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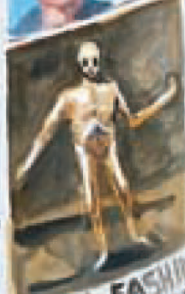
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CHARLIE ROBERTS PRESENT BRICE GALLERY

MIAMBO JAMBO CABINET OF THE COSMOS

COPS CAPTURE CRAZY





CHARLIE ROBERTS

MAMBO JAMBO:

Cabinet of the Cosmos

Rice Gallery
HOUSTON, TEXAS



Foreword

In September 2006, I walked into a small New York gallery and found myself mesmerized by a wall sculpture which included at least one hundred figures and heads – a girl with braids, a green-faced witch, a king, a man wearing sunglasses, basketball players, a devil, a mermaid and more. All were arranged on the wall in five concentric circles. Beautifully painted, weird, and amazingly crafted from only paper and hot glue, it was a mini-universe in motion, a grand vision of all beings linked together in a swirling Dance of Life. This sculpture, *Ode to Joy*, was the perfect introduction to the world of artist Charlie Roberts where obsessively but exquisitely detailed paintings overflow with closely observed humans, animals, birds, corporate logos, Old Master paintings, and you-name-it, all fresh, immediate, and true.

When I contacted Charlie he revealed he had never made an installation, but he accepted my invitation with enthusiasm and provided several sculptural proposals for the Rice Gallery space. As gallery staff continued to look through images of Charlie's past work, however, we found ourselves returning again and again to examples of his virtuoso painting. One painting in particular, *Mystery Cabinet*, 2006 consistently caught our attention, and we asked Charlie if he would consider using it as a starting point for the installation. Charlie embraced the idea, saying that he used the cabinet motif often because it allowed him "to fit many stories and objects into a small area."

During his site visit in November 2007, Charlie paced the gallery, using his body to measure the space. Rice architecture student Alice Chai took Charlie's estimates and drew precise plans for a colossal cabinet with angles calculated to give the look of exaggerated one-point perspective in order to draw the visitor's eye to the cabinet's center. Alice's drawings were given form by talented members of the Rice Carpentry and Painting Shop, so that when Charlie returned to campus in January 2008, a massive, empty, wooden cabinet and an unadorned plywood floor filled the gallery.

The bare structure must have been alluring to Charlie, a self-proclaimed “maximalist who loves to pack things to the gills,” because he went to work immediately. First, he lined the cabinet’s side panels with watercolor paintings of animals and humans, which he had completed at home in Norway. Next, he created the sculptures. For three weeks we heard the continuous thump of an axe and at the end of each day it was a thrill to see what Charlie had created. A fish replete with plywood scales, snarling guard dogs, a 12-foot tall woman wearing pearls and holding a knife, a referee with woodblock knees, totem poles, and two figures holding flags which read “Mambo” and “Jambo” were favorites.

Charlie’s sources of inspiration for the cabinet included 17th-century “cabinets of curiosities,” and 15th-century Northern Renaissance altarpieces designed with hinged doors, or wings, that could be opened or closed. Often the exteriors of the altarpieces were painted with muted images that stood in sharp contrast to the more radiant paintings inside. As Charlie said, “You’d have Adam and Eve in black and white and then you’d open the altarpiece up and see the glories of heaven in color . . . the worldly grey and then, Boom!” At Rice Gallery, Charlie asked us to keep the cabinet doors closed, so that visitors could open them and receive the full effect of the bright interior and figures.

When we asked Charlie, “Why MAMBO JAMBO?” for the title, he told us “jambo” was not only the word his bluegrass band used to describe their playing, but also a word that reminded him of voodoo, as well as gumbo, where everything is thrown into a single pot. While we did not realize it at the time, we know now it is a phrase that sums up perfectly how Charlie’s intuitive, improvisational way of working mixes with his vibrant, raw vision. I thank Charlie for his gift of transformation, of spectacle, and for the creative energy and sheer hard work that turned our space into such an unforgettable Cosmos.

Kimberly Davenport
Director



Charlie Roberts

MAMBO JAMBO:

Cabinet of the Cosmos

Cabinets of curiosities, or *wunderkammern*, were a phenomenon that swept Renaissance Europe. Progenitors of modern museums of history and natural science, they were room-sized collections of objects from far-flung places amassed by the wealthy. Narwhal tusks were displayed as unicorn horns alongside pieces of the “true cross” and glowing phosphorescent minerals. An illustration of the collection of Neapolitan pharmacist Ferrante Imperato from his 1599 *Dell'Historia Naturale* shows shelves filled with oddities lining the walls, a ceiling practically tiled with stuffed fish and mammals, and a crocodile dangling in the center of the room.

Charlie Roberts took the idea of the *wunderkammer* as the point of departure for his Rice Gallery installation *MAMBO JAMBO: Cabinet of the Cosmos*. While cabinets of curiosities initially were entire rooms, the term evolved to include pieces of furniture with doors that opened to reveal compartments filled with objects. Roberts's installation was a combination of both: his massive “cabinet” and its side panels spanned 65 feet, obscuring the back wall of Rice Gallery.

Roberts's quirky figurative paintings always have combined disparate elements – in the past he has placed images from Gainsborough paintings

alongside a portrait of Beyoncé – and his Rice Gallery installation was no exception. Two walls of wooden grids flanked the massive doors of the installation's central cabinet, and the grids were inset with portraits painted in Roberts's loose, skillful style.

