

Clifford Charles

06 April – 14 May 2005 at
TheSpace@inIVA

This is the first UK solo exhibition of Johannesburg-based artist Clifford Charles. Charles's evocative ink drawings, titled *Paintings on Water*, chart new visual and physical spaces in post-apartheid South Africa bearing witness to the slippage, multiple layers and forgetfulness in the lived experience of post-colonial Africa.

The Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA) is a contemporary arts organisation promoting artists from diverse cultural backgrounds through exhibitions, publications, research and educational ventures. inIVA has a special interest in new technologies, international collaborations and commissioning site-specific artworks.

Wednesday-Saturday, 12-6pm
Admission free

For further information, please contact:

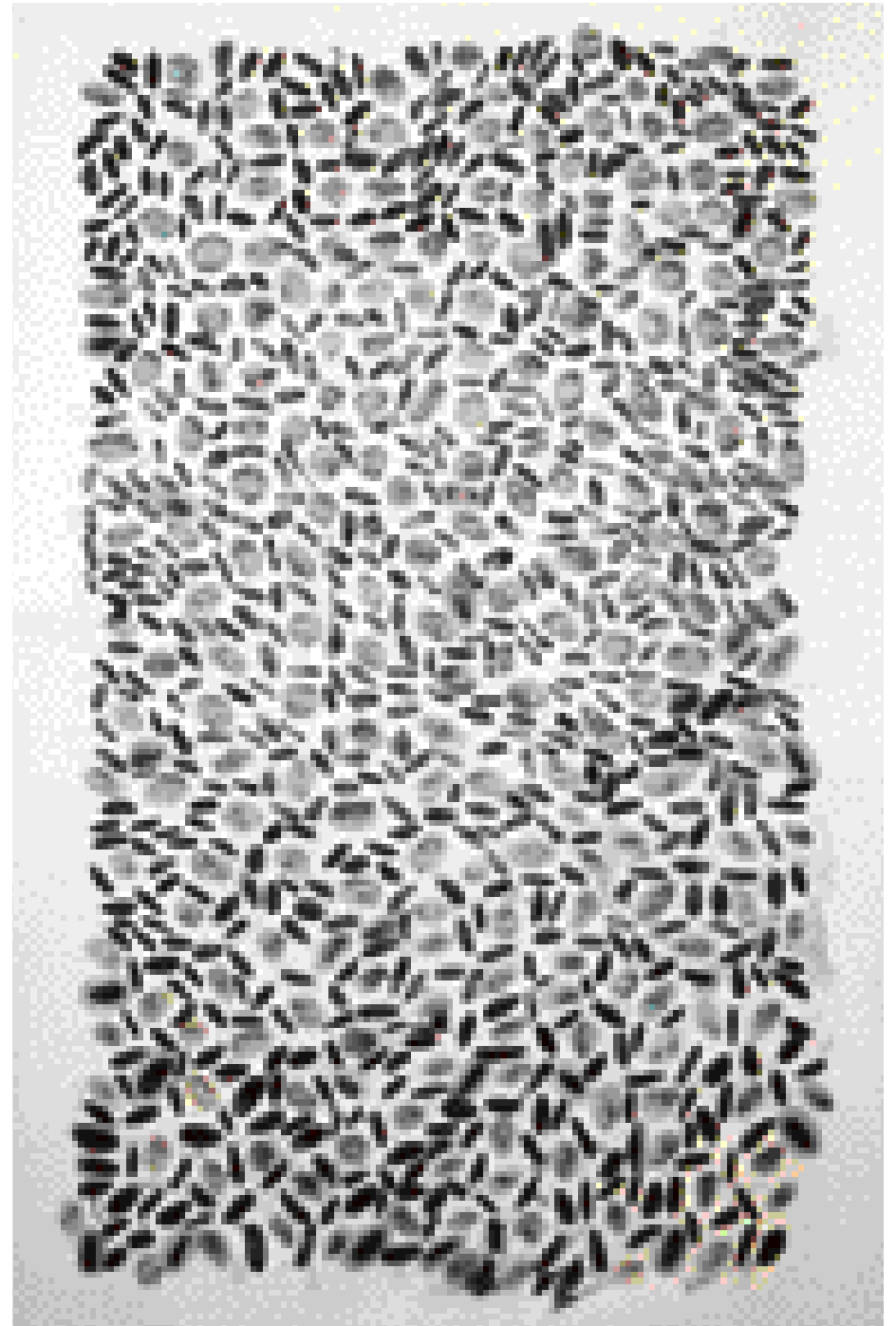
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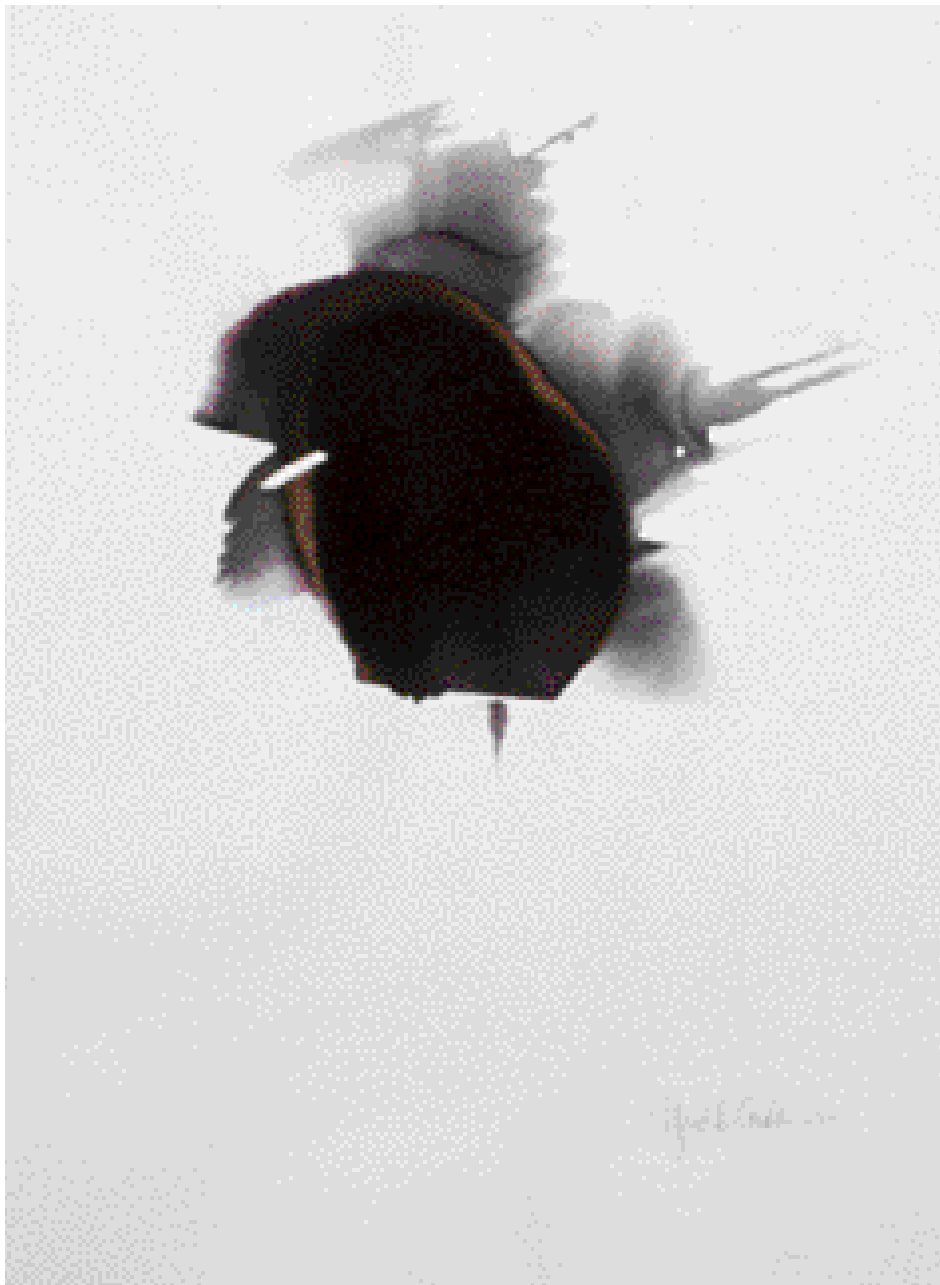
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Right: Clifford Charles, *Lackadaisical*,
Painting on Water series, ink on paper, 2002-3



Above: Clifford Charles, *Ignite, Haiku series*,
ink on paper, 2001
Far left: Clifford Charles, *Rhythm and Blues*,
ink on paper, 2001

**Clifford Charles
Selected Biography**

Born in 1965, South Africa.
Lives and works in
Johannesburg, South Africa.

