Charles Bell (1935-1995) was a pre-eminent American Photorealist who specialized in still lifes. Photorealism evolved from Pop art in the late 1960s and early 1970s in America—it is defined as a style of painting that resembles photography in its meticulous attention to detail. The word “photorealism” was coined in 1969 by New York art dealer and author Louis K. Meisel. Besides Bell, the most highly regarded American Photorealists are Richard Estes, Chuck Close, Audrey Flack, and Ralph Goings.

In Charles Bell: The Complete Works 1970-1990, a book written in 1991 by Henry Geldzahler (with an essay by Meisel), Bell discussed art in general and his own art in particular. “When Pop came along, suddenly art was a very different thing,” he said. “Suddenly, art was media and media was art. For me personally, the importance of Pop is that it legitimized the media look, the lens-eye view of the world, in high art.”

Born and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Bell drew and painted throughout his childhood. He took art classes during grade school and participated in Tulsa’s Philbrook Art Center summer art programs for children. Bell also enjoyed family outings to the Gilcrease Museum, where he was captivated by the works of Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran, and George Catlin. Although he remained interested in art as a teen and young adult, making a living as an artist did not occur to him until later in life. In 1957, Bell received a bachelor of business administration degree from the University of Oklahoma, Norman. He then served for a few years in the U.S. Navy as a reserve lieutenant, junior grade.

By the early 1960s, Bell was working as an accounting supervisor at C&H Sugar in San Francisco. He painted in his spare time and took art lessons from Donti Flores in his North Beach studio/gallery. Bell believed that his initial drawing lessons from Flores were exercises in seeing as much as drawing, which led to his conviction that “once you learn to draw with precision, you never see in the same way again.” One of his first painting subjects was water. The budding artist liked to go to Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco and photograph the reflections of the boats’ masts and bows on the water’s surface. Afterward, he would paint the abstract patterns of the reflections found in these photos.

While in college, Bell had befriended artist Harold Stevenson, who later became influential in his own vocation as an artist. “In the ’60s, Harold was doing very large works... if he did your portrait, it might be a 12-foot panel of your elbow. Abstract but real at the same time,” Bell explained. “I was fascinated by that [paradox]. When I finally visited his New York studio, I looked around and decided, ‘This is where I want to be and what I want to be.’” He calculated his savings and decided to quit his job and make a full-time commitment to art. In 1969, Bell moved to New York, and within a matter of days he was showing his work at Greenwich Gallery in Greenwich Village. Not long thereafter, he was invited to exhibit his paintings at the Louis K. Meisel Gallery, where he stayed for the rest of his career. Many of his paintings and prints are still available at the Louis K. Meisel Gallery (www.meiselgallery.com), which features Contemporary Realist art.

Bell’s subject matter consisted primarily of vintage toys, dolls, action figures, gumball machines, and pinball machines. He said that he chose those things because he still found wonder in them, “just like a little boy.” Bell took his own reference photographs of the still lifes so he could control the arrangement as well as the lighting. His work was distinguished by the enormous size of the subjects, which were depicted in a scale between 6 and 12 times life size. Meisel feels that Bell’s practice of enlarging the objects’ size enabled him to delve into their intrinsic reality. The 6-foot-high Raggedy Ann No. 1, completed in 1969, is considered to be the artist’s first painting as a true Photorealist. In the spring of 1970, 2 more versions of the Raggedy Ann painting hung in Meisel’s gallery—people passing by often stopped and stared in the window at the astonishing images. Geldzahler wrote, “I think the interest in Bell’s work is the interest in self-discovery, in showing us a corner of the world, a corner of the room, that we never really looked into before.”

Kandy Kane Rainbow is a superb example of Bell’s Marbles series that began in the 1970s and continued for the next 2 decades. He placed a multicolored shooter marble in the center of the celestial-like composition; the large orb representing the sun is surrounded by smaller marbles symbolizing the planets. Distinct highlights atop the marbles and sharply defined shadows beneath them demonstrate his unsurpassed ability to capture reflected and transparent light.

In 1975, Salvador Dali encountered one of Bell’s early gumball-machine paintings and exclaimed, “Magnifique!” By painting ordinary items in an extraordinary manner, this Photorealist’s body of work proved to be magnificent indeed.

Sheila Macho
Cover Editor

COVER CREDIT
Charles Bell, Kandy Kane Rainbow, oil on canvas, 40” x 60”. Copyright© 1994. Image courtesy of the Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York, New York.

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