The Ecstasy of Catastrophe: Collages of Charles Marsh, 1987 - 2000

By Gayle Rodda Kurtz

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In 1987 Charles Marsh volunteered at The New Museum of Contemporary Art in its old location on Broadway in Soho. He was searching for a way to reconnect with people involved in the art community after an absence of almost twenty years. It was during this period that he returned to making art and, when asked what he did, he said that he was an artist. In order to support himself, he worked part-time—first as an art handler and then as a sales clerk in the shop of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and then the bookstore at the International Center of Photography.

Marsh spent his early years in Greenville, South Carolina, where he was born in 1944. His parents divorced after World War II and his mother remarried. Because of abuse by the stepfather, his maternal grandparents took custody of him. The only happy memories he carried from his childhood were those of the time he lived with his grandparents. He remembered with fondness that his grandmother taught him to read and encouraged his artistic abilities. When his mother remarried again and settled in New York City, he joined her and, subsequently, was sent to a military boarding school on Long Island. The sense of abandonment he felt as a child was now a constant. After high school he left home and moved to San Francisco and reinvented himself as "Anton" to distance himself from his lonely and traumatic early years. Later in the 90s, when asked about his history from the late 60s to the late 80s, he said that his friends could make it up. He did not want to be limited and boxed in by the common stereotypes of the artist as loner, depressive, addictive, profligate. . . . There was no upside for him to dwell on the past, a past that had brought him to the brink when he turned to art as a last resort and a reason to survive. He spent the next thirteen years of his life on a journey through art as an act of redemption—to make sense of it all and to find meaning in the process of making art. Much of his work is dominated by images of transcendence—wings appear on many figures and even skulls. In fact, art transformed him and gave purpose to his life beyond his personal sufferings. His work is biographical only in the sense that it addresses the conditions of what it is like to live during a particular time and place, a time and place we share.

His distinctive collages and assemblages of often dissonant material reflect his association and attraction to the people he was drawn to in San Francisco in the mid-60s when he was part of a group that circulated around artists like Bruce Conner and George Herms. Other sources of inspiration were the exquisite collage works of Max Ernst and Joseph Cornell. Marsh made a pilgrimage to Cornell's small wood-framed house where he had lived with his mother on Utopia Parkway in Queens. He photographed it with color film, which he then had custom developed in black and white for the evocative sepia-like warm color of age—a process he used often with his photographs.

Marsh was disciplined and methodical in the way in which he pursued his work. He made regular trips to the flea markets in the old flower district of New York City. His fascination and familiarity with these markets was an extension of his activities during the late 60s and early 70s when he lived in London and ran an antique shop that specialized in Art Deco. In New York, he collected everything—books, photographs and posters, doll parts, broken fixtures, artificial flowers, cigar bands, frames, old machine parts and photographic equipment, spools of silk thread, outdated light bulbs, test tubes, feathers, and more. In his studio, he spent hours cutting out images and fragments of images from the various printed material collected and kept these in labeled boxes for later use. He felt a kinship with the different buyers and sellers at the flea markets and was comfortable in their company. They shared an obsessive attraction to the abandoned bits and pieces and broken ruins retrieved from anonymous people's lives. His use of this material in his art was not a project of reclamation but transformation. He searched through the detritus of the most common ordinary objects and reworked them into an exquisite mélange that addresses the struggle and often pain of existence through a rich visual excess of beauty. Like the alchemist or trickster of mythology, Marsh lived on the boundaries of society and recognized, from his own experience, that identity is fluid.[1] He was able to slip in and out of different social milieus without revealing himself. A passage by Yang Jiang from *Chinese Rebel Voices* evokes the way he experienced life around him:

> . . . you don't need supernatural powers to do things that are not allowed in this world . . .You can find the cloak of invisibility wherever you are. . . . a cloak from a humble, insignificant weave. . .Dressed in this cloak of invisibility, you can achieve things nobody can ever take away. . . . The real world is often stranger than fiction, so strange that it leaves us shocked and astounded. . . . Only the humble person has the opportunity of observing the reality behind the ways of the world, as opposed to the spectacle of art performed for an audience.[2]

