

WHAT IS YOUR TAR BABY?

Curatorial Statement



Myrtis Bedolla of Galerie Myrtis

Joel Chandler Harris, author of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby stories, is credited with preserving African folklore and maintaining the indigenous quality of the slave vernacular through his Uncle Remus character. In 1878, interviewer [James Morrow] asked Harris if any particular Negro suggested “the quaint and philosophic character which he had built up into one of the monuments of modern literature” Harris replied:

He was not an invention of my own, but a human syndicate ...of those whom I have known. I just walloped them together into one person and called him 'Uncle Remus.' You must remember that sometimes the Negro is a genuine and an original philosopher.

In “What is your Tar Baby?” artist Charly Palmer is the genuine and original philosopher. As the griot, he appropriates the tale of “Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby” to address issues of bigotry, racism and stereotyping. In Harris’ tale, the rabbit becomes trapped when the tar figure violates social expectations by refusing to exchange greetings. In Palmer’s version, it is no longer the archetypal trickster rabbit, but rather civil rights leaders, entertainers, politicians, scholars, and African and Native Americans who confront the tar baby. Each metaphoric “tar baby”, represents a conviction to a social cause, sensitive situation or misguided belief. The setting, – no longer the briar patch or a benevolent plantation – is a greatly conflicted society.

There is an ease and confidence with which Charly has rendered social commentary in the guise of folklore. He is as edgy and cunning as Brer Fox in the way he addresses controversial subject matter. While pointing to well-known figures whose foibles have brought on public fame or infamy, he provokes a deep emotional response. Palmer taps into the collective psyche, reaching the inner sanctum where our tar baby lies.

Myrtis Bedolla, Curator and Founding Director

Galerie Myrtis

Source Citation

Harris, Julia Collier. "'Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings'." *The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918. 142-160. Rpt. in *Children's Literature Review*. Ed. Deborah J. Morad. Vol. 49. Detroit: Gale Research, 1999. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 4 Oct. 2010.