Education

1983-1987
BA Fine Arts, University of
Witwatersrand (First ever
black Fine Arts graduate)
South Africa.

Awards and Honours

1993
Thami Mnyele Foundation
Scholarship to work and
exhibit in Amsterdam, 1989.
USA International Visitor
Program.

Projects

2001
Magnet in London.

1999
Katlehong Arts Festival,
Artistic Director.

1994
Visual Arts Coordinator
of South Africa's first
Children's Museum.

1989
FUBA Gallery Curator.

1986
Visual Arts Co-ordinator
at Afrika Cultural Centre.

Residencies

2000
October, Forqualquier,
France.

Exhibitions

2001
Group Exhibition hosted
by Crosspaths Culture.
Exhibitions and Workshops
hosted by RENAPAS
(Rencontre Nationale
avec le peuple de l'Afrique
du Sud in France).

Forqualquier, France.
Alliance Francais,
Johannesburg.
Millennium Gallery,
Johannesburg.

1995
B(//)ack in Town, exhibition
sponsored by the
French Institute.

Exhibition with Samson
Mnisi and Reggie Letsatsi,
Johannesburg Art
Foundation.

Nothing to Declare,
group exhibition.
50 Stories, exhibition, Carlton
Centre, Johannesburg.

1993
Exhibition at Elburg Gallery
and Artists Union.

1987
Exhibition at Afrika
Cultural Centre.

1986
Exhibition at Gertrude Posel
Gallery Student Show.

1984
Shell Gallery Student Show.

Media

2001
Interview, *Africultures*,
No.40.

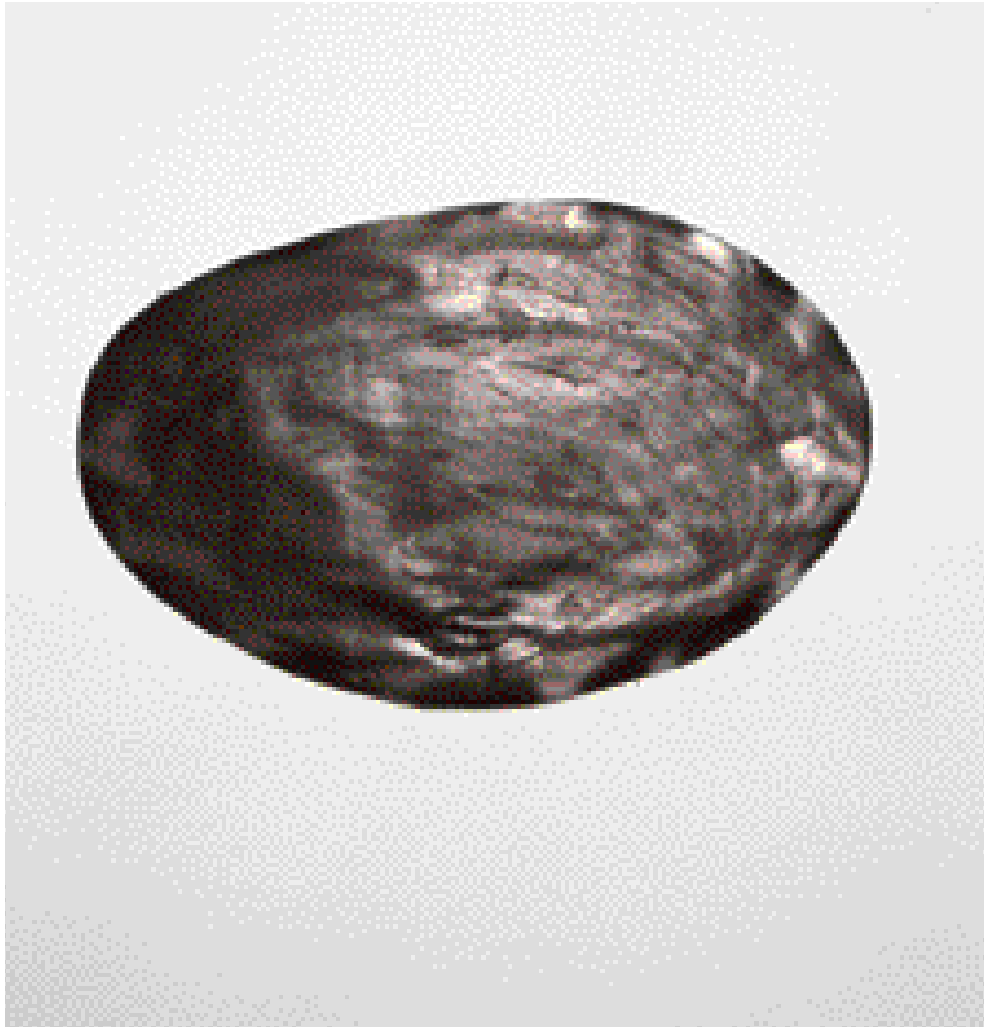
2000
Eastern Mosaic, South
African Broadcasting
Commission Programme.
Lecume des Villes, film
by Jacques Goldstein.
Interview, *Radio Zinzine*,
Forqualquier, France.

