

CHARLES STEFFEN

(1927-1995)

Charles Steffen was born into a family of eight children in Chicago. He studied drawing, art history, and photography at the Illinois Institute of Technology in the late 1940s. Around 1950, while still in school, he suffered a mental breakdown and spent the next fifteen years at Elgin State Hospital undergoing treatments and electroshock therapy for schizophrenia. He continued to make art while institutionalized.

After leaving the hospital, unable to take a job, Steffen went to live with his sister, Rita, in their childhood home. Steffen spent most of his time drawing, mainly on brown wrapping paper, with graphite and colored-pencils, often finishing between one and three pieces a day. His drawings derive mostly from memory, as well as, from within his limited sphere of existence (when not drawing, Steffen spent his time pacing the house while smoking or drinking). His personal, more quotidian subject matter included: the bank teller who would cash his social security checks; neighbors; plants from the yard, etc. Beyond this immediate sphere, Steffen's subject matter extended to the past and the general: his mother, her wheelchair and bed; showgirls from the bar he frequented during his school days; scenes from Elgin; a woman he had loved before his hospitalization; then, female nudes and crucifixions. Steffen experimented with his repeated subject matter; he began to merge the human form with plants, or with tobacco stains, or with the abstract tar splotches he saw on neighborhood sidewalks. His human figures began to merge as well, encompassing both male and female characteristics. In his later years, Steffen wrote notes in the margins of the drawings. His notes varied from thanks to God, to recollections and observations, to the mundane (what he had just eaten, how much he paid for art supplies, etc.).

Steffen's lifestyle and habits changed little after he left Elgin State Hospital. When the family house was sold upon his mother's death in 1994, Steffen moved into a small room in a men's retirement home in northern Chicago. He was prepared to throw away a vast body of drawings, but instead, placed pieces with his nephew, Christopher Preissing, who had shown interest in his work.

Forty years of drawing and smoking had gnarled his body and given his voice a gravelly quality. Before he died, this voice was captured in a recording was made of him reading "Jabberwocky" from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1872), a book both dear and inspirational to him.

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 Collection de L'Art Brut, Lausanne, Switzerland
- 2012 Galerie Christian Berst, Paris
- 2010 *Charles Steffen: Drawing Nudes Is Like Saying A Prayer, Amen*, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, NY
- 2008 *Charles Steffen: Nudes/Portraits/Flowers*, Russell Bowman Art Advisory, Chicago, IL  
Galerie Objet Trouvé, Paris
- 2007 Charles Steffen, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, NY
- 2006 Charles Steffen, Russell Bowman Art Advisory, Chicago, IL

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Drawings II*, Russell Bowman Art Advisory, Chicago, IL  
*Le Mur – Collection d'Antoine de Galbert*, La Maison Rouge, Paris
- 2013 *Gallery Selections*, Russell Bowman Art Advisory, Chicago, IL
- 2012 *Guo Fengyi, Sava Sekulic, Charles Steffen*, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, NY
- 2011 *All Folked Up!*, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, NY  
*A Life in Art: Monika Kinley*, Plymouth Arts Center, Plymouth
- 2010 *NeoIntegrity: Comics Edition*, Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art, New York, NY  
*Chicago! Chicago!*, Russell Bowman Art Advisory, Chicago, IL  
*Castle/Yoakum/Steffen*, Russell Bowman Art Advisory, Chicago, IL
- 2009 *In Through the Out Door*, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York  
*In the No*, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York  
*Masters of Self-Taught Art*, Russell Bowman Art Advisory, Chicago, IL
- 2008 Salon du Dessin Contemporain, Andrew Edlin Gallery, Paris

## ARTICLES

- 2013 Ebony, David, "A Spin Through Swiss Museums," *Art in America*, October 7.  
Frank, Priscilla, "Mental Patient's Hybrid Drawings Will Haunt Your Dreams," *Huffington Post*, August 6.  
Tischler, Victoria, "Welcome to Chas's World," *Raw Vision* #79.
- 2010 Brody, David, "Review," *artcritical.com*, February 24.  
"Review," *New Yorker*, February 15 & 22 (p. 32).  
Johnson, Ken, "Art in Review," *New York Times*, January 29.
- 2008 Bonesteel, Michael, "Alligator People, One-Eyed Nudes and the Creation of Cartoon Brut," *Raw Vision*, Spring.
- 2007 Stillman, Nick, *Artforum*, Summer.

# Andrew Edlin GALLERY

Glueck, Grace, "Art in Review," *New York Times*, January 26.

2006 McKinnon, John, "Charles Steffen," *Time Out Chicago*.

## **PUBLIC COLLECTIONS**

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA  
Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne, Switzerland  
Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI  
Intuit, Chicago, IL