The story of how Charles came to use imagery derived from mass-produced consumer objects in his artwork is, by now, well-known, but to rehearse it briefly: as a graduate student at the University of Houston, Charles received the gift of a so-called Sammy figure from a classmate. For Charles, who has a background in advertising, the visual language of such popular media was appealing, as was the imagery it employs. The grounds were laid for an artistic practice that appropriates found images, questions the narratives they circulate, and critiques the social, political, and economic vicesities of such circulation: “I wanted to use something familiar and change it into something strange.” 1 Not long after receiving his classmate’s gift, Charles began amassing a collection of objects, variously called “Black memorabilia,” “Black Americana,” or “contemporary collectibles,” that include, among other things, someone’s sheet music, broadsheets, cookie tins, spoons, and syrup dispensers—all of which contain some form of stereotypical image associated with people of African descent. 2 In the items on display in Michael Ray Charles, viewers will discern that Charles possesses an archivist’s inquisitiveness, attention to classification, and image recall. Through his collecting, he has produced a veritable catalogue of the many characters Western nations devised to communicate their dominance over the “other” during their empire building.

The figure of the African-descended person is one thread that ties Charles’ art to the archive of ephemera that he has collected. That visual theme is apparent in the impossible hues used to describe aspects of Black bodies—the shiny black color of the “skin” of the Aunt Jemima and the bulging bright red lips of the Conquistos candy logos—that Charles has appropriated and incorporated into his artworks. For example, in his Forever Free: Untitled (Circus) (2019), he appropriates the figure used to symbolize the enslaved and painted it using black lines to suggest the American page. Likewise, in prints five, six and seven from Every Head is a World, Every World is a Head, Charles portrays the smiles of his figures as watermelon wedges by sampling the ruby red that denotes the overly large lips of the Mammy character and smashing it together with the ubiquitous watermelon that attends the Sambo figure. The use of visual mages from old chromolithography objects, that include but are not limited to greeting cards, calendars, and advertisements, is the second visual theme that derives from his archival practice. The design and faded colors of the flowers that bloom into an alfro from the head of the figure in print three and that engulfs the figure in print two of Every Head is a World, Every World is a Head communicat nostalgia and mustiness. Similarly, Charles’ use of the figure of the clown in Forever Free: Untitled (Dixie) reveals a schmatzy and perhaps sinister sentimentally associated with the resurgence of the Confederate symbol.

The works in the exhibition Michael Ray Charles demonstrate that the artist has made a career exploring the power that attends well-constructed visual materials by sampling commercially produced icons, borrowing from the language of advertisements, and transforming the ethos of mass-marketing into a visual art context.

Cherise Smith
Chief and African Diaspora Studies
Founding Executive Director, Art Galleries at Black Studies


Every World is a Head, Every Head is a World #7 2018 / Lithogaph / Courtesy of Flatbed Press

Micha l Ray Charles is an internationally-renowned artist whose work addresses the struggles for equality and social justice. Charles was featured in the first season of the award-winning PBS series In Art, the 21st Century, and has been exhibited throughout the U.S. and Europe, including exhibitions at Colleum Gallery, Brussels, Belgium; Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY; Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, OH; Abington Knox Gallery, Buffalo, NY; and Galerie Hans Meyer, Dusseldorf, Germany. In 2016, he was awarded The Hene Prize, one of the most prestigious awards given to a practicing artist. Charles is the Hugh Ray and Little Cruz Cullen Distinguished Professor of Painting at The University of Houston and is a senior member of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences faculty.

Cherise Smith is an Associate Professor in African and African Diaspora Studies at the University of Texas, Austin. She specializes in American art after 1945, especially as it intersects with the politics of identity, race, and gender. Her book, Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleyaan-Addo, Niki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith (Duke University Press, 2011), examines how identity is negotiated in performance art in which woman artists take on the characteristics and manners of a racial, ethnic, and gender “other.” Her articles have appeared in Art Journal, African Arts, and exposure among other venues. She was awarded the Garity Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship, the Ford Foundation Diversity Postdoctoral Fellowship, and a Research Fellowship at W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African American Research at Harvard University. She has worked in the curatorial departments of the Art Institute of Chicago, The De Young Museum, and the Saint Louis Art Museum among other institutions.
Opening Reception
Sep 5, 6 - 8pm
Family Day
Sep 6, 11 - 4pm
Nov 10, 11 - 4pm
Dec 6, 11 - 4pm
Insights: Film Screening
Screening of the film 13th
directed by Ava DuVernay
Oct 16, 7pm
Public Symposium:
Approaching Otherness
Dec 7, 2 - 5pm
Check our website for event updates!

FROM THE DIRECTOR
The UMLAUF Sculpture Garden + Museum is proud to present this exhibition by internationally-renowned artist Michael Ray Charles. The exhibition features paintings made for the UMLAUF show, a site-specific wall painting, lithographic prints, and memorabilia from his personal research collection. This show coincides with the UMLAUF’s goal to examine the trajectory of major American art in the decades since Charles Umlauf’s passing. As a culturally rich arts destination, we are thrilled to initiate new partnerships and expand our programming in conjunction with this ground-breaking exhibition.

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Brief:
Forever Free: United (Gains)
2019 / acrylic on paper

Michael Ray Charles
Sep 5, 2019 - Jan 3, 2020

The UMLAUF Sculpture Garden + Museum exhibits the work of Charles Umlauf, his influences and other contemporary artists in a natural setting and provides educational experiences that encourage the understanding and appreciation of art. We provide art-in-education programs to at-risk youth, teacher tours for visually impaired and special needs, and free tours for every public school 1-12th. The UMLAUF is a 501c3 nonprofit organization.

605 Aze Morton Road
Austin, TX 78704
Tues - Fri 10 - 4
Sat & Sun 11 - 4
umlaufsculpture.org

This project is supported in part by Cultural Arts Division of the City of Austin Economic Development Department