

MICHAEL HUMFREY

## A Sense of Colour

CHARLIE MCKENZIE WAS IN MY class at school—though it might give a better sense of how things stood if I said that I was in his class. We were both taking Graphic Design at ‘A’ level and occasionally we were told to sketch each other to show what we could do. Somewhere, I still have one of his drawings of me. We must have been looking at Rodin that week, because he labelled it ‘The Thinker.’ I thought it was a pretty fair likeness and I kept it.

Everyone always knew that Charlie was going to excel at whatever he chose to do. It was a view he shared himself in his matter-of-fact way. He was captain of the college football team, played tennis for the county under-19s and his ‘O’ level results had been the best the school had produced in the past six years. He was tall, fair-haired and carried himself like an athlete. I can’t recall any girl who did not think he was wonderful. The rest of us suffered grievously by comparison, and we knew it.

For some inexplicable reason, Charlie liked me. I had inherited my family’s dodgy eyesight and so I was more or less useless on the playing field: at the same time, so it seemed to me, I had always needed to work harder than anyone else in the class just to keep in touch with the rest of them. No one ever thought that I was going to excel at anything when I left school, and they were right. Nevertheless, Charlie liked me and his casual friendship gave me a certain status which I could never have earned for myself.

Charlie was a young man in a hurry. I don’t know what sort of family he came from because I never heard him speak of them. But, like me, I knew that there had not been a lot of money at home—and he once told me, in his matter-of-fact way, that this was the first thing he intended to put right for himself.

He opted to skip his gap year, got a 2:1 from his university and then set about making money. By the time he was twenty-five, he had become one of the most successful young stockbrokers in the City. Everyone could see that he had a gift for it. He understood the marketplace, showed excellent judgement and was brave enough to back it when the market faltered. On his twenty-eighth birthday, he was listed in a Sunday newspaper supplement as one of the ten most promising young men in the Square Mile. And all the time, he kept in touch with me.

I had become a journalist—chiefly, I think, because when I left my own university with a modest degree in the History of Art there didn't seem to be much choice and I knew I wouldn't make a teacher. It was never a well-paid job but I have stuck to it and, looking back, I think I probably did the right thing. Eventually I became Arts Correspondent for my paper in the Midlands.

Charlie spent six years in the City and then made use of what he had learnt to set out on an even more prosperous career: he began to buy up small, failing manufacturing companies. He injected them with a dose of drive and vision, and his unbounded confidence in his own judgement. If he could haul a company to its feet in six months, he would sell it on at once: if there was no hope after that, he would strip its assets and kill it off. Either way he made money and, quite soon, he had moved into the big leagues.

Charlie had always believed that money was for spending. I remember in our last year at school we were walking together one evening past the four-star hotel in the middle of town. We were on our way to the local chippy. In the hotel's forecourt a youngish man was parking his Ferrari Testarossa. As we looked, a pair of the longest legs I had ever seen emerged from the passenger's side, followed by their blonde owner in a skirt which barely reached the middle of her thighs. I began to say something banal like: "Some people have all the luck ...," but before the words were out of my mouth, Charlie said, in his most matter of fact voice: "I'm going to have one of those in a few years time."

"Which one?" I asked

"Both of them," he said. "In fact I think I may have two of each."

I dutifully laughed at his joke, but when I turned to look at him he was not laughing with me. He meant it.

When he was thirty, he bought a Tudor cottage in the Surrey countryside. The grounds took in a private woodland with a trout stream running through it. The following year he extended the building by adding a large wing to each side. He was careful never to refer to the place as a 'mansion,' but that is what most people would have called it when the work was finished.

He had been married three times by the age of forty. I liked all three of his wives—all of them equally attractive in their different ways and all of them intelligent and fun to be with. Charlie never wanted children and he always remained on good terms with the wives he had divorced. I never sensed any bitterness on their part: it was as if they felt they had been fortunate to have married him at all and that they had never expected to be able to hold him for ever.

