terry St. John, and abstract artist Don Thompson. This was definitely the turning point for me. My mother started helping me look into Art schools at the age of 14 and discovered Art Center College of Design in Pasadena California. I was accepted to Art Center's Illustration/Fine art program in 1991 and graduated in 1994. It was extremely challenging but even more exciting to be a part of their program. Almost immediately, I realized how important and powerful art could become.

TSG: How long did it take to find "Your Voice" in your work?

CL: I'm still on the hunt! If it's a language then I think I'm continually in pursuit of its vernacular. The "Voice," in my opinion, comes from the mileage; countless hours in front of a surface, asking new questions, challenging what is possible and most notably, coming from an honest place creatively. It's tricky having come from an Illustration background; the leap to abstraction presents some interesting choices. Each piece represents a word in the paragraph describing the journey. I think the discipline of consistently making work has helped me grow both as a person and an artist.

I've spent the better part of 30 years after Art Center making music videos, commercials, television series and movies illuminating stories and sound with imagery. My first job was on my 23rd birthday on the set of a David



Bowie's video "Heart's Filthy Lesson." He remains an incredibly talented artist who generously encouraged me in my small role on the Art Team that day. I became aware of the interplay between art in all of its mediums and how they compliment, challenge and enhance each other. I remain a fan of artists collaborating and that is why I was so excited to have my work shown alongside Ceramist Patricia Shone.

TSG: What stage of the process do you enjoy most when creating?

CL: I am a huge advocate of the process in its entirety. Depending on the piece, I often add new materials and tools to create new textures and gestures. Changing these elements keeps the exploration new and adds spontaneity to the final product. I typically begin with something simple, often it is a word or the essence of a place from memory. As far as the application, I draw from my experience in the movie and television industry as an Art Director and Scenic painter in Los Angeles. Many of the techniques and materials I've learned through these roles have enriched the tactile qualities found in my new work. My favourite part of my process: pushing different mediums and learning what they will say.

TSG: How does your environment in Los Angeles manifest itself in your work?

CL: Where to start! I was raised in Santa Cruz just South of San Francisco. Its influence is unavoidable; the ocean, colors, the landscape. It's a nostalgic place for me. My recent work embraces the subtlety of lost horizons and lifting quilts of fog. Living in LA, I miss large expanses without buildings and traffic. It's a place I go, either physically or emotionally. I'd like to think part of this attraction is captured and preserved in each painting. They depict a personal catalogue of atmospheres I'm really excited to share with others.

This is the answer to the question that people sometimes ask

about Abstract work. You know the ones who say, "My kid could do that." This is about authenticity. A fingerprint if you will. Each piece has a part of me and my life experience, my thoughts, breath and DNA. It is the time spent and the dedication to the craft. Welcome to the pages of my visual diary.

TSG: What is your daily routine on a workday?

CL: When I'm not Art Directing, I typically paint every day. I don't usually follow a routine per se. However, I work within an organized framework. I have a studio at home, which allows me the freedom to spend more time being creative. My paintings involve a lot of layers of material and time that require hours to cure and evolve. I watch and work and cultivate them like a garden. There are definitely stages to this part of my routine, I suppose. I spend a portion of my schedule protecting my uninterrupted time in the studio. With all the tasks of self-promotion, commissions, and shipping, this is a critical aspect of how I'm able to stay the course. The business of creativity has to have a seat at the table regardless of if you paint, draw, act, sing, etc. Managing time has certainly helped in my productivity.

TSG: In this digital world, why is it still important to sell through galleries?

CL: This digital world! I'm grateful for it actually. I have artist friends and encouragement from all over the world. It blows my mind honestly. However, experiencing a painting in the flesh is a different dynamic entirely. Imagine meeting a silverback Gorilla for the first time. Definitely not the same as a photograph! My work is tactile and personal. I enjoy seeing the physicality of paint, the scale of something and pieces within an environment. Art transforms a space into a place if you will.

I think it's important for people to see art, to experience its true color and to learn what the artist is saying, their voice. If the right person stands in front of just the right painting, their visceral response can be transformative. It's a conversation between the canvas and the viewer.

Galleries such as yours act as a frame for artwork. The experience and promotion of educated curators not only encourages artists to continue making work, it assists in providing context, value and access to the collectors.

TSG: Could you name your favourite artists from both the past and present and why?

CL: My favorite artists? How much time do we have? Willem DeKooning, Schnabel, Basquiat, Twombly have been most influential. Contemporary painters - I'll keep it simple; Lawrence Carroll. Lawrence was my instructor at Art Center toward the end of my last 3 terms. It wasn't so much his lessons about painting that were so inspiring. But rather, why being an artist and painter is important.

"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea."
-Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Carroll taught in a similar fashion. He had an insatiable desire to create, paint, draw, laugh, and direct. They were all mediums useful in capturing what he'd intended. As I spent more time with him, I watched his personal life bleed into his work. This connection is critical and makes more sense to me now than it did 30 years ago.

I'd like to think I encourage others in the same way. That's the point isn't it? To pass on these epiphanies on to others!

It's not easy to be vulnerable and personal and generous. It's not in our nature. It is a noble thing for everyone to pursue. Painting is the diary of a person's life in my opinion. 64,000 years ago someone decided to blow pigment through a reed, leaving his or her handprint on a cave wall. It began with one single mark.

An indelible impression saying very clearly, "Here I am."

Charlie's work can be viewed on our website [here](#).

If you'd like to know more about Charlie's life and work, listen to the gallery podcast interview with him at home in Los Angeles [here](#).

THE STRATFORD GALLERY