

Charly Palmer's

WHAT IS YOUR TAR BABY?



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 Anasi 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.

That 'sticky stuff' is what Cornell West referred to in his discussion about how Barack Obama makes his decisions in government. The tar dictates how Obama moves in office and to whom his immediate loyalties lie. That trap was in place for him when he was sworn into office, placed there by the personification of Brer Fox, George Bush. The tar is not based on Obama's race, but simply on the fact that he is a part of the political game and in that game full of tricksters, someone will inevitably get stuck.

This tar trap is represented almost literally by the recent decisions made by Obama to handle the situation with the large oil tycoon, BP. Obligated to involve himself because of his position on offshore drilling; Obama put himself at the forefront of the BP investigation. He is forced to handle the situation in a way that prevents him from being completely smothered by *BP's tar*. His responsibility to America placed him in a 'sticky situation,' because he has to appease the people, the rest of the government and the world without compromising himself.

The *tar* can affect anyone because its sticky trap ensnares. There were many that compromised themselves and got caught in the tar that altered their lives. Joe Louis was caught in the tar throughout his whole career, compromising his integrity to placate the mighty conglomerates that controlled his career. He was told what to do, including disassociating himself from fellow boxer Jack Johnson. In addition to being told to go to his corner without celebration after defeating a white opponent, Louis was never to be seen with a white woman. He conceded in many ways and therefore lost himself and all of his earnings in the process. His life represented the same sticky element that Brer Rabbit himself got caught in, that dreaded *tar*. Louis was only one of the many entertainers who became stuck in the tar; Dorothy Dandridge, Josephine Baker, comedian Richard Pryor and Dave Chappelle all fell victim to its trap.