The idea of a cloak of invisibility also invokes the concept of a mask—an image that often appears in Marsh's work. The mask was of particular interest to the Surrealists—artists that he studied and identified with. He was a voracious reader with an uncanny memory for images. In 1987 he systematically set out to educate himself about subjects that impacted on his life and work. He marked significant ideas in the margins of books while he read and when finished, he went back and transcribed the most compelling passages, sometimes word-for-word, in notebooks that he maintained for the next ten years. Most of his reading was concentrated in philosophy, psychoanalysis, art historical and critical theory, and in particular the art of the Surrealists and their obsession with the unconscious and the repression of desire and trauma. Of particular interest to him were the contradictory psychoanalytic meanings of the mask for Surrealists. Like the cloak of invincibility, the mask can provide a screen of protection against the gaze of others—the mask can be manipulated, played with, to control this site of mediation.[3] In the past, the prevalence of the death mask to preserve the departed one's likeness prior to photography also inextricably links the mask to death. Marsh recorded the ideas of Jacques Derrida on this subject in his notes:

> . . . values of the mask. *First*, dissimulation: the mask dissimulates everything *save* . . . the naked eyes, the only part of the face at once seeable, therefore, and seeing, the only sign of living nakedness that one believes to be shielded or exempt from . . . old age and ruin. *Next*, death: every mask announces the mortuary mask, always taking part in both sculpture and drawing.[4]

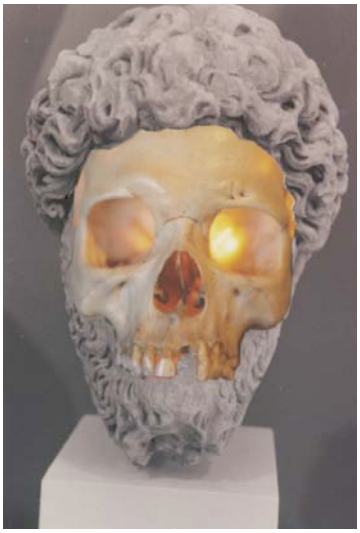

Fig.1. Skull over Classic Bust, c. 1990, photo collage, 4 x 6 inches

Marsh confronted death by placing images of human and animal skeletons along with their skulls—the iconic image of death for Western art—at the center of his work. The skull becomes another form of the mask. In a sketch-like collage, he cut out a skull and placed it on the photographed face of a classical bust (Fig. 1). And in a reversal of the traditional Dutch still-lifes, which display signs of death on the periphery, Marsh used the skull as the central object for one of his photographed still-lifes. He decorated the skull with fresh white and pink luscious peonies and digitalis (Fig. 2). Inside the skull and surrounding it, he assembled a string of lit Christmas lights. Depending upon one's point of view the aura of the lights and the beauty of the flowers might appear sacrilegious or recall the celebratory aspect of death closer to the Mexican tradition of The Day of the Dead than the Western sober, moral reminders evoked in the *nature morte*.

Fig. 2. *Skull with Flowers*, c.1990, paper collage and mixed media, 14 x 12 2 ¾ inches

Fig. 3. *In Whole or Part the Endeavor Requires*, c. 1990, paper collage and mixed media 23 x 30 ¾ x 3 inches

In a work with two separate images—one depicts Marsh's own photographed naked body before a mirror with a collaged warrior-like mask (Fig. 3). His prose under the image is about the potentially destructive and dark side of masks produced by present-day media culture that thrives on the advertising and promotion of multiple, changing designer/celebrity roles:

> The ill-used body exists in a culture which promulgates
> a variety of masks as a prerequisite to existence . . .
> These masks so confuse the personality, perception is left distorted.
> A body imagines the sun shines out of his ass and not on his head,
> Incarcerating a life in
>
> Illumination/Illusion [5]

The other collaged image is of a hand extended over a field of candles as if participating in a sacred ritual. Above float antique electric light bulbs and an eye surveying the scene.

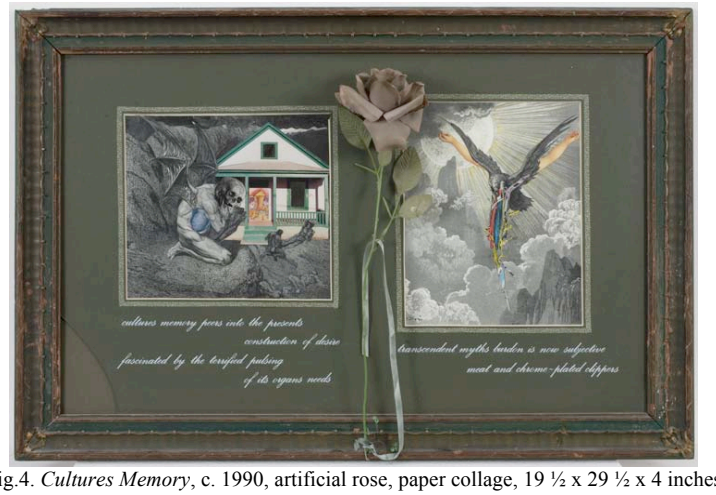

Fig.4. *Cultures Memory*, c. 1990, artificial rose, paper collage, 19 ½ x 29 ½ x 4 inches