Over the years he bought a number of holiday homes—in the Algarve, near Aspen, on Anguilla in the Leeward Islands. He developed business interests in California and travelled a lot. Yet he always kept in touch with me from time to time. At Christmas he would invite me to stay for a few days at his house in Surrey, which is how I got to know his wives. I remember on one of these visits to the house, I found him waiting impatiently for me at the top of the front steps. "I've got something to show you," he said in greeting. He took me round the back and, where there had been an ornate water garden, there was now a vast, single storey structure with a glass roof. It was his new garage, he told me, and he had filled it with a collection of vintage sports cars. They were not museum pieces: he made a special point of using each of them in turn whenever he drove himself anywhere. And right at the front, separated from the others by just enough space to show that they were special to him, he had parked three blood-red Testarossas.

"I know I promised myself two," he said in explanation, "but I had to have the third one when I saw it."

I thought of his three blonde, long-legged wives and made the obvious remark.

"Yes," he said. "And three of those as well." Then he put his arm round my shoulders and we went in for lunch.

In the world of high-staked business, everything Charlie touched seemed to turn to gold. In a piece about his cars, one of the tabloids christened him 'Midas' McKenzie and the name stuck. He never concealed his appetite for the rewards of his success. He enjoyed the things that money can buy and his spending brought him no feelings of guilt. He always seemed to me a thoroughly contented man: as he often said himself, he had achieved just about all his goals. I don't think he had every really doubted that he would. His belief in himself was absolute. It would be easy for me to claim that, in spite of it all, there still seemed to be something missing from his life, but though I can see it clearly now I did not recognize it at the time.

I hadn't seen Charlie for almost a year when, one winter's morning, to my astonishment, I ran into him in the Rothko room at the Tate Modern. I was there to do a piece for my paper on the success of the new gallery. Why he was there, I couldn't begin to guess. I had never know him show an interest in pictures and I clearly remembered he had once told me that he had left it to his wives to choose the paintings in his various houses.

"I didn't know you cared for this kind of thing," I began in greeting. He wouldn't let me finish the sentence. He swept an arm out in a gesture that took in the whole vast building. "It's wonderful," he said in a tone of voice I had never heard him use before. There was an element of reverence in it. I looked more sharply at him. In different circumstances, I would have said he was close to a state of ecstasy. "Have you seen the Cézannes?" he wanted to know. "And Picasso's women? I've been coming here every day for the past two months and it still bowls me over every time I climb the steps."

We went round the gallery together. I had to leave at 2 o'clock, but I suspect that he was still there at closing time. He had wanted to talk about everything we saw, and I was sorry that my knowledge of some of the more obscure modern artists on show was not wider than it is. I am mired in the Renaissance and can never really break away.

As I said goodbye to him, Charlie took my arm and said almost shyly: "I want to be an artist myself. You are the first person I've told. These last twenty years have been a waste of time. Who

the hell can find any satisfaction in stripping a failing business? I should have been painting—creating something from the soul. Anyone can buy and sell.”

I had to look hard at his face to make sure he wasn't joking. I had never heard him talk like that before and I had no idea how to respond. It was a Damascene conversion and it left me speechless. In the end I just said weakly: “You've already proved you're a creative man—making pictures isn't the only way to express it. Putting together a business empire is just as creative in its own way.” But my heart was not in it, for secretly I agreed with what he had said. What he really wanted to hear, I think, was something like: “Well, there's no reason why you can't be a fine artist too,” but I couldn't say that without the evidence. I felt vaguely uncomfortable as we parted on the top floor, but I don't believe he noticed.

I didn't hear from Charlie for quite some time after that. When I phoned his house at Christmas, one of his staff told me that he and his wife were away. For some reason, I got the impression that they were not necessarily in the same place. I had sent them both a card, but I did not receive one in return—which was unusual. Then one evening in March he telephoned me at home. He did not waste time on preliminaries. “I'm going to be a painter,” he said. “I've bought a house with a studio in Cornwall and I'm building a gallery next to it. I'm going to paint and show my work in the same place. I'm going to be part of the Cornish School tradition. The light down there is wonderful, even in winter.”