On the left was a diverse collection of animals; on the right was an odd assortment of people. The animal portraits were rendered anthropomorphically, sometimes looking more human than the humans. An alligator grinned in profile, a lemur stared in wide-eyed surprise and a bear looked like it was captured in mid sentence. The

people Roberts painted, however, could have been collected for a cabinet of curiosities assembled by a visiting alien. Among the cast of characters were a stick-like fashion model, a hip-hop aficionado, a member of the Mohawk tribe and an actor in Kabuki makeup.

The doors of the central cabinet opened to reveal Roberts's rustic wood sculptures. In the middle of the cabinet was the fantastic figure of a woman giving birth, alluding to the birth of the world. Constructed from roughly hewn and blackened logs, the figure was backlit by flashing lights, adding a kind of campy drama. The artist painted the watercolor portraits at his home in Norway and shipped them to Rice, but



his massive wood sculptures were all created on-site in Rice Gallery using sheets of plywood and logs. Roberts executed everything in a short but labor-intensive three-week period.

In addition to the various animal sculptures surrounding the birthing figure in the cabinet, there were two giant wooden animals positioned like snarling guard dogs in front. Meanwhile, pieced-together figures of a man and a woman stood like sentinels in the Rice Gallery foyer, one holding a sign that read “MAMBO,” and the other holding one that read “JAMBO.”

While Roberts’s watercolors were fluidly and deftly executed, his sculptures had a brutal, raw and hard-won quality that reflected the tremendous physical effort required to create them. He described his approach to sculptural materials as “caveman.” In the weeks preceding the opening, he could be viewed through the gallery window attacking logs with long- and short-handled axes, wood chips flying. The plywood was spared the ax – Roberts simply broke it into pieces using his hands, feet, and knees and then roughly pieced it back together.

The tension between spontaneity and control, between the real and unreal, bestowed a subconscious aspect to each element of *MAMBO JAMBO* and suffused the entire installation and gave it vibrant life. As much a psychological museum as it was an exhibition of oddities, *MAMBO JAMBO* was a window into Roberts’s own personal piece of the cosmos.

Kelly Klaasmeyer

Kelly Klaasmeyer is a Houston arts writer.
This article first appeared in the Spring 2008 issue of *Rice Sallyport*, The Magazine of Rice University.



























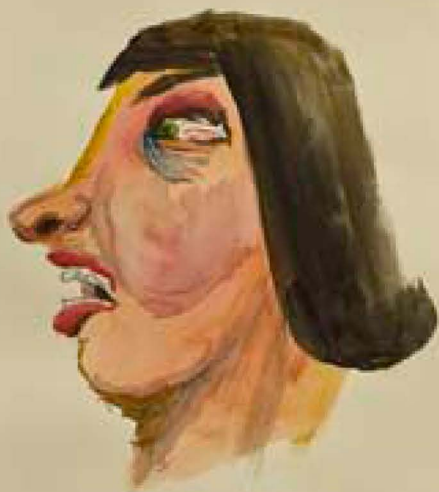
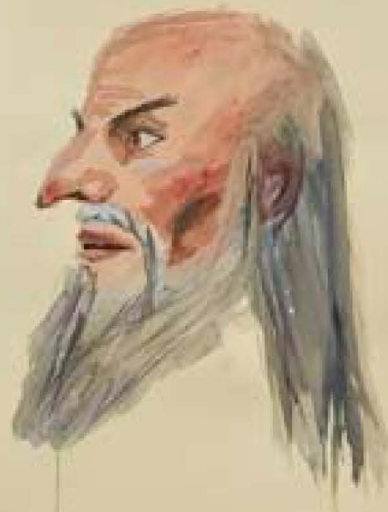














about the artist

Charlie Roberts was born in Hutchinson, Kansas in 1983. He started making art in high school when he and his friends created posters to promote their band. Not until he took an art class from an especially influential high school art teacher did he become, as he puts it, “obsessed” with painting. Still, art did not seem like a realistic option to Roberts, so he entered the University of Kansas as a history major. There he heard an art history professor tell such vivid stories about visual artists and their work that he committed himself to art, left the University of Kansas, and enrolled at the Emily Carr Institute of Art + Design in Vancouver, British Columbia, where he studied painting for two years. Solo exhibitions include *Freedom* (2008), VOUS ETES ICI, Amsterdam; *Hill Country Fuzz* (2008) and *Ode to Joy* (2006), Kravets/Wehby Gallery, New York, and *Animals vs. Humans: The Final Battle* (2005), Blanket Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia. Group exhibitions include *The Incomplete* (2008), Chelsea Art Museum, New York and *Paint* (2006), Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia. In summer 2008, Roberts was included in *Sonsbeek 2008: Grandeur*, the 10th international group exhibition of sculpture in Arnhem, the Netherlands. Charlie Roberts lives and works in Asker, Norway.

Charlie Roberts, *MAMBO JAMBO: Cabinet of the Cosmos*
Commission, Rice University Art Gallery
24 January – 30 March 2008

Rice University Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the campus of Rice University,
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Photographs courtesy the artist
MAMBO JAMBO: Cabinet of the Cosmos Exhibition Announcement, 2007
gouache on paper, 24 x 18 inches
Copyright © Charlie Roberts
Front cover

Mystery Cabinet, 2006 (detail)
gouache on paper, 30 x 24 inches
Copyright © Charlie Roberts
Page 3

Photograph courtesy the artist and Kravets/Wehby Gallery, New York
Ode to Joy, 2006
cardboard, acrylic, and string, dimensions variable (112 individual pieces)
Copyright © Charlie Roberts
Page 3

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