

Tradition and Ronald Ramsey: The Art of Simultaneity

by Harlan Greene

At first glance, the exuberant and engaging art of Ronald Ramsey may seem like nothing you've ever seen before. In some pieces, elements vary from simple to sophisticated, imparting both an innocent and a complex finish. In others, the viewer is faced with an image that seems to lack all perspective, yet at the same time, a startling dimension, that of time itself, enters the picture—literally—through clippings of a building's earlier incarnations, along with details marking the days the artist worked to complete the drawing. Then, as if doubting his renderings' ability to speak for themselves, he gives them voice in captions that often adorn the drawing like a frame or which function like a conversation bubble in a cartoon. His art is an eccentric and eclectic blend that may bring many things to mind: maps, plats, cartoons, architectural drawings and elevations, and even old samplers with their artistry of cross-stitched borders, images, and text.

It is this complex simplicity, this art of simultaneity, referencing various different art forms that suggest something else, that makes his work different. But despite how unique and idiosyncratic the artist and his art are, both fit neatly into a tradition of referencing and reverencing Charleston's built environment. This tradition extends back to the early 1700s, when cartographers charged with delineating the walls and streets and creeks of the town seemingly could not restrain their enthusiasm for their subject and, instead of merely depicting angles and lines, added innocent little images of prominent structures like churches and dwellings that seemed important enough to somehow signify.

The same force animates some of the work of Charleston's famous surveyor, Joseph Purcell, active in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While his "real" job was to note property and lot lines for surveys attached to deeds, he nevertheless often felt compelled to embellish his linear plats with sophisticated elevations of the structures that stood on them or nearby. As other surveyors did, he often included a fine wash of color and enclosed his presentation in bracelets of geometric shapes and lines, while always giving the exact date of the survey, anticipating the much later work of Ronald Ramsey, who may have been influenced by them and their reproductions.

The effect of these "aberrations"—breaking out of the confines of the mapmaker or surveyor's basic purpose—can be compared to that of a dull speaker, overcome with his subject, suddenly breaking into song. Similarly, Ramsey can't seem to contain himself to a flat plane or a single drawing for particular buildings that catch his fancy. For these, a compiled dimension is necessary. Just as one might document

oneself, or a family, over time, so he has created scrapbooks—layers of images, objects, and texts—to suggest the life span and history of a beloved building, such as the old G. W. Aymar Pharmacy at King and Vanderhorst streets. In seeing how he has laid the items in and arranged them, one gets the same sort of sense his drawings bring: that brick by brick, pane by pane, shingle by shingle, he has not so much drawn a building as reconstructed it.

In his depictions of *Four Mile House*, and other destroyed buildings, such as a fortress-like hotel on Rivers Avenue, Ramsey repeats, in his own special way, what other artists did in the nineteenth century. When, for example, the early St. Philips Church burned in 1835, two native sons, artist John Blake White and planter Thomas Middleton, immediately tried to resurrect it, to ensure that if it did not survive physically, it could at least exist on canvas to give others an idea of its beauty. When another fire three years later destroyed the 1794 synagogue of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim on Hasell Street, local artist Solomon Nunez Carvalho immediately did the same, giving us interior and exterior paintings. Like them, Ramsey has recently defied time by reconstructing in line a once-handsome wooden house on Spring Street that burned in October 2016.

While Ramsey's work displays parallels with the work of artists in the early life of the city, he fits most neatly in with those of the first part of the twentieth century, the era between the World Wars, which saw a burst of creativity in the arts that has earned it the name of the Charleston Renaissance. Alice Ravenel Huger Smith and her father D. E. Huger Smith launched the movement in their tribute to the built environment in a portfolio of twenty drawings of the Pringle House, followed by a book of dwelling houses of the city. Alice Smith, the artist, like the poets and writers and artists of that era, found herself in a time of rapid change, fueled in part by a tourism boom that bolstered the local economy. It was a cusp period, when a distinctive way of life was giving way to modernization, and when the tangible fabric of the city was being lost.

