

Charles White

Monumental Practice

January 8–February 16, 2019
537 West 20th Street, New York

Opening reception: Tuesday, January 8, 6–8 PM
Press preview: Tuesday, January 8, 5 PM



Charles White painting *Mary McLeod Bethune*, 1978.
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David Zwirner is pleased to present a significant group of works by American artist Charles White (1918–1979) on the second floor of the gallery's 537 West 20th Street location in New York. On view for the first time since the 1970s will be four monumentally scaled ink and charcoal drawings made by the artist as studies for the figures in his mural *Mary McLeod Bethune*, completed in 1978 for the Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune Regional Library in Exposition Park, Los Angeles, as well as related preparatory works and ephemera documenting the project—White's last major artistic endeavor during his lifetime.

White's prodigious body of work, spanning prints, drawings, paintings, and murals, demonstrates a commitment to African American social causes, combatting racial and economic injustice with depictions of strength and resolve. His detailed, bold images of individuals and their relationships resonate universally, and yet remain grounded by his interest in history and his personal interpretation of truth, beauty, and dignity. As an artist, educator, and political activist, White was an integral part of the intellectual milieu in his hometown of Chicago, and later in New York and Los Angeles. During his time in LA, where he permanently relocated in 1956, White taught at the Otis Art Institute, and mentored and influenced a younger generation of artists, including Kerry James Marshall and David Hammons.

In 1976, White was commissioned by the city of Los Angeles to create a large-scale painting for the Exposition Park library branch as part of a building ordinance that designated 1% of new construction budgets for art. Related to his earlier work in the mural division of the Works Progress Administration in Chicago in the 1940s, the resulting mural, finished one year prior to White's death, can be seen as a culmination of several lifelong themes and still hangs at the library today. The mural pays tribute to an important black educator, civil and women's rights leader, and government official, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune (1875–1955), whom White greatly admired and respected. The commission, White's first mural since his WPA years, brought together his individual interest in teaching, learning, and research, alongside his enduring commitment to collective education and social consciousness.

The four large-scale ink and charcoal compositions at the center of this exhibition are the largest drawings that the artist created and—although they were intended as preparatory works—are exceptional in their level of finish and detail. White conceived of the foursome of multigenerational figures that comprises the mural's composition as a black "family," with the individual figure standing in as a symbolic representation of learning, education, music, or culture. Each is isolated and realized individually in the charcoal studies, in which space is clearly defined to indicate how they fit together in the larger mural, with Bethune—a towering presence wearing flowing robes—at the center.

David Zwirner

Also on view will be several smaller drawn and painted preparatory works, as well as a range of ephemera and archival documentation related to the project. Seen in conjunction with the critically acclaimed retrospective of White's work organized by the Art Institute of Chicago and The Museum of Modern Art, New York, where it is on view through January 13, 2019, after which it will travel to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, this focused examination of White's *Mary McLeod Bethune* mural will provide a fitting coda to his outsized influence and legacy in American art.

In conjunction with *Charles White: Monumental Practice*, the gallery will also present a selection of the artist's paintings and drawings, dating from the 1930s through the 1950s, a significant period for the development of his social realist aesthetic. These works demonstrate White's unwavering commitment to realism and thus underscore the central values of his practice. "To him," as Kellie Jones notes, realism "presented an art language that was understandable worldwide. Above all, the 'communicability' of the representational was key, 'how it reflects the great experience of life and singles out that which is most significant and meaningful to its process'; these are portrayals of the subtle and daily human struggles for peace and freedom."¹

To coincide with these exhibitions, David Zwirner will present an online Viewing Room of prints by Charles White.

For all press inquiries, contact

Julia Lukacher +1 212 727 2070 jlukacher@davidzwirner.com

Ashley Tickle +1 212 727 2070 atickle@davidzwirner.com

To RSVP for the January 8 press preview, contact

Natalie Miller +1 212 727 2070 press@davidzwirner.com

¹ Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 31–32.