The image of the "ill-used body" and its parts is dominant in Marsh's work. The body and its interior organs are a metaphor for the interiority of subjectivity and the physicality of human existence with the drives of fear and desire suppressed or manipulated by commodity culture. This

confrontation with the unseen organs of our insides, exposes that which is closest to us but untouched, unknown, feared, and acknowledged the least. On another work with double collaged images, he depicted the bat-winged figure of a skinned body with skull-like head crouched in terror over a scene of lovemaking before a small wood-framed house, the windows darkened but the door opened to reveal colored bodily organs (Fig. 4). His words are beneath the images:

> culture's memory peers into the present's
> Construction of desire
> fascinated by the terrified pulsing
> Of its organs' needs.
> transcendent myths' burden is now subjective
> meat and chrome-plated clippers.[6]

The second image is a fabricated figure with the body of manicure clippers, human arms out-stretched above with the wings and body of a bird soaring toward the sun. Attached to the frame is an artificial black rose tied with a delicate ribbon. "Culture's memory" constitutes us as a collective with knowledge of the past now confronted with the way in which the commercial culture deals with desire. As physical beings we are obsessed and terrified by our physical needs. Terrified because so much of what circulates around us through the media is about the denial of the profound implications of desire. This culture of illusion rejects myths, mystery, the unknown, transcendence even through sexuality, and experiences of value beyond the materiality of the surface—where life exists for those we are meant to worship—the famous and celebrated figures that saturate every aspect of mass media. We are objects (meat) to be rearranged and groomed.

Fig. 5. *Two Female Mannequins*, c. 1990, paper collage, ink, feathers 14 ¾ x 18 ¾ x ¾ inches

Fashion and its promotion is the subject of another work with the collaged heads of *Two Female Mannequins*, that are adorned with elaborate decorative accessories (Fig. 5). His writing encircles them around the frame:

> des____prohibition, the law that bodies cannot____have sought to avoid suffering
> and small sufferings . . . eroticizing the machine will be essential for the
> coexistence of man and machine in the future . . . first duty of____to become
> artificial. where the lines of power____drawn . . . bodily decoration becomes . . .
> a site of freedom or restriction, the hint of catastrophe which makes sex bearable

in the age of the death of seduction . . . the ecstasy of catastrophe.[7]

Their heads, one a profile the other a three-quarter view, are draped in flowing cloth and embellished with fantastic headdresses of flowers and feathers. Their faces are made-up with machine-like perfection—red lips, alabaster-smooth skin, and noses pierced with precision-made rings. These lures of attraction almost distract from the vacant stare toward the viewer of the one eye that obliquely looks in our direction. The futile and vain attempt to achieve the fashionable ideal of perfection is disrupted by the fragmented, broken, and indeterminate phrases of his prose.

Fig. 6. *Classical Ruin (Temple),* c. 1990, paper collage and mixed media, 9 ½ x 12 x ¾ inches

With awareness that his health was fragile, Marsh was intent on traveling as much as he could afford. In 1993, he made his first trip to Greece and returned again in 1996 and 1998. During these years he also traveled to Amsterdam, Barcelona, Paris, Turkey, Crete, and Italy. The many photographs he took became more material for his art. He obsessively worked on them by cutting, pasting, coloring, combining multiple views. He transformed what began as the usual tourist photo into a singular, transcendent moment (Fig. 6). Ancient ruins appealed to him more than other more famous and popular sights. Like the imperfect and discarded objects at flea markets, ancient ruins contain traces of the past with their history written in the damages left un-restored. He was drawn to the ruins of the ancient world, particularly in remote places that had escaped the withering forces of restoration. He exalted in a momentary sublime connection with life of the past in the presence of dramatic untouched ruins marked by the signs of monumental effort of human purpose and subsequent signs of nature's relentless effect of continual change and ominous decay.[8]

