



## Charles Bierwirth's *trompe l'oeil* Paintings

After having completed a sojourn across the European continent in 1998, filling his eyes and mind with creative inspiration, artist Charles Bierwirth reflects on his fascinations with sculptured mastery. "There is something about sculpture and relief that is timeless. I want to create a picture that is timeless." The combination of his talents as a painter and his inspiration from classical bas-relief sculpture coalesce into large and masterful murals. Bierwirth is an aficionado and practitioner of *trompe l'oeil*. French for "to fool the eye," *trompe l'oeil* is a classical convention of European painting which artists used to embellish the immense ceiling and wall space of both secular and sacred buildings. The technique involves painting illusions that would fool the eye into thinking that something was real when in actuality it was fabricated. One favorite example of Bierwirth's is the Pitti

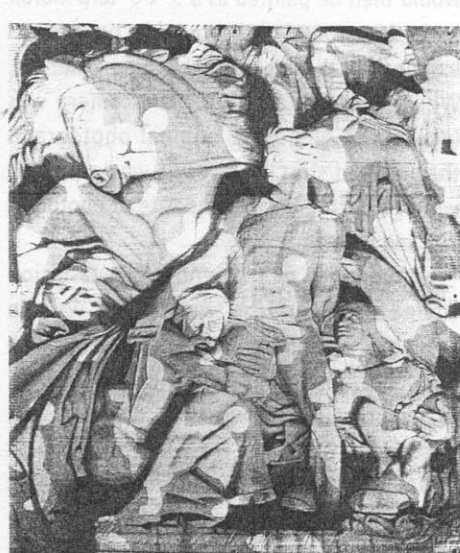
*I don't want to take a lot of time preparing something to then paint on . . . I get something in my mind and I want to do it!*



Charles Bierwirth, *Backdrop #2*, Oil/Tarp, 6' x 8', 1980.

Palace in Florence, Italy. The enormous ceilings are illustrated with high columns shadowed with filtered light, which creates an illusion of heaven-reaching proportions. It was this creative deception of perception that Charles Bierwirth adopted as his style and has been developing over the last twenty-five years as an artist. This recent visit to Europe is the creative impetus for his latest series of murals based on marble reliefs.

Bierwirth's imagination weds with canvas in an unusual marriage. The uniqueness comes from his choice of medium: the Army tarpaulin. Perhaps not the choice of Michelangelo, Bierwirth finds the selection best fits his artistic needs. "I come from a very ad hoc sensibility. I take things that are immediate, and I apply them to the work to resolve the situation that I am working on. Something that's close at hand. I don't want to take a lot of time preparing



Charles Bierwirth, *Champs Elysée*, Oil/Tarp, 5' x 6', 1999.

something to then paint on. . . I get something in my mind and I want to do it! The quickest thing to grab was the tarpaulin." Bierwirth's tarps have been his signature trademark. "I am really in love with [the tarps]. I have been working with them for 25 years. I was at first buying the tarps folded up in plastic bags. I would bring them home and I'd see a seam going down the center, or even off center. I would accept that as a challenge. I'd pull something together incorporating the seam."

It was for an art project at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1979 that Bierwirth was first inspired to use a tarpaulin. He created a series of scenery backdrops for an experimental theater performance. These "backdrops" were literal interpretations of the term: draping canvas tarps portraying realistically painted human and animal backs. While the painting chosen for the performance actually portrayed the back of a Dalmatian, his favorite pieces featured the muscled backs of young men. Bierwirth is an admirer of the human body and continues to utilize the masculine form as a reoccurring artistic theme.

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As Bierwirth became more comfortable working on tarps he began to experiment with them. His next series of murals involved camera work. The artist would first take a photograph of a person or scene. That photo would then be painted as a 5' x 6' tarp-mural. In the foreground of the mural he painted the hand of the picture-taker clutching a camera. Where the view finder of the camera was located, he glued the original photograph that he had shot. The result was a picture within a picture and a composite of photography and paint.

A sequence of tremendous devastation altered his life and his artwork. First was the passing of his mother and a difficult move to Michigan. Things improved with a move back to San Francisco, but in 1995, Bierwirth was destroyed when he was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. "My work started changing; it was getting more expressive. I was looking at the tarp and just taking razor blades and scraping the paint and just getting expressive. [I was] contrasting that with very finely painted photographic fragments. It was a contrast of a really strong, aggressive [image] with a very silent and beautiful, calming image put together." Reflects Bierwirth, "subconsciously I think that is what was going on in my life; this aggressive and emotional stuff happening. Yet, I wanted to maintain some peace and clarity in my life, too."

One work that really bespeaks this alteration in his art style is *Untitled #7*. "That painting is a real gutsy painting for me." The image is a soft, vivid, caramel-colored leather couch against a smoldering gray background. Bierwirth describes his process: "I was at the point where I wanted to push into the image. I actually burned off paint with a torch and scraped it with my fingernails. My knuckles were just raw. It was real physical, bleeding work." The painting juxtaposes a pristine couch against a hazy background and is imbued with meaning. The artist had thrown himself completely into his work. "I got my butt off the couch and got into the painting. There is no one on my couch because I am painting." This seems to be a positive turn in the artist's style. The emotion is



Charles Bierwirth, *David*, Oil/Tarp, 5' x 6', 1989.

still present, but so is a renewed lust for life and living.

When Bierwirth toured Europe to renew his artistic senses, he came face to face with more of his beloved *trompe l'oeil*. In Italy, England, Germany, and France, Bierwirth observed the bas-relief carved upon municipal structures. His love for the immortal images sparked a new idea. When he returned home to San Francisco he began his relief series, the first



Charles Bierwirth, *Untitled #7*, Oil/Tarp, 5' x 6', 1998.

inspired by the carvings on the world famous Arc de Triomphe in Paris. In *Champs Elysée*, Charles Bierwirth captures images of French glory on tarpaulin. New to this series is his addition of stenciled pattern. The observer can catch a glimpse of his ever-present, but often latent, dry wit from the French poodles that overlap the grave image of Napoleon. Bierwirth has dedicated 2000 as the year for his relief art. He has many intriguing pieces already in the works: one bas-relief from the British Museum, one from the Louvre, and another from the Berlin Metropol.

Why has he stuck with the tarp as the preferred medium for all of these varied series? "They are sculptural themselves. Every seam, bulge, grommet, and sag." He enjoys the playfulness of the material and the drama inherent to a tarp. "I always thought they had a theatrical element. They can roll out and unfold like the banners on a carnival freak-show wagon."

Always eye-catching and "eye-fooling," Charles Bierwirth's *trompe l'oeil* paintings, for the most part, have not been exhibited since his illness was diagnosed in 1995. However, Visual Aid plans to feature his works in an exhibition this year. ☺