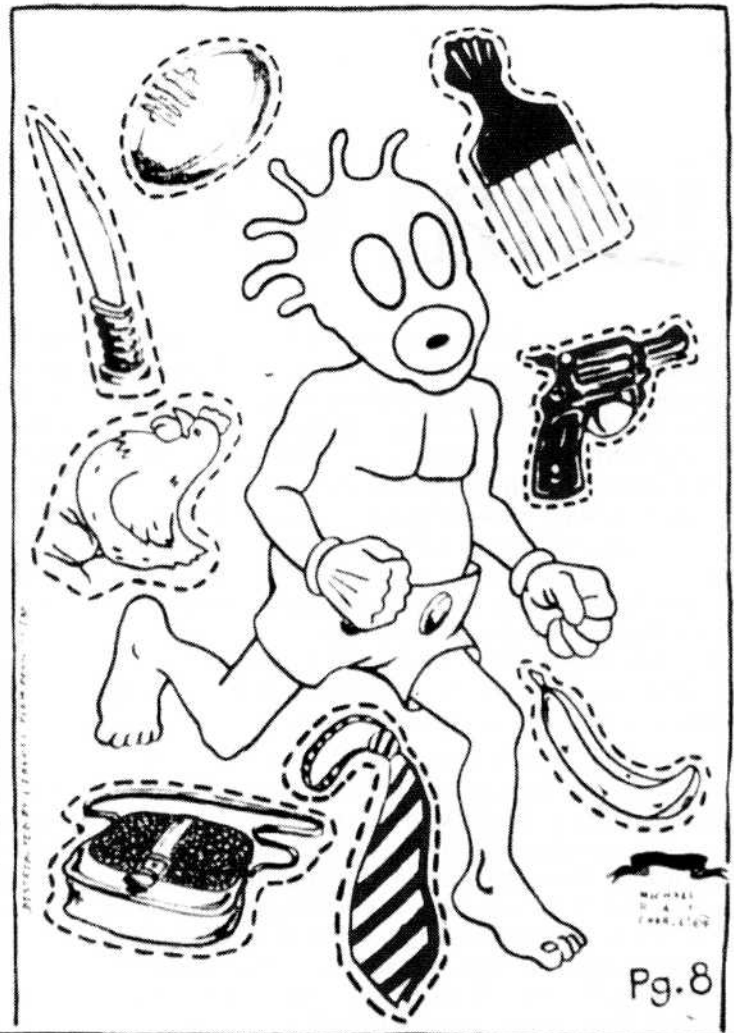


Michael Ray Charles,
Cut and Paste,
 acrylic on paper,
 60 x 35 inches, 1994.
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, NYC.



CUT AND PASTE

Interpreting Connotations in Visual Culture

Denotations and connotations are at play in all of visual and verbal communication, and their consequences can be much more serious than designers' attempts at influencing our choices of which fashions to desire and acquire. Michael Ray Charles, for example, is a contemporary African-American artist who in his paintings employs and unmasks connotations of racism in commonly used denotations of African-American subjects. This article shows how teachers, college students, middle-school students, and preschoolers have deconstructed a painting by Charles, a cover of a *Rolling Stone* magazine, printed tee-shirts, cereal boxes, and teddy bears by using the construct of denotations and connotations as an interpretive strategy to better understand, evaluate, and enjoy the visually constructed world in which they live.

Roland Barthes (1915-1980), the French semiotician and literary critic, investigated how material items of culture signify and express meaning and analyzed many kinds of "texts" in popular culture, including fashion, wrestling, and advertisements. While studying magazine advertisements, he identified two signifying practices: *denotations* and *connotations*. To

Interpreting Visual Culture

BY TERRY BARRETT

illustrate the distinction between denotations and connotations, Barthes (1977) provided his interpretive analysis of a photographic magazine ad for Panzani spaghetti products that appeared in a French magazine. The ad shows cellophane packages of uncooked spaghetti, a can of tomato sauce, a cellophane package of Parmesan cheese, and tomatoes, onions, peppers, and mushrooms emerging from an open string shopping bag. Yellows and greens predominate against a red background. The Panzani label is on the can and cellophane packages. Barthes identifies three parts of the ad: the linguistic message, the denoted image, and the connoted image. The linguistic message is the word *Panzani*, which is both denotational and connotational. Barthes explains that the word denotes a brand name of the packaged products, but that it connotes, just by the way it sounds, "Italianicity" for non-Italian speakers. (It would not have that connotation in Italy for Italian readers because they would perceive the word as "normal" rather than as "Italian.")

The photographic image itself denotes what it shows: a can, spaghetti packages, mushrooms, peppers, and so forth. Barthes explains that the image connotes several other messages that are implicit. He interprets the connota-

tions of the ad as representing a return from the market and implying two values: freshness of the products and the goodness of home-cooking. The variety of the objects connotes the idea of total culinary service as if Panzani provided everything needed for a carefully prepared, (almost) homemade dish. The photograph of fresh vegetables suggests that the concentrate in the can is equivalent to the vegetables surrounding it. The predominance of red and green, the national colors of Italy, reinforces "Italianicity." The composition, focus, lighting, and color transmit a further value: the aesthetic goodness of a still life.

Art Teachers Interpret a Painting

In his paintings, Michael Ray Charles, himself an African American, overtly refers to offensive denotations of Blacks constructed in the past that have become collectors' items of the present, all with unsavory racial implications. When filmmaker Spike Lee (1998) first saw Charles's work, he said, "His works are one-sheets, posters for movies that Hollywood would never have the courage to make, exploring race and sex in this country" (p. 3). Lee then invited Charles to collaborate with him on the movie *Bamboozled*, a satirical film

about resurrecting the minstrel show for primetime TV.

Artist and art writer Calvin Reid (1998) identifies the denotations of Charles's subject matter this way: "Big-lipped little dark pickaninnies with heads full of nappy pigtailed; the happy-go-lucky coon; charcoal dark Little Black Sambo; Aunt Jemima, her head in a kerchief smiling down from the grocery shelves (and don't forget Uncle Ben); watermelon-eating darkies and the evil black thug looking to rob white men and rape white women" (p. 4). These are the images that denigrate and degrade African Americans while feeding racist delusions about the absence of humanity in Blacks: "Charles's appropriated signifiers collide in a reduced version of a kind of race war, without guns but fought with images and the ossified stereotypes still rumbling around the American subconscious" (p. 4).

The consequences of racial stereotyping of African Americans are dreadful. As early as 1944, Lawrence Redneck, an African-American author, identified 19 different and distinct stereotypes assigned to Blacks in images: the savage African, the happy slave, the devoted servant, the corrupt politician, the irresponsible citizen, the petty thief, the social delinquent, the vicious criminal, the sexual superman,

