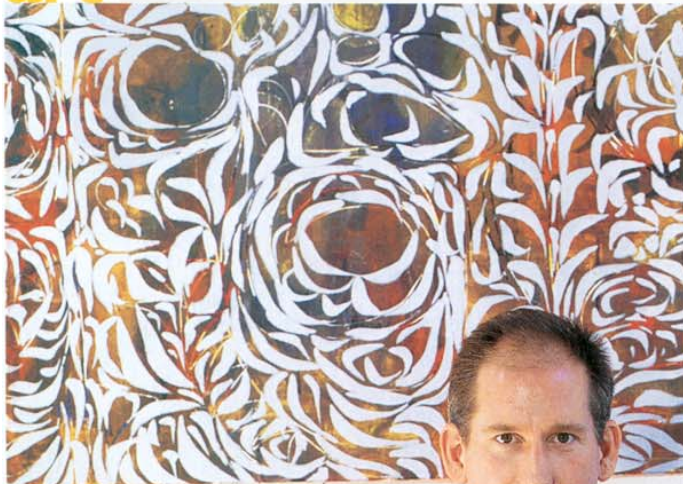


# CHEIM & READ

## ART IDEAS GREAT GIFT GUIDE!

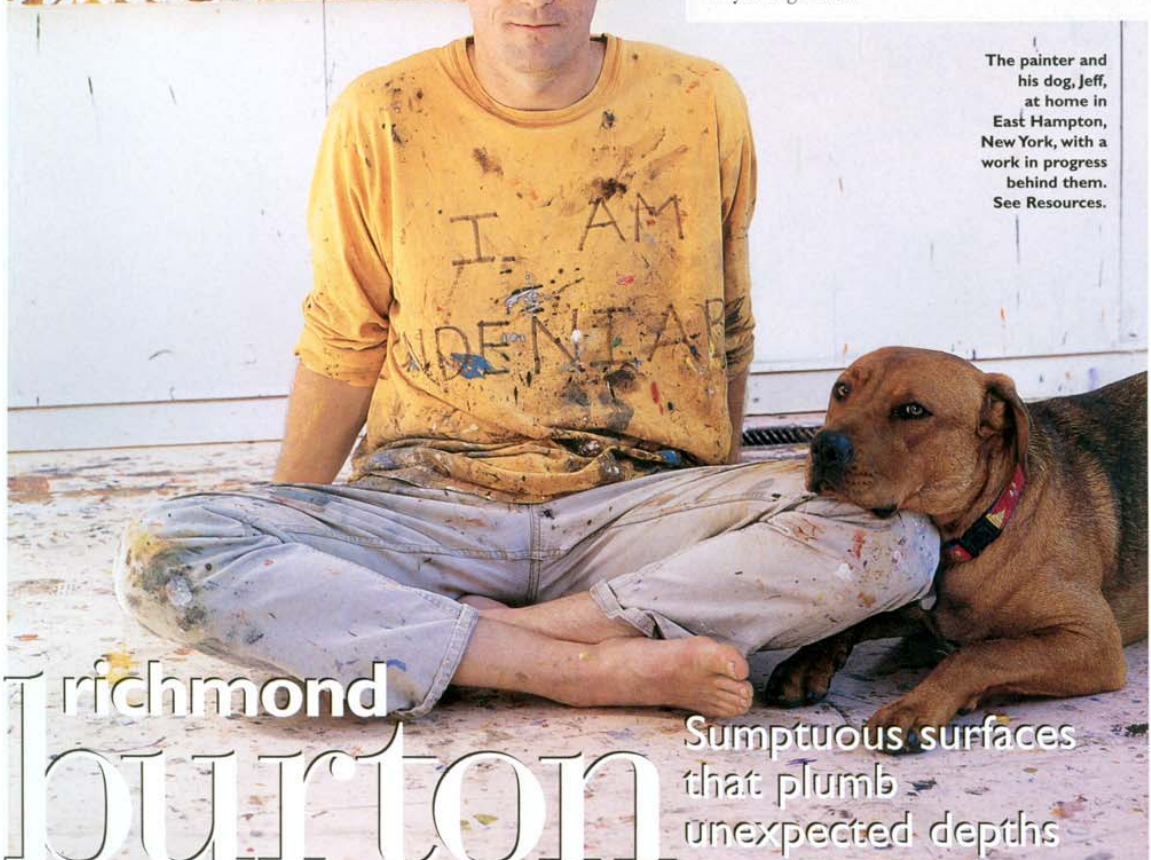
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**R**ichmond Burton's paintings sweep the viewer into the same state of sensuality as lazy afternoon sex or eating oysters on the beach. "Beauty is an antidote to the world we're living in," says the artist, whose work is an exuberant swirl of pattern, melting Klimt-like triangles of gold and copper, and teardrops of lavender and robin's-egg blue. "It's an age of anxiety—though that, too, is reflected in my paintings—and I keep looking for a way to lessen it and increase the feelings of pleasure and harmony with the environment."

More than simply voluptuous, however, the compositions reveal themselves as esoteric, multifaceted, and referential the more you look. Again and again a breathing space, whether a small slit or an egg-shaped aperture with a golden light behind it, appears on the surface, just hinting at an underlayer where an alternate reality or chaotic abyss might hide. ▷



The painter and his dog, Jeff, at home in East Hampton, New York, with a work in progress behind them. See Resources.

