

# TEMPLON



MICHAEL RAY CHARLES

*DESIGN BOOM*, 23 mars 2022



confronting racial stereotypes at galerie templon – interview with artist michael ray charles

## **'IN THE PRESENCE OF LIGHT' AT GALERIE TEMPLON**

for the first time in almost two decades, **galerie templon** is presenting the complex oeuvre of **american artist michael ray charles** in an exhibition titled **'in the presence of light'**. on view until **may 7, 2022**, the exhibition transforms the gallery's **grenier-saint-lazare space in paris** into a theater stage in reference to minstrel shows, a popular 19th-century entertainment format when white actors in blackface played black musicians. within it, the artist presents new paintings and sculptures with a color palette limited to black and white shades. striking as they are disturbing, these unseen works subvert american popular imagery to challenge the common perception of identity and racial discrimination. the exhibition is accompanied by the publication of a book written by curator **hedwig van impe** recounting the extraordinary story of his partnership with the artist.

born in 1967 in **lafayette, louisiana, USA**, michael ray charles is considered a pioneer in exploring the representation of **african-american communities within american history and pop culture**. many of his paintings examine racial stereotypes that appear in commercials, advertising billboards, and product packaging. the artist created a sensation when he first emerged on the artistic scene in the nineties, while the success of his shows at **tony shafrazi gallery in new york (1994 to 1999)** quickly led him to exhibit extensively around europe. however, the controversial reception of his work, combined with a growing sense of frustration with the american art world, led him to solely focus on his work and research, avoiding all public exposure for close to twenty years. **designboom spoke with michael ray charles to find out more about his comeback, as well as the provocative new works he is presenting at galerie templon.** read our [interview](#) in full below.



michael ray charles, (forever free) the facts of live, 2012, paint, acrylic latex and copper penny on canvas, 195 × 140 cm – 76 × 55 1in.

all images courtesy templon / hedwig van impe © remei giralt

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### **INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL RAY CHARLES**

**designboom (DB):** this is your first exhibition in almost 20 years. what made you withdraw from the public sphere?

**michael ray charles (MRC):** I think early on, I gotten off to a fast start. and while I was holding my own, I did have some concerns about the speed and what I was putting out. I travel and give lectures and talk about my work and along the way, I realised that america was not healed regarding notions or issues of race. often, people were looking at my work and their responses were less about the work, the work became a source for them to express themselves. and I started thinking about why was that the issue? that led me to think about notions of power, and how people lacked power or had a certain range of power to express themselves in regards to certain ideas. oftentimes, black people were disturbed by the images, but they talked about the images as if they were black people. and it varied with white people, their engagement with the work. also, the way that my work was being written about concerned me. or myself, for example, I was called 'a wild child from the south', as if I were wild and needed to be tamed or cultured by the north. I felt people didn't talk about the work enough, they didn't explore the imagery enough and it was more reactionary. the work had other challenges, don't get me wrong, but it was a moment for pause.



michael ray charles, (forever free) the magic man, 2012. acrylic latex and copper penny on canvas.  
185 x 140 cm – 72 7/8 x 55 1/8 in. (also header image)

**DB:** what made you decide to exhibit again now?

**MRC:** I had an opportunity to explore some culture here in paris and in brussels, so I begun to embark on that. when I got here, I started to think about being black in america versus being black in in europe and different parts of europe, and what that means. what were the similarities and differences? I was working with a business partner of mine, hedwig van impe, and we decided that it'd be a great idea just to produce work. I would come abroad, I'd work here, and we'd travel. I was able to gain access to experiences and ideas about issues of race, power and history, and meet people that I would not otherwise have access to.

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michael ray charles, (forever free) black values, 2013, acrylic latex and copper penny on canvas, 170 x 170 cm — 66 7/8 x 66 7/8 in.

**DB:** do you think that the public's perception of your work, from 20 years ago to now, has changed in any way?

**MRC:** I don't know, obviously things have changed in 20 years. there's different ways that people engage with the work, folks come to see the work for different reasons. I'm someone that believes that you are attracted to that which you are, as well. sometimes folks are interested in collecting work for specific purposes. hopefully there's an aesthetic component that catches the attention of a person, and, hopefully, there's the feeling, the sensation, to question what one is seeing. all of those are important to me. there's been consistency, and I think that even if I was exhibiting more there would not have been much difference. there seems to be a similar interest.



michael ray charles, (forever free) the road most travelled, 2013, acrylic latex and copper penny on canvas, 170 x 155 cm — 66 7/8 x 61 in.

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**DB:** you are showing new works, including paintings and sculptures, at galerie templon. do these function as a continuation of your earlier work in terms of the themes they address or are there any additional topics?

**MRC:** I like to think that growth is linear. certainly I could make paintings, next to paintings, next to paintings and, and show the evolution of work. there's certain ideas that continue to linger, but the earlier works were definitely informed by a different set of intentions. I made a conscious effort to make work that I thought reflect the characteristics of hip hop culture. I thought that there was a time when black youth had the ability to express themselves in an authentic way that was different than previous generations, and I wanted to not borrow from, but make art of it. the best way was to make art that intersected with those characteristics. it was work that was unapologetic, it was in your face, it was confrontational, it was playful, it was clever at times, smart, I would even say brilliant, colourful. but I had always been interested in art serving other purposes than what typically people associate with it as something that sits on the wall and provides you with a moment of departure. I'm really interested in how the past remains present, so I try to make art that encourages, or nurtures, the exploration of such ideas.



michael ray charles, (forever free) rising tide, 2006, acrylic latex and copper penny on canvas, 153 x 221 cm.

**DB:** as you mentioned, earlier examples of your work include a variety of colors. why did you decide to limit the color palette to black and white shades this time?

**MRC:** I actually want to do more of those, I started thinking about warm and cool darks and greys. what's interesting about the black and white paintings is that it's been a gradual evolution. the removal of color, the stripping away of the text and so forth. I think that the work is more contemplative in different ways. yet there are still hints of color in some areas. this is just this group of work, I've done a lot of work over the years and in many cases they're done in color, both symbolic and expressive use of it.



michael ray charles, (forever free) the last laugh, 2011, acrylic latex and copper penny on canvas, 172 x 135 cm - 67 6/8 x 53 1/8 in.

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**michael ray charles currently lives and works in houston, texas, USA.** he spent most of his youth in california and louisiana. he studied design and advertising for three and a half years before being awarded a BFA degree in 1989. he went on to obtain an MFA in 1993 at the university of houston, texas, before teaching at the university of texas in austin. in 2014, he joined the faculty of the university of houston. his work features in a wide range of public collections, including the museum of modern art in new york, museum of fine arts in houston, arizona state university art museum and san antonio museum of art in texas.



michael ray charles, (forever free) the bank, 2006, bronze, stainless steel, glass and copper penny, 142 x ø 80 cm – 55 7/8 x ø 55 7/8 in.

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