DuBose Heyward, to gain fame with his novel *Porgy* (1925), first used poetry to give voice to what he saw happening. "Shatter, shatter, shatter," he wrote in "Chant for an Old Town" (1922) as he witnessed wrecking balls and building crews demolishing old buildings. Whole blocks of the city were vanishing, he wrote, with "ancient flagged pavements like faint pastel mosaics" disappearing, replaced by "all asphalt and concrete." Steeples no longer ruled the skyline as developers instead dedicated themselves to building "hotel[s] the mate of twenty others in great American cities."

City boosters called it progress, good for business; others called it barbarism. And rising to the challenge of safeguarding the past were artists like Elizabeth O'Neill Verner and Alfred Hutton, who featured the architecture of Charleston, grand buildings but also those in disrepair and in danger of disappearing, in their paintings and etchings. (It is interesting to note that while Ramsey takes as his subject buildings now lost or in danger of demolition, unlike those before him he respects them too much to show them in a state of dishabille or decay; no siding is gone, no doors are ajar, no shutters hang loose. Despite their condition, he shows them instead as they *should* be, formally dressed, in their original glory.) Alfred Hutton's love of the beauty of the city prompted him to attend the founding meeting of the organization that became the Preservation Society of Charleston, demonstrating the direct link between artistry and activism. The same impulse informs Ramsey, who often draws attention to less-celebrated vernacular buildings, the ones in danger of demolition. He has said he wants to meet with mayors of our local towns to show them that not only architectural icons, but also more humble structures have grace of line and expression that can be returned to their proper states, as he portrays them.

Ramsey, a great collector of publications documenting Charleston (which is how our paths first crossed in the 1970s), may have imbibed ideas and been influenced by these and other Charleston Renaissance artists and draftsmen. Many of his detailed drawings recall the interior and exterior elevations published in the White Pine series of pamphlets on American architecture produced in the 1920s; and many Historic American Building Survey (HABS) drawings of Charleston done in this era were disseminated widely. Charleston's first great preservation architect, Albert Simons, came into prominence during the Renaissance era, and his elegant drawings of local woodwork, doorways, moldings, and the like are featured in *The Early Architecture of Charleston, Plantations of the Carolina Low Country* and other iconic books on Charleston that anyone interested in the city would have encountered. Similarly for ironwork, Richard Jenkins Bryan created pencil drawings for Alston Deas's *The Early Ironwork of Charleston*, another possible influence and forerunner of Ramsey's spectacular drawings. Ramsey's art resembles these predecessors, but his drawings are more dynamic and have more personality.

In many ways, Ramsey also has much in common with the man considered the first modern artist in town, and the namesake of the Halsey Gallery. Born in 1915, just after Alice Smith's first architectural work was published, William Halsey studied with Elizabeth O'Neill Verner and was intrigued, as she was, by the life of the side street. Yet his vision was different from Verner's, not as sentimental, often stripping away the vague human forms present in her etchings as well as Hutton's. (One sees no human forms at all, or even

trees, in Ramsey's work; architecture is his sole focus.) As if taking DuBose Heyward's "shatter, shatter, shatter," dictum as a directive—in art, at least—Halsey began to break up his realistic buildings into lines, angles, and planes. Ronald Ramsey has held on more strongly to realism than Halsey did, yet his structures stand in an unshaded, unshadowed space, sharing the innocence of early American primitivism that influenced 20th century artists like Halsey. Experimenting with form, Halsey laid on collages and used newsprint, as does Ramsey. Both are intrigued with the very texture of the city. Halsey salvaged shattered decorative pieces and architectural fragments and put them together in sculptures he called constructions. Ramsey has done something similar, but he has made it more personal: Almost as if he can feel the pain and shame and indignation of buildings overcome by time or neglect, he rescues and labels them, not so much reconfiguring as transforming them into architectural reliquaries.

This exhibition allows us to look into the private and passionate relationship of one man with his city. Others have come before him and more will follow; few, however, may ever be as compelling as he, for his work is fresh and unique. Seeing him in this continuum does not diminish him in the least but instead serves to honor both Ramsey himself and the tradition he is in — simultaneously.