

TEMPLON



MICHAEL RAY CHARLES

FRIEZE, September 2023



Michael Ray Charles,
(Forever Free) Playgirl, 2003,
acrylic latex and copper
penny on board, 2.5 x 1.5 m

Michael Ray Charles
Templon, New York, USA

'What's the use of creating images if they can't motivate, move, instruct or provoke?' Michael Ray Charles asked me when I spoke to him recently. Regarding his own work, I would add: repel, frighten, arouse and, most importantly, implore audiences to explore their suppositions regarding global race relations.

'VENI VIDI', Charles's recent exhibition with Templon – his first in the US for almost two decades and only his second globally since 2004 – continues the artist's inquiries into minstrelsy, 'America's first creative contribution to global culture' as he told me, which he complicates with burlesque and masquerade. Though ostensibly presenting caricatures of Black people, Charles's works use visual cues and gut-churning symbolism to illustrate the violence

ever-present in a society dominated by white supremacy.

The exhibition's titular work, *(Forever Free) Veni Vidi* (2022), depicts a sculpted bust of a Black figure with muscular arms, a chiselled jaw and large protruding breasts, wearing a pained, weathered expression. In their white-gloved hands, they hold a thin red string: on one side dangles the head of US president Abraham Lincoln, whose 1863 Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves; on the other, hangs that of Lyndon B. Johnson, who passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibiting racial discrimination. The bust hovers above a French-style console, which holds between its legs a globe displaying the African continent, set against a white wall decorated with neoclassical moulding. This convergence

of cultural symbols presents a historical view of race and power structures that reverberates into the contemporary moment. The pillage of African nations by European countries such as France, which peaked during the 18th century, resounds in former colonies as well as in their diasporas. The symbology is also personal: some years ago, Charles was only able to sell his home after replacing his own family photos with images of white people, reminding us of the pervasive biases inherent to the visual artefacts of contemporary life.

This framework – notions of injustice conveyed through visual politics, the mirroring of sexual desire and race relations – extends throughout the exhibition. On the gallery's ground floor, nine paintings showcase still-prevalent suppositions about gender and race despite centuries of so-called development. In *(Forever Free) A One 'Man' Show* (2022), for instance, a female figure sits on a chair in fishnets and long boots. Their face, however, is overlaid with a low-resolution reproduction of what appears to be a figure in blackface. Charles subverts the traditional striptease – where what is most desired is only ever hinted at – to highlight negative assumptions regarding race. *(Forever Free) In a Masquerade* (2023) similarly mirrors the dynamic between performer and audience with that of artwork and viewer. Two white female figures, both in blackface, appear on stage: one is on her knees, bound by ropes, wearing a collar and mask that recall chattel slavery; the other stands coquettishly in a tight black corset and long black gloves. It's a spectacle that discomforts by displaying suppressed sexual desires within racial dynamics.

Reviewing Charles's work in 1997 for *The New York Times*, critic Roberta Smith wrote that his paintings fail to exceed 'the level of clever, stylish calculation'. On the contrary, a quarter of a century later, the artist brings us face to face with a mirror of American culture that forces us to reckon with the hypocrisies upon which our society is built: that all men are created equal, that freedom came in the form of emancipation, that the Civil Rights Act successfully removed discrimination, that race and gender no longer harbour inequity – that, at its core, the US truly wants equality.

— Folasade Ologundudu