

Michael Ray Charles on Racial Stereotypes

Michael Ray Charles is a representational painter whose work in the early 1990s addressed political and social issues with homage to such nineteenth-century commentators as Goya and Daumier. In 1993, he began painting racial stereotypes (mammies, Sambos, and coons) derived from vintage commercial art that incorporate wit and irony to attack both the racism of the past and present. His paintings are rendered in a primitive style, and he quotes old circus banners, vernacular signs, and folk paintings—a pastiche that underscores the fact that these disturbing images were once America's most popular art. Charles was born in Lafayette, Louisiana, and teaches painting at the University of Texas at Austin. He has had solo exhibitions at the Art Museum of the University of Houston; Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York; Moody Gallery, Houston; and Galerie Hans Mayer, Düsseldorf, Germany. His works are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; San Antonio Museum of Art; and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo.

In your recent catalogue, *Michael Ray Charles: An American Artist's Work*, you ask, "What if the Jews never talked about the Holocaust?" Do you feel that nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century caricatures of African-American representations—the Sambo, mammy, minstrel, and coon—are ignored by blacks and whites?

A lot of blacks don't want to see images like mine; perhaps they bring up too much pain. A lot of whites are embarrassed and feel ashamed by them. But "out of sight, out of mind" doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. It happened, and I feel it has not been dealt with.

Do you feel that these images are still being used?

Let's talk basketball. When I look at some images of black basketball players in today's advertisements, I see references to the talented man-child or the ungrateful and unruly servant who should be happy to be receiving millions of dollars to entertain. It is unfortunate that the image of the Negro athlete, by my standards, has become the most visible definition of black masculinity.

How did you become aware of these stereotypical historical images? Were they introduced to you as a child or later?

As a child I may have seen a lot of such things around Louisiana, but I did not think much of them. When I was in graduate school, a colleague of mine had given me a little Sambo figurine. At the time I was doing paintings about the American flag, and so I didn't use these stereotypes initially—I didn't think it was what I was searching for. However, ever since I began to use such images, I haven't viewed life in the same way. They have taken me on a ride. And a wonderful ride, I might add.

How do Sambo, mammy, minstrels, Amos and Andy, and other images of this kind have relevance today?

I think the importance of these images to the development of American culture has been, in many cases, overlooked or misunderstood. Images of this nature are so significant to our definition of who we are, how we are, and what we shall be.

I've heard the argument that bringing this stereotypical imagery back to the surface merely rekindles old antagonisms. For a period of time, this was endemic to American mass media—one couldn't get away from ethnic and racial stereotypes. But after a certain amount of time, those specific images were eliminated, and there is at least a generation, if not more, that has never been exposed to this.

That's right. Such imagery was supposedly killed off. But I think that the images were repackaged and reintroduced to us in the images of J. J. from *Good Times*, Raj and Dee's mom from *What's Happening!!*, George Jefferson from *The Jeffersons*, and the woman who played Clifton Davis's mom from *That's My Mama*.

That leads me to Ellen Degeneres coming out of the closet on *Ellen*. Some people say this is a great thing. I recently asked the writer and performer Quentin Crisp his thoughts about this. When he was living in England (for the better part of his life) openly as a homosexual, and was being persecuted, arrested, and tried in court for his sexual orientation, could he ever have imagined something like this—a person's decision to admit homosexuality is broadcast over national media—and how did he feel about it? His response was, "It's still a caricature." Forty years ago, *Beulah* starring Ethel Waters (and later Louise Beavers) was the only American television show to feature a black woman as a leading character—and she was a maid. Later there was *Amos and Andy*. Today there are many television shows starring black men, women, and children. Do you feel that these spawn a new breed of stereotypes?

Yes and no. I can't blame the actors, producers, directors, or writers because we've all been affected by these images. They're drawing upon what they've consumed. One of the biggest problems I have with stereotypical imagery about blacks is that so many of the people that these images were made to mimic or to define have accepted such variations as their equal. I think a lot of the stereotypes have been internalized and made human by blacks as well as whites.

Are you reprising the minstrel character, the Sambo character, the mammy character, and the Sapphire character (from *Amos and Andy*) as a kind of object lesson? Are you saying that the stereotypes we see now really have their roots in this, and we need to understand the essence of what a stereotype is?

