



Charly Palmer

Charly Palmer's art continues to expand.

Already a force as a fine artist and graphic designer, Palmer has of late found success on another storytelling platform – as a children's book illustrator.

Palmer's first effort, "Mama Africa! How Miriam Makeba Spread Hope with Her Song," written by Katryn Erskine, was published in 2017 and received a Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe New Talent award for children's literature.

"I've always had a love of children's books," Palmer said. "I've been collecting them since I was twenty years old. I'd always wanted to do one, but the time and money had never been right until "Mama Africa."

Palmer, who as a fine artist won distinction for his "Civil Rights" series of paintings, took a year to illustrate "Mama Africa."

He knew the work was needed – during a 2017 trip to Johannesburg, South Africa, Palmer said he met many black South African youngsters who didn't know of Makeba, whose inspirational songs gave voice to the worldwide movement to end apartheid – the sadistic, state mandated and enforced laws that disenfranchised and subjugated black South Africans.

Some of the same youths also did not know who Martin Luther King was, Palmer said.

“A young man told me “I’m a born free,” Palmer said. “I had never heard the term before. It meant they were born after apartheid, and basically saying apartheid had nothing to do with me.

“And I’m like, really?”

Palmer is on a quest, using his fine art and illustrator’s eye to create work that can help young people of color understand the barriers they will face on the path to success.

“We have to reach our children with a relevant message that encourages them to follow their dreams,” Palmer said. “Sometimes we reach them too late, and that’s tragic.

“As a parent, I want to see and encourage young people to think and dream big, to be daring, and not put limitations on themselves.”

Palmer knows the power of inspiration.

Born in Fayette, Ala., and raised in Milwaukee, Wis., Palmer earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the American Academy of Art and studied at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, IL.

He said his artistic style is heavily influenced by a book he read as a child.

“To some degree, me doing what I do today came from being exposed to one book, Ezra Jack Keats, “The Snowy Day,” about a kid who wakes up and doesn’t have to go to school on a snowy day.

“The book is not about him being a black kid, it’s about him being a kid, a beautiful black kid, who reminded me of me.”

Like Keats, Palmer said he uses “a lot of collage, texture and patterns” in his work. “I went back and looked at that book again and I can see the influence,” Palmer said.

Palmer has also made a thematic change in his work, moving from the “narrative” form reverently depicting events of black history, to one that simply celebrates the beauty of black people and their various cultures.

It’s all about the future, Palmer said, which makes it all about the kids.

“My youngest child is 15, my oldest is 36. I have grand kids,” Palmer said. “My work now is about what do I leave them.

Palmer said he wants his work to help the next generations understand “who they are and how to get to the next step.

“It’s definitely about sacrifice, about trying to make it better for them,” he said. “If they’re paying attention to Forty-five (President Trump) and the things he’s doing, what can I do even to address that in a way so they don’t become angry, bitter or fearful?

“It is easy to get frustrated and angry and want to give up, but you have to have a reason to continue,” Palmer said. “That’s where the young people come in. They are our reason. There are so many young ones out there doing great things. They work hard and are focused.

“They will be our inspiration.”

Inspiration is one of the reasons he signed on with the Mackey Twins, who Palmer has known for almost a decade.

“When we met, I was not sure if we were going to do any business together, but I knew I needed to meet them,” Palmer said. “Now we have a great friendship.

“They also believe in me, and that’s what all of us need, someone who believes in you.”

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