

What is your Tar Baby?

Galerie Myrtis presents Charly Palmer's sticky, metaphoric paintings
by Cara Ober



CARA OBER

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photo by Cara Ober

In the story of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby, the plucky folk hero falls prey to his own hot temper. "Are you deaf or just rude?" he demands of the figure seated beside the road, who refuses to respond to his greetings. "I can't stand folks that are stuck up! You take off that hat and say 'Howdy-do' or I'm going to give you such a lickin'!" Shortly, he lays into the "baby," but quickly discovers that it is a dummy created by his archenemy, Brer Fox. Too late: He's become ensnared in the black goo.

The tale, which has roots in African American slave-era storytelling and was popularized in the late 19th century by Joel Chandler Harris (the quotes above come from a version by S.E. Schlosser), is being told in fresh forms this month at Galerie

Myrtis in the Old Goucher neighborhood. The gallery's current exhibition, "What is your Tar Baby?" is a solo show of mixed media paintings by Atlanta-based Charly Palmer. Using the story as a cultural metaphor, Palmer analyzes the "sticky situations" that often entangle public figures. Using painted portraits, layers of text, and scraps of pattern, Palmer depicts President Barack Obama, singer and actor Paul Robeson, comedian and film producer Dave Chappelle, Marilyn Monroe, and many others, in order to question the bigotry, racism, and the stereotypes that confine them.

"Your convictions, your weaknesses, or your environment can be your tar baby," explains gallery owner Myrtis Bedolla. "According to the artist, 'sometimes the tar is simply being black,' but these figures were chosen for their cultural resonance. Paul Robeson's tar baby was his belief in communism. Richard Pryor's was his drug use. The artist got started on this idea after hearing Cornell West speak about the political snares that surround and entangle President Obama. After that, he began looking at a number of famous civil rights leaders, athletes, scholars, and celebrities and realized that each one had their own kind of tar baby."

[click to enlarge](#) Charly Palmer's paintings manage to retain a sense of mischievous humor, much like

photo by **Cara Ober**

the Brer Rabbit he depicts, despite their controversial social and political messages. Like the famous trickster, Palmer uses a playful approach to weave disparate images and materials together, including magic marker sketches from E.W. Kemble's original illustrations and industrial shingles, a literal reference to tar. Skillful painted portraiture and bold color choices complete the series, presenting visuals as complex and emotional as the narratives represented. Palmer is slated to visit Baltimore on February 12 and 13 for an artist talk and reception with the public.

As a contemporary fine art gallery, Gallerie Myrtis represents living artists, exhibits 'guest' artists, and curates thematic group shows every year. "We are always looking for new talent and I am especially interested in Baltimore artists," says Bedolla. Galerie Myrtis has existed in its current location for four years and does an exhibit every 3-4 months. Bedolla attends Station North Arts Community meetings, as well as those for Charles Village. The gallery participates in many of Station North's Second Saturday events, as an honorary member.

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Myrtis Bedolla spent twenty years in Washington, D.C., as an art consultant before she opened her own gallery on Capital Hill. She has studied art at the University of Maryland, College Park, and attended the Exhibition Development Seminar at MICA. Bedolla worked on the exhibit, "At Freedom's Door: Challenging Slavery in Maryland," at the Maryland Historical Society in 2007 and has travelled to South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Niger to research and document ceremonial objects, research African sculpture, and work on a project with the National Museum of Niger.

Soon after opening her D.C. gallery, Bedolla began shopping for more affordable real estate in Baltimore and, in 2006, she moved to her current location, also known as Lower Charles Village. In an imposing brownstone on Charles Street, Galerie Myrtis is just a few steps from WYPR headquarters. Previous building inhabitants include Goucher College administrative offices, a photography studio, and a private home. The building is approximately 5000 square feet, and the gallery space sprawls throughout the first floor, centered around a modern kitchen, which is useful for opening receptions.

Past Galerie Myrtis exhibits include "Mother, Daughter, Sister, Self" featuring local artists Joyce J. Scott, Oletha DeVane, Maya Freelon Asante, Valerie Maynard, and Linda Day Clark, as well as "Stars and Stripes Pride or Despair," a group exhibit of artistic interpretations of the American flag. "That was one of the shows I'm proudest of," says Bedolla. "It examined where we are as a nation and presented a number of diverse perspectives."

Currently the gallery is accepting applications for a new exhibit: "Emergence: Contemporary Artists To Watch." So far, a number of artists have applied from across the country for the show, scheduled for March, 2011.

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