



Opposite page: Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled*, 2009, acrylic on PVC panel, 61 1/4 x 72 1/4".

Right: Kerry James Marshall, *Better Homes, Better Gardens*, 1994, acrylic and collage on canvas, 8' 4" x 11' 10". From the series "The Garden Project," 1994-95.



## THE MARSHALL PLAN

CARROLL DUNHAM ON KERRY JAMES MARSHALL'S "MASTRY"

IT IS AS PLAIN as the nose on one's face—and, for many, equally impossible to see—that the history of Euro-American painting has been created by and for white people. Kerry James Marshall has recounted his childhood realization of this distorted condition while wandering in museums, and as an adult he made it his stated artistic mission to create representations of the black figure that would be ratified in the halls of our institutions. With the large survey exhibition "Mastry"—which traveled this fall from Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art to the Met Breuer in New York, where it is currently on view—he has clearly succeeded.

As a young artist, Marshall (more or less) eschewed abstraction in favor of an honest, highly personal representation of his surroundings and experience, and he has developed with increasing confidence, ambition, and subtlety into one of the most consequential painters among us. His work is noteworthy not only for the complexity and originality with which it braids together topical, art-historical, and personal concerns but also—perhaps more so—for the bright but surprisingly gentle light it sheds on the horribly mutilated condition of our collective psyche when it comes to matters of "race."

Beginning in the late 1970s and throughout much of the '80s, the dramatic ambition of many emerging





Left: Kerry James Marshall, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, 1980, egg tempera on paper, 8 x 6 1/2".

Right: Kerry James Marshall, *Souvenir I*, 1997, acrylic, collage, silk-screen ink, and glitter on canvas, 9' x 13'. From the series "Souvenir," 1997-98.

Opposite page: Kerry James Marshall, *De Style*, 1993, acrylic and collage on canvas, 8' 8" x 10' 2".



Marshall's work is noteworthy for the bright but surprisingly gentle light it sheds on the horribly mutilated condition of our collective psyche when it comes to matters of "race."

painters in both Europe and the US captivated much of Western art discourse, and Marshall was clearly paying attention. In 1980, he made a tiny (8 x 6 1/2") painting in egg tempera on paper, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, a "self-portrait" depicting a ghoulishly smiling black man with a missing tooth, wearing a wide-brimmed hat. His teeth, eyes, and shirt stand out in white against the heavily worked black surfaces. Henceforth, all of the people who populate Marshall's work would be black (literally). This little jewel claimed a territory in which abstract formal values, intensity of facture, and personal symbolism collide, while different notions of blackness, as subject, condition, and material reality, are conflated. Over the course of the next decade, Marshall, with increasing confidence, deployed similar images embedded in a field of personally and culturally symbolic icons that gradually matured into a more narrative form of inquiry.

Exemplary of this more ambitious and historically knowing approach, *When Frustration Threatens Desire*, 1990, depicts a magician, sharply dressed and nearly life-size, levitating a woman who hovers at his waist in a lacy dress as transparent as mist. The figures inhabit a shallow space before a diaphanous curtain that is covered with magical symbols and numerological diagrams, plus a newspaper advertisement for the psychic Sister Debra. The floor is littered with cards and dice, and a black cat and a snake attend the wizard. The scene feels at once dated and timeless. The painting can be considered simultaneously as a

nostalgic memory of earlier forms of entertainment, a sympathetic evocation of folksy spiritual belief, and a knowing allegory about the "magical" abilities of artists. The magician could almost be reanimating a female corpse. The approach to representation is dramatically more sophisticated than in the artist's previous work, the "illusion" in the painting seeming to arise from the material of the surface rather than from rendering in the usual sense. This is an altogether weird and beautiful work.