Marsh searched for the broken and damaged objects like hunting for hidden treasure—objects that he could rework to reveal a different kind of visual beauty. He only framed his collages in used old frames that he acquired at flea markets or retrieved from discarded piles of garbage off the streets. Some of the frames he used as he found them. If he altered a frame, he never restored it. Rather he enhanced its age by adding fragments of gold leaf, or pieces of soft metal sheets, color, brass studs, wires, beads, and threads for hanging other bits and pieces—materials that created a plenitude of references beyond the border of the damaged and worn skeleton of a structure. By manipulating the frame with additional objects and transgressing its limits and original function, he resisted the concept of the frame as a metaphor for the rigid enclosure for dominant ideological constructions that operate to exclude those who do not adhere to the prevalent values of accepted traditions.[9]

Marsh recorded numerous passages from his readings of possible definitions and meanings of art, the artist and, in particular, what might the purpose of art be in a postmodern advanced capitalist culture. He was reluctant to promote or sell his own work and conflicted over exposing it to the market system that would establish a monetary value for what he was doing and convert it to a commodity. At the same time, he was aware of the impossibility of the position of the isolated artist as evidenced by his recorded quotation of Lewis Hyde from *Trickster*: "There is great freedom to working in secret, but it is powerless freedom if the enclosure never breaks."[10] For Marsh the making of art was the one constant thread—the connective tissue—in his life that gave him purpose and stability. A passage that he copied from Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* illuminates what for him was a conundrum—how could one be part of a system but still be able to critique it:

Allergic to any relapse into magic, art is part and parcel of the process of the disenchantment of the world . . . It is inextricably intertwined with rationalization. What means and productive methods art has at its disposal are all derived from this nexus.[11]

From a book that synthesizes the key ideas of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, he recorded:

> One important difference between Freud and Lacan is this: while Freud elevated the artist to a sacrificial position, one whose repressed neuroses provide others with cathartic release, Lacan argued the opposite. Artistic productions are not in and of themselves pathological or neurotic. The purpose of art is not to permit repression, but to pose a question that the artist . . . has not answered or resolved.[12]

Marsh posed questions in his work by exposing the many ambiguities he found amidst the dogma of dominant ideology. The words he rewrote of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari possibly come closest to his own emotional response to the relationship between the artist and art:

> But books of philosophy and works of art also contain their sum of unimaginable sufferings that forewarn of the advent of a people. They have a resistance in common—their resistance to death, to servitude, to the intolerable, to shame, and to the present.[13]

And this quote that he starred from the same book reflects his own experience:

> . . . artists are like philosophers. What little health they possess is often too fragile, not because of their illnesses or neuroses but because they have seen something in life that is too much for anyone, too much for themselves, and that has put on them the quiet mark of death. But this something in life is also the source or breath that supports them through the illnesses of the lived (what Nietzsche called health).
> "Perhaps one day we will know that there wasn't any art but only medicine."[14]

He had his own irreverent thoughts about art: "Life is a shit storm and art is the only worthwhile umbrella."[15] He was interested in the seemingly insurmountable ability of the artist's work to enter a field of effective criticality.

> In art now any so-called political content allows for a privileging of intention. Art is always in some degree about a hierarchy of intent. An artist statement often

> now functions as a testimonial—I'm gay, black, female—with other aspects—in jail, sick, insane—located as outside what's acceptable as protestable [sic]. When the politics of form is dismissed, one may be thrown back on personal statements, on a political expressionism.[16]

Fig. 7. *Untitled (Screw),* c. 1990, string paper collage, 18 ¾ x 23 1/8 inches, Private Collection.

Marsh found this political expressionism as "protest" or "activist" art as problematic for being separated from the "aesthetic" by the system that controls contemporary art. For him, these two facets of art did not have a productive or integrated relationship to one another and were, thus, not allowed to complicate each other.[17] Protest art was expected to be bold, aggressive, and daring and not seductive to look at to be effective. It was the complication and interaction of the different facets of art that fueled his vision in a work like his collage of an idyllic landscape scene with a beautiful butterfly-winged angel in a boat rowed by a monster toward shore and a house full of those pulsing organs (Fig. 7). The scene is shadowed overhead by a giant menacing screw.

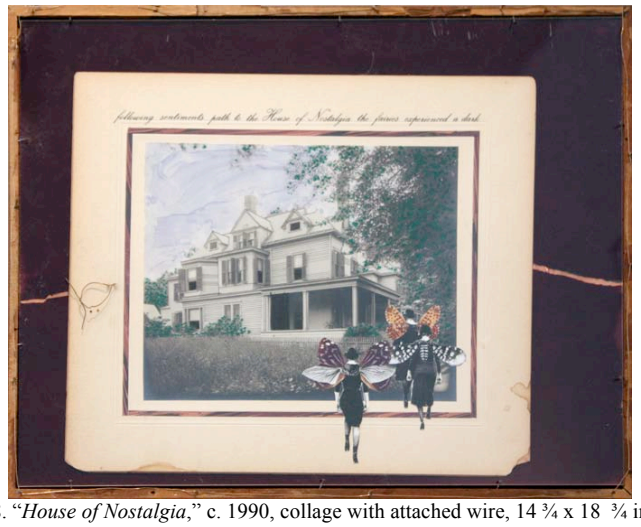

Fig. 8. "*House of Nostalgia*," c. 1990, collage with attached wire, 14 ¾ x 18 ¾ inches