His excitement was palpable. “You remember I told you when we met at the Tate Modern? I believe you thought I was joking. It's the only thing I want to do: it's more important to me than anything I've ever done. I've been taking lessons in Paris for the past six months. When I've got an exhibition together I want you to come down and preview it before I let anyone else in.”

“But what about your businesses?” I said, refusing to be swept away by his wild enthusiasm. “You can't paint professionally and run all that at the same time.”

“To hell with all that,” he shouted. “I've sold off the whole caboodle. I've got rid of the place in Surrey as well. It's simple: I was a businessman; now I'm an artist. It's the best thing I've ever done. I want people to have an opportunity to appreciate my work.”

It was suddenly clear to me that the possibility of failure had never occurred to him: in that, at least, he had not changed.

Afterwards, I sat down at my kitchen table with a mug of coffee in my hand and tried to reassure myself that, even if it all came to nothing, no great harm would be done. The fact was that he would never need to work again: he could live on his investments for the rest of several lifetimes without cutting back on anything. He could always buy another mansion in Surrey if he wanted to. And there were no children to provide for. If calling himself an artist was what gave him pleasure, why not? But I knew even as I formed these thoughts that it was not like that at all. He had decided to be an artist—and I knew him well enough to understand that meant being a *good* artist. He had set his heart on it and nothing would be allowed to stand in the way. Throughout his life, he had excelled at everything he attempted, and nothing less would satisfy him now. I had heard that he and his wife had separated when he went to Paris, so there was no one close to him now to rein him in a bit. But, of course, I reminded myself hopefully, I mustn't forget that after his time in France he really might have learnt to paint. That evening I looked out the pencil sketch he had made of me at school all those years ago; but try as I might, I could not detect in the faded trace of his pencil any obvious sign of unusual talent. I decided that my only useful role was to wait patiently until he called me down to view his work.

It took Charlie another six months to paint the pictures to furnish an exhibition. He phoned me late one night. I was already asleep. "I've done it," he said. "Come down and see for yourself. It's the only thing I've every really wanted to do with my life, and I've done it." He sounded light-headed with excitement. "Charles McKenzie, artist, is about to reveal his soul."

He met me at Penzance station. There was no thoroughbred sports car now. He had bought himself a modest van in which to transport his easel and all the other paraphernalia when he painted *en plein air* as he called it. His house and 'gallery' were on the outskirts of a village five or six miles from the town. There was a view of the sea with St. Michael's Mount in the distance, and there

were dog roses and honeysuckle everywhere and a lily pond spanned by a wooden bridge. It was just like Monet's garden. The walls of his studio were mainly glass and overlooked the pond, so rain could not interfere with his work. He had not wanted to lose a moment. He had already wasted twenty years, he said, and now he had to make up time. It was an attractive place and I noticed he had furnished it in the simplest style with nothing more than was necessary for a true artist to live and paint without interruption. He had steeped himself in the work of the old Cornish School, and I think he saw himself now as keeper of the flame.

He showed me over the modest house and we spent a few minutes in his studio. "This is where it happens," he said. Then we walked across the grass to the gallery. When he took a key from his pocket to open the door, I saw that his hands were trembling with excitement.

It was an admirable little gallery, divided into three sections by plain wooden screens. The natural light from the glass roof had been supplemented by well placed artificial lighting, so that every one of the sixteen pictures was displayed to its best advantage. The walls were white, with the smallest hint of cream. "I poached someone from the Royal Academy to design the place," he said. "I don't think my pictures could have a more fitting setting."

He had stayed by the door. "I'm going to leave you here alone. When you've finished, come back to the house. I want your frank opinion. I've laid on the formal opening for next week. I've arranged for a number of critics and dealers to travel down from London by coach and I am putting them up in Penzance for the night. You're the only person I've allowed to see the work beforehand." He went out and shut the door behind him. I began my private viewing.