# Richmond Burton

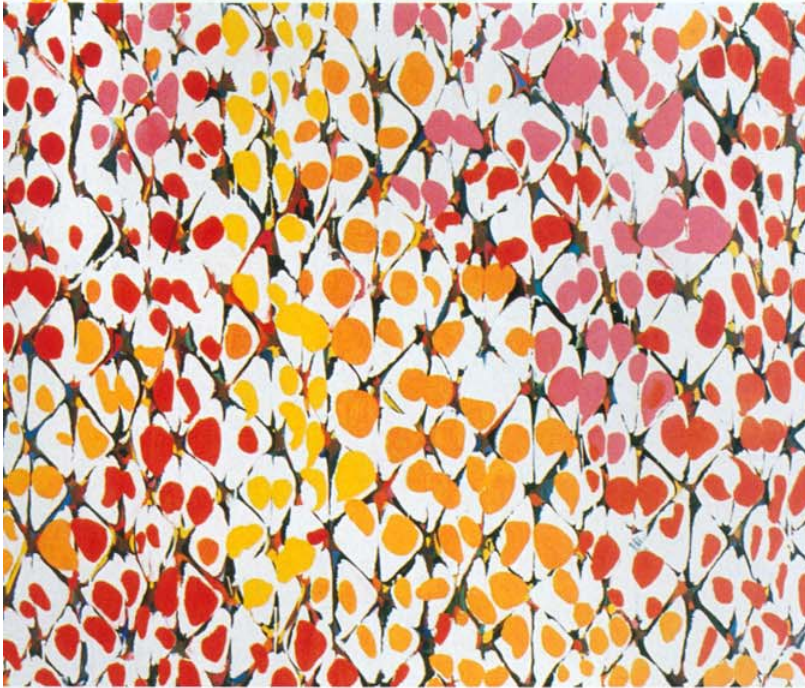
Sumptuous surfaces  
that plumb  
unexpected depths

text by SHERIDAN SANSEGUNDO photography by EVAN SKLAR

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Left: *Eyes in the Heat*, 1992 (oil on linen; 7'x9').  
Above: A bowl that Burton uses to mix silver paint.

“I learned to make art as a recipe for sanity and self-exploration”



Above: *Everything Is Early*, 1997 (oil on canvas; 90"x102").

A clue to the complexity of Burton's work lies in the exquisite sketchbooks that he carries wherever he goes. On fine linen squares pasted to the pages, his own preparatory sketches alternate with evidence of his immersion in other artists' work: jewel-like copies of every Malevich in a retrospective in Amsterdam; details of Picassos, Caravaggios, Roman mosaics, Géricaults, and Braques, sometimes mere fragments, sometimes complete reinterpretations.

Burton, who just turned 40, belongs to the generation of appropriationists, and his canvases are full of allusion to other artists. "My paintings have quotation marks around them—it's my way of tipping my hat to everyone else," he says. If Klimt jumps to mind in the latest pieces, then Lee Krasner does in those from the mid-'90s, not to mention Miró and Klee's abstractions, Pollock's drips, Friedensreich Hundertwasser's polychromatic cities, and Roberto Matta's sexual iconography.

Thanks to a dozen years of one-man shows everywhere from San Francisco to Zurich, Burton can consider himself well established. Growing up gay and artistic in the small Alabama town of Talladega, though, he felt thoroughly out of place. "I hung out with my grandmother, who was an artist and ceramist, and learned to make art as >

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Top to bottom: *Untitled*, 1999 (oil on linen; 63"x72").  
*Morphing Fields*, 1999 (oil on linen; 75"x90").

**"I keep looking for a way to increase the feelings of pleasure and harmony"**

a recipe for sanity and self-exploration," he says. Although he dreamed of moving to New York and becoming a painter, he went to Rice University in Houston and studied architecture to please his parents. Then he did come to New York—but to work for I. M. Pei. One of the young draftsman's projects was to make drawings for the Louvre pyramid's diamond-patterned triangles.

While still working for Pei, Burton was also painting, and in 1987 an East Village gallery gave him his first solo exhibition. That show marked his official entrée on the downtown art scene, where he discovered the work of Philip Taaffe, Sherrie Levine, Mike Bidlo, and Ross Bleckner. The latter, who, Burton says, "opened the door to self-expressive painting," was particularly supportive.

An interest in architecture and the way objects fit together helped define his black, grid-based paintings from the late '80s, and the grid also had symbolic value as the "net of life, what holds everything together, the interrelatedness of people." In the '90s, color began to creep in, then broke through and took over in flesh-toned swoops, fecund oranges, and black and red mussel shells filled with egg-yolk yellow. The grid relaxed. Then, two years ago, Burton kicked free of it altogether. His paintings became more organic, with intimations of water and sunlight through leaves. For his most recent solo show at Manhattan's Cheim & Read gallery, he added gold, silver, and copper paint to the colors.

This loosening more or less coincided with his move to East Hampton, New York, where he's now based full-time. "I lived in the city for 13 years and absorbed everything, but one day I guess I had absorbed enough," he says. "I came out here, and it's been happily ever after." His house and studio, surrounded by white-pine forest and only half a mile from the bay where he likes to swim, once belonged to Elaine de Kooning. Relocating to the country has allowed him to escape our society's infatuation with the media. "The more I've been able to unplug, the more at home I've felt," Burton says. "Removing the static has allowed me to find out new things about myself. Ultimately, I think that is the role of the artist." ✨