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What is your Tar Baby?



Professor Gates
(Henry Louis Gates, Jr.)
24" x 48"
Acrylic/Mixed Media on Canvas, Year: 2010

What is your Tar Baby?

Charly Palmer

Exhibition Catalogue

Second Edition



Marilyn
(Marilyn Monroe)
24" x 48"

Acrylic/Mixed Media on Canvas, Year: 2010

Galerie Myrtis

Myrtis Bedolla, Founding Director

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Cover image: **What is your Tar Baby? #1**, 11"x14", Acrylic/Collage on Canvas, Year: 2010
Courtesy: Myrtis Bedolla and Alexander Hyman Collection

What is your Tar Baby?



Revolutionary
(Angela Davis)

24" X 36"

Acrylic/Mixed Media on Canvas, Year: 2010

Courtesy: Gail Smith Collection

What is your Tar Baby?

Charly Palmer

Artist's Statement

In my current series, *Tar Baby*, I visually delve into the lives of entertainers, politicians and athletes, while acknowledging the struggles of these gifted individuals and their varying backgrounds. **My interest in these sometimes-brave individuals came from the complex and often divisive decisions they had to make for their careers.** My series began with a painting of scholar, Cornell West. The painting of West focused on the story of Brer Rabbit and his interaction with the tar baby. The tar baby painting was a representation of West's connection to modern day society and the imposition that he faced because of its sticky element. West himself, upon seeing my piece, gave me his personal blessings to proceed and a new series with the same theme began to emerge.

Brer Rabbit, a cunning charlatan, masterfully dupes others using his wit and charm. He is a pivotal character in stories throughout the Caribbean and South America. The origins of Brer Rabbit can be traced back to Africa, and gives honor to the idea of lineage and history through storytelling.

The stories, which had been passed down orally from generations of slaves, only became publicly written because of Robert Roosevelt. Slaves dictated the stories to Roosevelt, uncle of President Theodore Roosevelt, and he went on to publish them in Harper's. Despite being published, the African based stories didn't fare well with the masses in white America.

Years later, Joel Chandler Harris developed the fictional character Uncle Remus. Remus' character became the voice of the Brer Rabbit

stories and his character was the one that became most associated with Brer Rabbit. It was then that the stories were published in books and shown on television, with Uncle Remus as the storyteller. Despite all of the success of Uncle Remus, the true history of the stories belongs to the slaves and their ancestors who passed them down from generation to generation.

Brer Rabbit, or Brother Rabbit, became very appealing even to white audiences. His fluffy coat and adoring face was part of his appeal. Rabbits represented something soft, endearing and comforting. The Brer Rabbit character was reassuring enough (despite his conniving ways), *that even white families allowed their children to keep up with the stories.

There were many Brer Rabbit stories and he interacted with many characters, including Brer Bear, Brer Coon, Brer Snake, Brer Fox and Anansi the Spider, who was more popular in the Caribbean.

In the original *Tar Baby* story, Brer Rabbit unwittingly became 'outfoxed' by Brer Fox, when he became stuck in a sticky trap of tar, formed to look like a baby. His anger and frustration caused him to react and consequentially, he fell deeper in the tar. Over the years the tar has come to represent *the trap*, often times one that is more politically aligned, but most times the word is used in a way that is meant to degrade. The tar has become a negative implication used by blacks and whites alike to express their anger towards their losses or failures, and their feelings about complexion and race.

What is your Tar Baby?



Mr. President

24" x 48"

Acrylic/Mixed Media on Canvas, Year: 2010



The Conversation

22" x 28"

Acrylic/Mixed Media on Paper, Year 2011