I'd say yes. It's self-exploration. I want to know about these images—how they were used, why they were used, and when they are being used. There's more to my work than just blackface imagery or the clown caricature. On one level, it's me trying to say that what we're seeing now, in different variations, was originally rooted in these caricatures. On another level, my work goes beyond that. I am deeply motivated by various forms of communication. I like finding out how things have evolved to mean what they mean. I see images of the black basketball player everywhere. I know it's a hot fad, but I remember watching the Olympics when the first Dream Team was assembled. Oh boy, did America jump on the backs of those athletes! It's like, "These are Americans; we can kick everybody's butt." Everybody seemed to be blown away that the team was as awesome as it was, how they just walked over these other countries' teams. It was like the flag blowing in the wind, all shining and shit. The beautiful red-white-and-blue flag at its best, with the right amount of wind passing through it so that you get the full flap—confidence, cockiness, whatever you want to call it. But the reality is that the flag is more torn, *worn*,

and tarnished, and that's the flag I think I find more attractive, more intriguing, because that's not a false face for me. You know, it's funny, I'm a very optimistic person. But in terms of the representations of the black in this country, I don't think much has changed.

But doesn't that ultimately present a positive and powerful image of black men and women?

It depends on who you're asking. I think that in some cases, however, an inaccurate abstraction of blacks remain.

The stereotype has changed from the poor, shiftless black field hand to the mighty supermen who are getting million-dollar contracts. But one of the things that I have found as I study historical stereotypes is the desexualization of black people. The mammy is certainly not a sexual character, and when placed in a couple situation, she's always the harpy, the one who won't let her husband get away with anything. How and why were these characters desexualized?

The black male and female images were desexualized so that they could not appear to be a threat to whites, in any capacity. I think they had to remain childlike, overweight, lazy, and unintelligent for whites to remind themselves of who they were. In some of today's advertising I now see the Negro athlete as this superbeing who is able to be all things within the confines of the arena. The image of the athlete is juxtaposed with the image of the criminal and the image of the rapper. When combined, you have the same old shit—a dangerously, uncontrollable, powerful physical specimen. In the nineties, this is beautiful. When something is thought of as beautiful, it is considered sexy. In this case, the sexually charged black male remains.

How does the minstrel show—that once popular form of entertainment where whites, stealing an essence of black people, put on blackface and cavort onstage—fit into the idea of deracination of black culture?

Minstrelsy was whites' attempt to mimic and make fun of blacks, but the "essence" of black people was not stolen. It cannot be stolen. Minstrelsy was a desire to become something or someone that was as great as the human longing to be. The essence of blackness, for me, is defined as being able to withstand, to evolve, to grow in spite of, to show one's wounds, to wear one's scars, and to get right back up because there is nothing else left to do.

But didn't the bombardment of these stereotypes in mass media influence how black people saw themselves?

Not only do I think those images influenced some blacks' interpretations of themselves, they continue to influence white, Asian, European, African, and many other cultures' perceptions of American blacks as well as how they see themselves. These images are forever part of the vocabulary of what one should want and what one should not want.

How do black people respond to your imagery?

I receive mixed responses. One black woman once asked me, "How does it feel to be the Clarence Thomas of the art world?"

I don't see the logic of her metaphor.

It seemed to me that she believed that Clarence Thomas was a sellout, and, by association, she was giving me the same label. She had a very limited perspective. I am an individual who happens to be black. The fact that I am black does not mean that I represent or support every black cause. Her comment initially bothered me. Ultimately, I found it more humorous than anything. Maybe she saw a part of herself in one of my paintings.

I wonder whether people have trouble distinguishing between these as insulting pictures or charged symbols?

I had a journalist walk up to me and say, "So tell me about the black woman in this painting." I responded by saying, "It's not a black woman; it's an image that I use to refer to a black woman." She then replied by asking about another painting in the same manner. I don't think she was able to separate the caricature image of a black person from the reality of what a black person actually is.

What about the aesthetic force of the image? Despite the grotesque caricatures, the drawings and paintings are often masterfully done.

Thank you. I think that there's good and bad in everything, and there's a beauty about these that I'm attracted to. I'm not going to tell you a lie. I'm very attracted to those images.

Whenever I lecture about black and Jewish stereotypes, I preface by saying that these are not the racist bile produced by hate groups. They are mainstream concoctions. Often the characters are very appealing. In the advertising trade literature of the early twentieth century, Aunt Jemima was called the most "friendly" American trade character. Do you see the images that you're drawing from here as essentially racist?