To be perfectly honest, the pictures were better than I had feared. They were mostly watercolour landscapes, but there were three or four large oil paintings as well. There was St. Michael's Mount on a misty day; aspects of the pond and bridge in various seasons of the year; and, taking up two of the three sub-divisions of the gallery, a series of views of the coastline between Penzance and Land's End. In other words, they were exactly the kind of thing that a summer visitor with sixty or seventy pounds to spend would look for in one of the waterfront galleries in the town. He had learnt to draw, and whoever had taught him perspective in

Paris had done a good job. The trouble was he had no sense of colour; and as any artist will tell you, that is something you have to be born with. You can't be an artist without it, any more than you can be a musician without a sense of rhythm.

Later that afternoon, my friendship with Charles McKenzie came to an end. "I don't want you staying here tonight," he said, his face flushed with anger and disappointment. "I'll take you to a hotel in Penzance. You can get a train back to London in the morning."

As it happened, I was just able to catch the last train of the evening and I was in London at daybreak, unshaven and profoundly saddened. The problem was that in all his life Charlie had never before been told that he wouldn't be able to do something on which he had absolutely set his heart. It had been no good my saying: "But you told me to speak honestly." He could come to terms with my opinion only by rejecting it. "I'm sorry I asked you down here," he said. "I thought you knew something about painting. I forgot that you're just a provincial hack. Thank God I've got people coming next week who really know something about the subject."

The formal opening of Charlie's exhibition took place five days later. I believe there was quite a good turnout of critics and dealers from London. Penzance is an attractive place to visit in the summer at someone else's expense. At the weekend, three minor newspapers carried brief reviews of Charlie's work. They all said roughly the same thing, and it was as cruel as I knew it would be. The more weighty critics—and there had been some of these—made clear their own opinions by ignoring the exhibition altogether in their columns. Not one dealer ever got in touch.

I was away from home that weekend. When I got back on Sunday night I could tell that someone had begun to leave a message on my Answerphone and then, perhaps, thought better of it. I was pretty sure that it was Charlie McKenzie.

One evening three months later I was riffling through the business pages of my own newspaper on my way home by train. The economy, so the headline told us, was in good shape and



interest rates were down again. Then, at the bottom of the same page, I saw a much smaller item. It was headed: MIDAS McKENZIE DIES IN FALL. There was a single paragraph of text. Charles McKenzie, the well-known asset-stripping millionaire, had been found dead at the bottom of cliffs near Penzance. He had been seen earlier with a sketchbook in his hand at the top of the cliffs. He had recently sold off his business interests and retired to Cornwall. His estranged wife was returning to England from their home in Portugal for the funeral. There had been no children. He was forty-six years old.

Some weeks later, when the coroner had duly recorded death by misadventure, I received a letter from Charlie's executors. It enclosed a note they had found on his desk. Apparently it had taken them some time—and with Mrs. McKenzie's help—to decide that the note was intended for me, since it bore only my first name. The note was in Charlie's familiar, impatient handwriting and it read:

*Tried to get you today to say I'm sorry. I knew you were right at the time. Forgive me old friend, and remember happier days.*

That was all. I saw that the note was dated the day he died. I think he must have written it just before he set out to walk over the cliffs.

That Christmas, a padded parcel arrived for me with a card from Charlie's widow. "I'm sure he would have liked you to have this," she wrote. "It was lying on his easel. He cared a lot for you and for what you thought." Inside was one of his watercolours of the coastline near Land's End, which I had not seen before. He had painted the ragged cliffs with real assurance, and I liked the way the land in the middle distance was invaded by the sea mist: but all his blues were still far too harsh, and they ruined the work.

I laid the picture on my desk and thought of those happier times which must have been in his own thoughts on that last day. More than ever, I found myself wishing he had been born with a decent sense of colour. I suppose you could say that it was just about the only thing he couldn't buy; and in the end, it was the one thing he couldn't live without.