1998
L'Autre Afrique,
No.72, December.



Clifford Charles and the Pleasures of Contemplative Insurgency

Bheki Peterson



Above: Clifford Charles, *Quietude*, *Painting on water series*, ink on paper, 2002-03

The work of Clifford Charles does not present itself as surface beauty, simply there to be viewed, grasped and just as quickly forgotten or mounted as décor. Nor does it pander to the well-intentioned, but ultimately fickle and prescriptive, notions of what the thematic and aesthetic prerogatives of black artists in South Africa should be. Always against the grain of convention and expectation, the paintings of Charles possess a startling energy that invigorates them in a manner that constantly teases the viewer into new, and hopefully, fuller ways of perception.

Since the late 1980s, the work of Charles has retained a strong sense of continuity and a preoccupation with a number of aesthetic and thematic questions and challenges. Firstly, there is the journey motif. Charles is obsessively preoccupied with matters of form, always striving to interrogate and refine his own command of craft. The impulse towards journeying results from Charles's integrity and lifelong pursuit of a textured artistic vision that will enable him to chart the trials and tribulations of life on the southernmost tip of Africa. These quests impinge on each other in complex ways, such as when the politics are as much in the formal methods and processes followed as in the ideas evoked. The incisions on to the paper, which are then layered with ink upon ink, resonate beyond the imperatives of the technique used. I say this because incisions upon the body, as it was literally scarred, tortured and reconfigured under the violence of apartheid, were a powerful focus of a series of oil paintings Charles produced in the 1980s under the composite title of *Metamorphosis*. Moving between the body and the landscape, Charles explored and drew our attention to the landscape and its markings, scratches and representations imbued with memories that contested and recast the distortions of colonial narratives.

The second motif that is prevalent is that of memory. Very much aware of the ambiguities and complexities of memory work, Charles has sought to do more than merely

bear witness. He is drawn towards the fissures in the grand narratives of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. It is the fragments that he finds compelling in his reflections on and representations of the paradoxes and contradictions of South Africa's past, present and future. His *Carrier Bag* series (1989) examined the ways in which the lives of black people were packaged and commodified by racial capitalism and, in response, the manners in which black people internalised or resisted the identities forced upon them. *Masks* (early 1990s) teased with its colourful recreations of African masks that, despite their beauty, called upon the viewer to look beyond the stereotypes and clichés associated with African masks and see instead the insurgent carnivalesque and spiritual energy that is staring back. In the *Healing* series (1996), the fascination was on the significance of materials such as cloth, mud and ink, on how – almost as instruments of ritual associated with *sangomas* (traditional healers) – they come into play in resolving the tensions between the sacred and the profane; in the beautification and preservation of space and place; in the representation of experience; and in negotiating dreams for the future. *Mapping* (1997) tried to strengthen the connections, casting the artist as an archaeologist of sorts, retrieving and reconstructing lost 'topographies' of self from as far back as the rock paintings of the San to the contemporary pursuit of resistance and redemption.

