

# THE WORLDS OF CHUCK BOWDISH

JANUARY 19 — MARCH 10, 2024

OPENING RECEPTION AND FILM SCREENING: FRIDAY, JANUARY 19, 6-8PM



Chuck Bowdish, *Untitled*, n.d., watercolor on paper, 5 1/2 x 8 inches. Courtesy the Estate of Chuck Bowdish.

New York Studio School is pleased to present a solo exhibition of work by the late artist Chuck Bowdish. Organized in collaboration with the artist's estate, *The Worlds of Chuck Bowdish* draws on several decades of work to explore the various facets of Bowdish's highly personal and enigmatic paintings, watercolors, collages, drawings, and sculptures. An opening reception will take place on Friday, January 19, which will include a screening of Peter Wareing's documentary film, *Chuck Bowdish: Painter* (2001).

Bowdish's career is marked by an ethos of experimentation, in search of what he described as "grace and honesty" in the face of the "darkness of human character." The subject matter of Bowdish's works emerges from both keenly observing the world around him and probing the depths of his subconscious. *The Worlds of Chuck Bowdish* is organized around the specificity of place that informed his artmaking in subject matter, palette, and materials, even as he became increasingly preoccupied with the landscapes and narratives of the imagination. Diagnosed with bipolar disorder, Bowdish found solace in the act of painting. "When I am behind the easel," he explained, "I can feel the forms and shapes in my physical body coming out in a very concrete way. It is truly therapeutic."

Bowdish flourished while attending the Ringling School of Art in Sarasota, Florida, from 1977 through 1980. There he studied figure painting and drawing, concentrating his efforts on watercolor—a medium that remained central to his practice throughout his career. Motifs inspired by Florida, such as palm trees, boats, and shorelines, recur across his bodies of work.

Bowdish's years in New York evidence a dedicated interest in form while studying illustration and figuration at the Art Students League and figural sculpture at NYSS. He continued to refine his draughtsmanship and developed a singular sense of color, which, he observed, was "considerably brightened" by the "color, light, and culture" of San Miguel de Allende, where he lived from 1986 to 1991. Returning to New York, he pursued figure painting and anatomical studies at the New York Academy of Art, a period of intensive study that resulted in large, haunting oil paintings of nudes in imagined

scapes inhabiting unknowable narratives. The surfaces of his gestural oil paintings are marked by scratches and scrapes, themselves becoming objects with storied histories of erasure, change, and discovery, like Roman frescoes. In his later oil paintings, watercolors, and collages from New York and, finally, Hendersonville, North Carolina, he worked primarily from his imagination and dreams, reformulating themes and narratives of innocence, violence, loss, and sexuality central to the human condition. His inventive deployment of scale underscores the emotional and psychological tenor of much of his work, as does the high-contrast, stage-like lighting.

Bowdish's work signals a profound and expansive familiarity with the history of art. His angular forms at times evoke the timelessness of Archaic sculpture, his landscapes the dreamlike scenes of the Fauves. His winged figures conjure Fra Angelico's and his nudes Balthus's. Yet, Bowdish's work complexly intertwines his personal lived experience with broader national and international events through these familiar art historical forms. Allusions to a midcentury childhood defined by the American idealism of John F. Kennedy's presidency and the brutality of the Vietnam War haunt scenes populated by recurring motifs of Greek amphoras, military tanks, ballet dancers, Judeo-Christian symbols, fedora-wearing mobsters, and Gauguin-inspired nudes. Artist Bruce Gagnier, with whom Bowdish studied at NYSS, highlights the metaphoric nature of Bowdish's work, explaining that "he fashions forms that project feelings that lie within us all. Here, as in all great painting, life comes to the canvas with the urgency of the painter's brush." This exhibition explores the cosmologies he experienced, remembered, and imagined.

*The Worlds of Chuck Bowdish* serves as an important critical examination of an artist whose prolific output has yet to be fully considered. Bowdish's expansive body of work searches for innocence and transcendence in a post-industrial, fragmented, and, at times, perilous world. As the artist himself wrote, "One of the responsibilities of an artist is to reaffirm our humanity which is basically our capacity to love." Also on view in the exhibition is Peter Wareing's thirty-minute film *Chuck Bowdish: Painter* (2001) that chronicles Bowdish's artistic journey.

Following its presentation at NYSS, the exhibition will be on view at the Ringling College of Art and Design, Sarasota, FL, during their 2025-2026 season.

On February 13, NYSS will host an Evening Lecture Series panel discussion on Bowdish's work featuring Sasha Chermayeff, Bruce Gagnier, Ernie Sandidge, and Lisa Steiner. The event will start at 6:30 pm ET and will be held in person and livestreamed on Zoom and YouTube Live. The occasion will also mark the launch of the illustrated exhibition catalogue, *The Worlds of Chuck Bowdish*, which will include remembrances by friends and fellow artists, such as SoHyun Bae, Chris Carone, Marianne Gagnier, and Nels Pierce, among others.

**Chuck Bowdish** (1959-2022) was born in Dayton, Ohio. His peripatetic childhood was defined by his fighter pilot father's tours of duty in the Vietnam era. He first learned to draw from his mother, a painter and schoolteacher. He attended the Ringling School of Art and Design in Sarasota in the late 1970s, followed by the Art Students League and NYSS in the early 1980s. In New York he joined the downtown art scene and began working as an illustrator with *The New York Times* and *Fortune*. After several years in Mexico, he returned to New York and enrolled at the New York Academy of Art. His awards include the Edgar Whitney Scholarship (1981), "Best of Show" at the 1993 Ringling alumni exhibition, the Wynn Newhouse Award (2012) and the Hassam, Speicher, Betts, and Symons Fund Purchase Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2015). He showed often with Steven Harvey Fine Arts Projects, New York, and Galerie Timothy Tew, Atlanta, GA, among several other galleries, and his work is in the collection of The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio; Western Carolina University Art Museum, Cullowhee, North Carolina; and the William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation, Mt. Kisco, New York. Recent exhibitions include *Chuck Bowdish: Complete Works*, Art at Kings Oaks, Newtown, PA, and the group exhibition *The Way I'm Wired: Artist Reflections on Neurodiversity*, Western Carolina University Fine Art Museum, Cullowhee, North Carolina.

The School extends a special thank you to the family of Chuck Bowdish.

NEW YORK STUDIO SCHOOL GALLERY | Open Daily 10am-6pm  
8 WEST 8TH STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10011 | 212-673-6466 | [nyss.org/exhibitions](https://nyss.org/exhibitions)  
NYSS GALLERY CONTACT: Kara Carmack, [kcarmack@nyss.org](mailto:kcarmack@nyss.org)