I have to say yes because of the time in which images like these flourished and the social conditions blacks were subjected to. I don't quite see today's evolved variations in the same way. It is obvious that we are living in a country that has grown and continues to evolve. How we are evolving is the issue: Have we reached a limit on what's new? Or is everything recycled, repackaged, and reprised until someone grabs the bait?

When I look at the original source material, I can't help but be repulsed by the fact that this is about promoting infantilism and reducing people to objects. I call it a cancer. For me, as a child, it must have had a subliminal impact on how I perceived black people. The first time I could think of a black woman as truly beautiful was when Diahann Carroll starred on television as a nurse in a show called *Julia*. When do you think perceptions among whites toward blacks began to change?

I am sure that was one of the times when it occurred. Perceptions about blacks didn't change overnight. It's evident that some white people's perceptions about blacks have never changed. This process of change has been a gradual thing that is consistently gaining and losing ground. I think that when Africans came to this country as slaves, the lust for the other began. Opposites have always attracted. The perceptions of blacks always change when whites find ways to utilize blacks for profit. However, the lust for blacks remains.

Speaking of beauty, once I gave a talk before a Jewish group of women and men between sixty and seventy years old. I showed them illustrations from *Little Black Sambo*, among other things, and talked about the negative connotations of that book. A woman came up to me afterward and said, "I loved that book. That was my introduction to black people."

I had the same thing happen to me recently. An elderly white woman came up to me and said, "Please don't make the Sambo ugly; I love little Sambo. I grew up with the Sambo; it's so dear to me." She started crying. I said, "You're speaking of this image as though it were a person." She went on to say that she's not racist, her children grew up around black people, they had black people over all the time, and she worked in a school in which she taught black students. This woman began making a cradling gesture as if she were holding a little baby. She didn't get it. She did not see that image as anything but a black

person. That's one of the things that really motivates me to continue my exploration into these images and how they affect us.

How difficult has it been for you as an artist to use this taboo imagery?

At times it has been slightly discomfoting. But I always seem to find inspiration to follow my heart.

In your catalogue, you talk about also being interested in the subculture heroine, pinup, bondage mistress Betty Page. How does that get integrated with your interest in black imagery?

I want to do a pinup series. I would like to explore some other ideas about beauty that I have been having for some time now. Besides, if you are going to do a pinup painting, you have to go to the source.

Among your paintings are images of mummies on the covers of the *Saturday Evening Post*. What is the motivation for those? Was it because the *Saturday Evening Post* never, or rarely, had a black person on the cover? The only Norman Rockwell painting I remember in the magazine with black people was the now-famous painting of the young girls being integrated into a Little Rock public school.

There were mammy images that surfaced on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*. I don't think that Rockwell did any of them, but there were some of those images there. My doing a parody on the *Saturday Evening Post* had nothing to do with whether or not an image of a black person was included in the magazine. I've been a big fan of the *Post* covers, more specifically the work of Rockwell. I think during this time he managed to capture an America in his art like no other I have seen. I gravitated toward his work the first time I saw it. Parody was my vehicle of expression, but after completing one painting I quickly became interested in how I could use the feelings I got from those covers to my advantage. This is what gave the Forever Free [a series of paintings using slave stereotypes] products their biggest push very early on.

We talked about how black people react to the paintings. How do white people react to them?

Mixed, you know. A lot of women cry. Some people feel apologetic. Some people just don't get the irony; they walk in and say something like, "I really enjoyed your show; it's very funny," then move on. I say, "Thank you for coming out." I don't worry about it anymore. You've just got to do what you've got to do. And when it's all said and done, then people do what they have to do.

Does the response of the viewer enter into your artistic decisions?

It used to bother me because I think deep down inside of me I wanted every black person to really understand my work and appreciate my work. I think my work challenges ideas about who black people are and who white people are—in terms of interpretation representation. Whatever responses I get about my work now, I evaluate them according to what I can or cannot learn from them. Otherwise, into the trash they go.

After years of involvement with these stereotypical images, how do you personally feel about them?

They deserve a certain respect. But you know, I think about so many people whose lives these images have affected. A lot of black people have died, and many are dying under the weight of variations of these images. That's motivation enough for me to explore and deal with these things.