Underscoring his attention to the structural underpinnings of advanced painting aesthetics, Marshall around 1992 began presenting his large paintings on unstretched canvas, mounted on the wall with grommets. This treatment and an increase in size pushes the paintings' scale to that of theatrical backdrops or billboards. Measuring roughly eight and a half by ten feet, *De Style*, 1993, was the largest work Marshall had made up to that point. It has the ambition and atmosphere of an important history painting, while depicting a mundane scene in a neighborhood barbershop. The barber (who has an aura surrounding his head and seems to be blessing the man whose hair he is cutting) and four customers (three stare dead-eyed out of the painting; the other's head is cropped by the canvas's left edge) occupy a space loaded with topical detail and made much more complex by the mirror that traverses the back wall. The hairdos of the three visible clients are marvels of culture-specific morphology, while the barber's hand gesture echoes many representations of "the Savior" in earlier European painting. The painting's

title is an obvious play on words, condensing the aesthetics of early modernism and contemporary urban fashion; indeed, the artist's feeling for the abstraction in day-to-day subject matter fills the painting with formal echoes and reverberations, increasing the sense of historical portent embedded in the mnemonics of individual, localized experience.

Marshall's "Garden Project" series, five enormous canvases produced in 1994 and 1995, is one of the great painting cycles of our period. The subject of these works is a quintet of public-housing projects in Chicago and Los Angeles (each bearing the word *Gardens* in its name), and it provides a complex armature for the artist to develop an astonishing array of pictorial and painterly strategies while exploring the nature of work and pleasure, social and historical connectedness, and the inertial collapse of progressive social schemes. (Two of the largest projects—Chicago's Rockwell and Stateway Gardens—were demolished about a decade after Marshall painted them.) The canvases look exactly like contemporary painting while not really looking like anything else, in part due to the artist's ruthless yet good-natured pillaging of atmospherics from sources such as Rococo fantasias, gritty process-based abstraction, and carnival posters. The paintings somewhat resemble WPA murals that have been vandalized by smart art students and angry sign painters.

