









Christine Y. Kim & Franklin Sirmans



## Michael Richards

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MICHAEL RICHARDS' ART WORKS TOOK ON SENSITIVE THEMES WITH FORMAL rigor to create images whose resonance and vitality will continue to amuse, provoke, and communicate. As a Jamaican-American raised in Kingston, Michael found sustenance in the poetic ambiguity of all human experience. Jorge Daniel Veneciano, one of the many curators who was affected by Michael's work, once framed a discussion about Michael's work around Ralph Ellison, one of Michael's heroes whose reference will live long in his art. Born in New York in 1963, Michael's work is a synthesis of the 1970's Black Arts Movement in which he grew up and the multiculturalism prevalent in his formative years as a student and artist.

While Michael's work employed culturally-loaded symbols such as hair, tar, feathers, rubber and mirrors, his primary medium was bronze. Often employing molds of his own body, the sculptures provoke questions regarding the ways in which subtle signifiers affect our place within society. "The mirrors are a metaphorical device — a reflection of society and how we perceive ourselves through the eyes of others, the ways in which self-perception is molded through myths, stereotypes and subliminal messages," he told Marysol Nieves of the Bronx Museum of the Arts.

Michael's life-size figurative sculptures set ready-mades of ancient and modern mythologies within a contemporary landscape. A ladder made of feathers, a chariot with a broken wheel, and a punctured forearm represent some of the icons in Michael's lexicon of imagery. In his sculptures as well as his drawings, the figure was positioned in a narrative that lent itself to layered readings. Veneciano, curator of Richards' 1995-1996 Artist-in-Residence exhibition at The Studio Museum in Harlem, wrote in the exhibition catalogue:

His form of appropriation is more on the level of the conceptual, intersecting the visual; it is essentially symbolic. This is apparent in works such as *Escape Plan 76 (Brer Plane in the Brier Patch)* and *The Great Black Airmen*, where cultural constructs from folklore to African-American history function as topical and categorical ready-mades from which the artist culls his subjects and juxtaposes them to elicit their hidden contradictions as well as their poignancy.

More recently, Jeff Konigsberg, Michael's studio mate at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's World Trade Center Studio Program, explained that Michael's two newest works, which were also lost in the World Trade Center tragedy, depicted the autobiographical figure being pierced by airplanes accompanied by meteors and flames. This was not new for Michael, simply the trajectory of a flight he had been working on consistently for many years right up until his untimely death in his studio.

One cannot help but notice the eerie connection between the imagery in Richards' work and his tragic death. Though ever forward in his conceptual practice, Michael found sustenance in the subjects of the past, most specifically the triumph and tragedy of the famed Tuskegee Airmen. A team of World War II Air Force pilots, as famous for their flying skills as they were infamous for their alma mater, where black men were subjected to being live experiments on syphilis, the airmen represented a crucial space for dialogue and thought that Michael continuously mined. He worked with the inexhaustible history of the Tuskegee Airmen for almost the last ten years, including his most recent works.

After receiving his BA from Queens College in 1985 and his MA from New York University in 1991, Michael completed the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in 1993 and went on to the Artists-in-the-Marketplace Program at the Bronx Museum in the Arts the following year. He was an Artist-in-Residence at The Studio Museum in Harlem in 1995-96 and at the Socrates Sculpture Park in 1997.

Considered one of the most prolific artists to come through The Studio Museum A-I-R Program, he was included in the prestigious *Passages: Contemporary Art in Transition* curated by Deidre Scott. That exhibition presented *Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian*, (1999), a seminal work in his series about the Tuskegee Airmen, where the artist's cast body in the uniform of the airmen is pierced with model airplanes. St. Sebastian, the patron saint of soldiers and athletes because of his physical endurance, was martyred for protecting the captured Christians he was supposed to imprison.

While Michael's untimely death is a grave tragedy to us all, his life and work will be preserved by museums and galleries, and treasured by friends and new viewers, and recorded in the history of American art for generations to come.

