

TEMPLON



MICHAEL RAY CHARLES

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VIA MICHAEL RAY CHARLES AND TEMPLON, PARIS/
HEDWIG VAN IMPE, PHOTO BY REMEI GIRALT

Michael Ray Charles's "(Forever Free) Veni Vidi" (2022), on view at the Templon gallery.

Michael Ray Charles

Through May 6. Templon, 509 10th Avenue, Manhattan; 212-922-3745, templon.com.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Michael Ray Charles's paintings excavated the ugly history of antebellum minstrelsy with nervy appropriations of racist imagery — the grotesque faces and rictus grins of Sambos and mammies — and not always to appreciative reception. He was accused of perpetuating painful stereotypes when many would have preferred they remain buried. For the last 20 years he has shown sporadically, mostly in Europe.

The pictures in Charles's first New York exhibition since then finds an artist still surfacing that past, but with a slicker veneer. Where the demeaning depictions of minstrel performance and advertising were replicated at confrontational scale, here their bitter taste is blended into ornament. The shining obsidian bust in "(Forever Free) Veni Vidi" (2002) sits in a richly appointed Baroque interior, a recognition of how racism smooths itself into the

background of modern life.

These are contextually complex paintings, incorporating ideas about performance (of gender, race, sexuality) and the theatricality of identity. Blackface caricatures still haunt the canvases, but they're flattened à la wheatpaste street art and spliced onto burlesque dancers and dominatrixes. The figures are often half-formed — Black faces grafted onto white bodies missing limbs or segments of torso, obscured by gimp masks or African ones studded with cowrie shells, performing in circuses and masquerades — a dizzying cascade of historical references that reveals the nightmare of our insatiable need for extravaganza. The metaphors can get tangled, but Charles's equation of American racism with entertainment is hard to shake, a sadomasochistic relationship dependent equally on pain and pleasure.

MAX LAKIN