Although Charles's practice is deeply inscribed with historical specificity, it also stubbornly refuses to be reduced to, solely defined by, or, more correctly, confined to the exigencies of time and place. It demands that it be approached and assessed within its own terms, which it fortunately also eloquently suggests to the attentive viewer. Charles had the following to say about the ink paintings:

Finishing new work is a pausing moment – a punctuation, a realisation or maybe the last step where effort ceases. It

becomes for me both a culmination of experience and a dilution of conformity. An uninhabited space of not being yet being, a contradictory and ironical motive, since the action of painting becomes an act of nothingness. Unbundled by the known. An active meditation and contemplation. Attempting not to defy or define – just being. Trying to move to a thoughtless moment of listening to oneself till one exhausts words. Working with water as the basic medium throws further challenges since its nature is liquid, uncontained, fluid, and transparent – is nothing yet everything.

The ink paintings represent a turning point in the creative mission of Charles. Fundamentally, they are a provocatively ingenious response to South Africa's 'altered states', that is, the changes that have taken place in the areas of, especially, governance and consciousness. It is no surprise that almost ten years after the first democratic elections in South Africa, the artistic pulse behind the ink paintings feels as if it is overwhelmed by the need for introspection and meditation. As if trying to flee from the disillusionment and cynicism that many artists and activists bear towards what they see as present-day South Africa's colluding with the individualistic and consumptionist agendas of globalisation, the ink paintings appear to yearn towards a hesitant neo-primitivism and mystical symbolism. Charles elicits the allure and perils of minimalism in these paintings – exciting the imagination by avoiding the naturalistic and figurative as well as all the seductive images of mass culture that currently overwhelm us. Also, the large scale of some of the paintings and Charles's use of colours – in their starkness and contrasts – evokes a mythical and ironic sense of beauty.

Contemplation in Charles's hands is a dimension of the journey and memory motifs. It signals a desire to reclaim the self on personal, creative and social levels. Again, the creative

impulse encompasses the modes of ritual that Charles's work often revisits with all the attendant ambiguities. For instance, in some of the ink paintings, the incisions that are cut into the paper can be deflected away from the violence of and associations with repression. Instead they can be viewed from within the ambit of the making of African identities; circumcision and bodily markings as markers of rites of passage are two obvious examples. The scarified paper is then steeped with watercolours, allowing the different contours to suck in the colours in the drying process, often in an uneven manner. The other ink paintings are, often, the result of deep meditation and focus where Charles's creative and living experiences are called upon and released in a single, quick gesture of ink upon the canvas. Again, the cracks that appear in the ink as it dries stir up feelings of earthiness, of landscapes that are dry in many senses of the term.

Although there is clearly an element of a self-conscious, structured use of technique in the ink paintings, once initiated, Charles calls upon considerable spontaneity and improvisation as he responds to the energies of the material used and tries to put them into the service of his thematic intentions. The end result is that the viewer is sensitised about the material and techniques used, allowing for a more critical appreciation of the different elements and dimensions that have gone into the work. In short, the ink paintings are imbedded in the tussle with form as much as they continue to explore the journey and memory motifs.

For all their evocations of palaeontology, of San rock paintings, of ritual, Charles's ink paintings also speak to contemporary influences and issues. As far as their dialogue with contemporary black South African art is concerned, they nod to the oblique influence of, in particular, the works of two contemporary masters: Ernest Mancoba and Thami Mnyele. Thematically, the ink paintings are another, necessary archival project – one of many such interventions that are currently

underway in South Africa.

The ink paintings are a thoughtful and humorous displacement of whiteness with the intricacies of blackness. In their minimalism and dense imagery, they restate the premise that black existence, thought, spirituality and artistry is as complex as any other and can be expressed in as many forms and styles as any other. The thick and seemingly impenetrable shapes of black against white tease the eye to come forward and see if there is, indeed, anything else beyond the 'dark abyss'. In this sense, they recall the black blocks that apartheid censors used to hide faces and material that was considered subversive. Of course, the blocks (like a veil) intrigued and tantalised the imagination and desire as much as they concealed. Let us also not forget the sardonic humour of apartheid that euphemistically described areas populated by black people, outside of the homeland reserves, as 'black spots' that needed to be removed from white South Africa.

Once I was captivated by their black shapes, the ink paintings elicited an emotive response. I was drawn in by their evocation of the warmth of the colour black, the tenderness of the night, and of the infinite pleasures of blackness. The ink paintings, consistent with Charles's oeuvre, retrieve marginal memories and animate them under new contexts as part of the larger project of displacing whiteness and inscribing the complexities of the African heritage and experience as the basis for a redemptive future.