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## **Charles McGee: Artistic Electricity at 85**

by Rebecca Kavanagh

Charles McGee was at first reluctant to stage a retrospective of his life's work. He is a man who looks forward, not back. When asked which of the 66 paintings, assemblages and sculptures to be displayed this fall on the EMU campus is his favorite, he says, "None of them."

It's not that McGee is unhappy with his past efforts. He says instead, "My favorite piece is always the next thing."

Indeed, the artist seems to top himself at every turn. Over the past six decades, he has created artwork on display in private and public collections across the globe, including those within the permanent installations at the Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit's Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History and on the focal-point wall of the Detroit People Mover's Broadway Station. So distinguished has been his career that McGee was presented with the inaugural Detroit Eminent Artist Award last year by the Kresge Foundation—an honor that came with a \$50,000 prize.

"Charles McGee exemplifies what it means to be eminent and what it means to be a Detroiter," says Rip Rapson, president of the Kresge Foundation. "He is an artist of international renown who in his life and his work is energetic, passionate, always probing and eager to reinvent."

To his very core, McGee is a student: His Detroit studio is his schoolhouse, his brushes are his books. Even when he was being paid to teach as a member of EMU's painting faculty for 18 years, McGee says he was the one getting an education.

"I didn't go to Eastern with the idea that I was the professor," says McGee. "I went in with my mind open. I learned so much from my students that I should have paid them a salary."

This receptiveness to new ideas is evident in McGee's work, says EMU art history professor Dr. Julia R. Myers, curator of *Energy: Charles McGee at Eighty-Five*. "One of the most interesting aspects of his career is that Charles has not succumbed to the pressure put upon artists to adhere to one signature style," Myers says.

McGee's technique has spanned from early works in the 1950s and '60s that feature images of African-American life to the abstract during the 1970s to what's come to be known as his mature style from the 1980s on—a return to the figure with paintings, collages and soaring sculptures that explore themes of equality and interconnectedness.

Says Myers, "Through it all, you can see that he has constantly educated himself, always asking, 'What's new in art? What can I learn? How can I make myself better?'"

### **Mandated by Nature**

At an age when most people are well into retirement, McGee goes to his studio daily, takes an active role in the Detroit community, and teaches one day a week at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center in metro Detroit.

"When you give your life to something over a period of time, it's no longer work," McGee says. "It's a labor of love."

McGee believes he has been mandated by nature to do what he does: "Where nature may have given you the ability to run fast, nature has endowed me with the ability to observe and to create art. I have no choice. I breathe it, I sleep it."

When asked about his transition through the decades from realistic charcoal drawings to avant-garde paintings to neon light sculptures to mixed-media collages, McGee says he has been blessed to have been able to open himself up to new possibilities. "I've given myself over to the idea that life will continue to show me new ways of doing things," he says. "My work metamorphosizes because I never stop reaching."

This was true, too, of 10-year-old Charles McGee, who arrived in Detroit from his grandparents' South Carolina sharecropper farm having never owned a pair of shoes, unable to read or write. It didn't take long for his teachers to single McGee out for his discernible talent, which he developed while creating posters for school events and through classes at the local library.

His formal studies were put on hold through his teen and young adult years while he went to work and later joined the U.S. Marines. But even when sandblasting carburetors or surveying the horror of Nagasaki, Japan, one month after it had been decimated by the U.S. nuclear bomb, McGee was receptive to whatever lessons presented themselves.

Upon returning home, he worked in an assembly plant and as a draftsman for the government, but spent nights and weekends at the Society of Arts and Crafts (now the College for Creative Studies), where he attended classes for 10 years.

By the time McGee was 43 years old in 1967, he had become successful enough to quit his day job and make a living doing what he loved. He traveled to Europe for a year of training in Barcelona, Spain, before returning for good to his beloved Detroit.

There, he embraced the city and its art scene. In 1969, he was asked to create a showcase called *Seven Black Artists*. This pivotal event opened several doors to McGee, who then:

- Established Gallery 7, a collective that provided much-needed exposure for black artists in the early 1970s.
- Started the Charles McGee School of Art, through which gallery artists volunteered their time to teach classes to all ages.
- Was invited by EMU to serve as an artist in residence, gaining tenure a decade later and finally retiring from full-time teaching in 1987.

“Charles was a great benefit to Eastern during his nearly 20 years here,” says exhibit curator Myers. “His connections to the Detroit art scene were beyond compare, and he was extremely devoted to the learning process.”

That devotion is what finally compelled McGee to green-light the forthcoming exhibition. “This show is for the students,” he says, “so they can see the possibilities.”

Art appreciation, says McGee, is not about emotional edification. “The important thing is to discern and understand what constructs a work of art: line, shape, color, value, texture, content. Then we can sit down and have a conversation about order in our lives.”

## **Ongoing Connections**

From its very inception, the McGee exhibition has been focused on education. For three years, Myers has involved students in the research of McGee’s life — which included locating more than 250 works of art, most of them in private collections. “When students do something like this that has a real-world outcome, it makes their studies more meaningful,” says Myers.

One such student was Michelle Hartung (BA06, MS08), whose undergraduate degree is in art history and who served as a graduate assistant in the art department for two years. “Students of art can absorb so much from Charles because he has so much to give,” Hartung says. “He is always teaching, always making sure people are learning through every experience.”

A key part of the exhibition's scope is its outreach to local children. Tour materials — including hands-on activities — have been developed by visual arts education students led by Dr. Elizabeth Ament. "We chose the theme 'Interconnection' to help students relate to McGee's art," Ament says. "We think they'll be fascinated by the fact that, no matter where he's been in his life, Charles McGee has forged a strong connection to his community."

It seems a fitting lesson plan about the patriarch of Detroit's art scene, a man in his ninth decade who says he is enamored of life. "When I die, I will leave here not having scratched the surface of what there is to know," McGee says. "It makes every breath precious."