Anamnestic—to recall, a recollection of the past—is a word that Marsh wrote and defined several times in his notes and incorporated into an artwork. He combined the word with another—*between*—defined as: "Between is the middle of before and after."[18] "Through 'between' run anamnestic conduits of hotwire connection."[19] In the gray area of the indefinable, indeterminate

interstices of time and place, he located meaning. Looking at the past with a grasp of the future—a position that is not one of seeking escape in the past or retreat from its sorrows but one of comprehension. He imaged a scene of foreboding and menace in going backwards in search of the mythic past. In a subdued collage of a typical wood-framed American middle-class home in a lushly green bucolic setting that recalls the past of the 1930s—two women dressed in 30s costumes with wings on their shoulders walk toward the house (Fig. 8). On the matte Marsh inscribed in electro-type letters: "following sentiments path to the House of Nostalgia the fairies experienced a dark."[20] On the frame is the hotwire of connection—fine wire has been carefully threaded around tacks to encircle the image.

> Between (the great between, time loss suspension)
> Between is a relation.
> Between is the running red thread.
> Between is the glowing red wire.
> Between are the fragile threads on which run meaning.[21]

End Notes

[1] See Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes this World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and
[2] Yang Jiang, "The Cloak of Invisibility," *New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices*, ed. Geremie Barmé and Linda Jaivin (New York: Random House, Times Books, 1992): 443-447.
[3] See Hal Foster*, Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993): 40 and 70. (Notes of May 1993 February 1994)
[4] Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (The University of Chicago Press, 1993): 72-73. (Notes of January 1995-May 1996)
[5] Charles Marsh from *In whole or part the endeavor requires*, c. 1990. (George Adams Gallery inventory CMard 53) See Pulitzer Prize winning author Chris Hedges' *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (New York: Nation Books, 2009). Hedges' book is a powerful indictment of our current commodity culture that elevates empty images of the famous (including celebrities, politicians, and sports stars) that we are meant to emulate and worship. Many of Charles' artworks could have illustrated this book.
[6] Charles Marsh, from *culture's memory* . . . c. 1995. (George Adams Gallery inventory CMard 65.)
[7] Charles Marsh, from *Two Female Mannequins*, c. 1995 (George Adams Gallery inventory CMard 06.)
[8] Ivan Gaskell, cultural historian and curator at Harvard, gave a talk on *Sublime Damage* at the Collage Art Association's 2009 Conference on February 26. His thesis about the aesthetics of degradation that honors damage and sees it in a new way is, uncannily, reflected in Marsh's work. His talk is available at his website: http://www.ivangaskell.com/IVAN%20GASKELL%20podcast.htm.
[9] Rosalind E. Krauss*, The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993): 16-19. (Notes of May 1993-February 1994)
[10] Hyde, *Trickster*, 309-310. (Notes of December 1997)
[11] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (edition unknown). (Notes of February 1994)
[12] Madan Sarup, *Jacques Lacan* (University of Toronto Press, 1992): 168. (Notes of February 1994)
[13] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy*? (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 110. (Notes of April 1994-December 1994)
[14] Ibid., 172-173. The sentence in quotations is attributed to Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, writer and Nobel laureate, from *HAI* (Paris: Flammarion, 1991): 7.
[15] Notes of April 1994-December 1994.
[16] Notes of May 1993-February 1994.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Charles Marsh, from *Electric Electra*, 1994, drawing with attached vintage light bulb.
[20] Charles Marsh, from *House of Nostagia*, c. 1998. In the image the windows on the second floor are blocked out by black. Marsh reproduced, without knowledge of Disney's Celebration, the houses at this planned community meant to replicate an earlier time. To save money but preserve the look of a two-story house at Celebraton, the second-floor windows are dark and fake. My thanks to Katie Kurtz for making this connection.
[21] Charles Marsh, Notes of May 1993-February 1994.

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Charles Marsh, *Masked Self-portrait*, c. 1990, paper collage on photograph, 9 ½ x 7 ½ x ½ inches