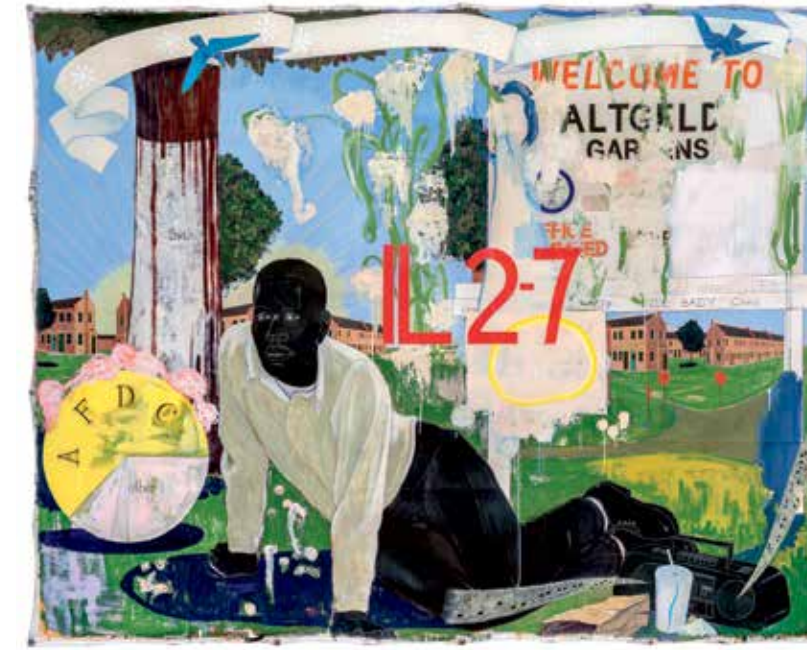
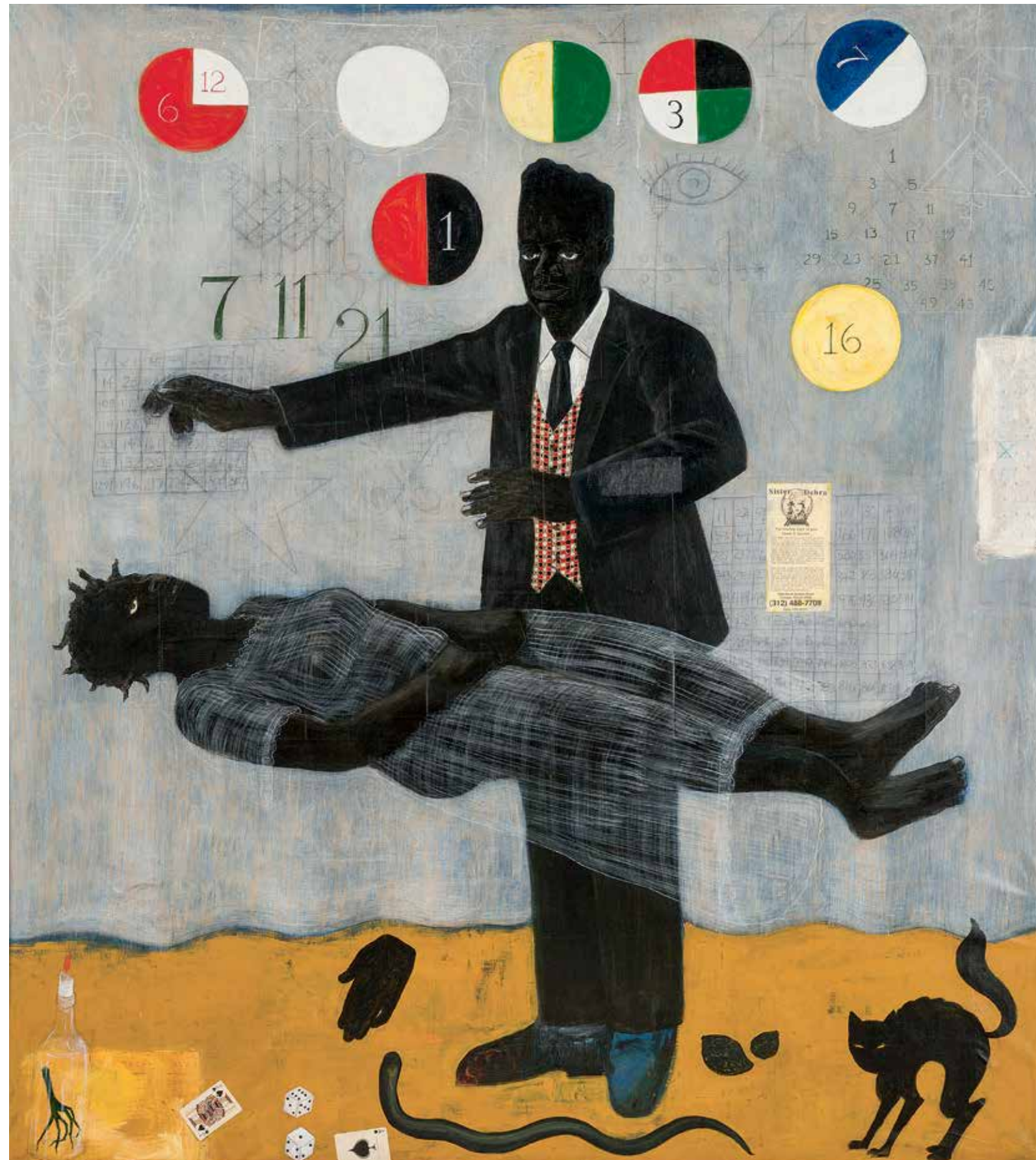
Notwithstanding the depressing nature of their overt themes, these paintings evince an atmosphere of sweetness and optimism: Gardens are tended, flowers bloom, and young love flourishes across the works'



scruffy surfaces. Before seeing the group installed together, as it is in "Mastery," one might have thought it impossible for contemporary painting to simultaneously occupy a position of beauty, difficulty, didacticism, and formalism with such power. There really are no other American painters who have taken on such a project; in this, Marshall is closer to German artists like Anselm Kiefer and Jörg Immendorff, who in different ways have attempted to collapse the gap separating advanced painting ideas from cultural history.

In the late '90s, Marshall's paintings became both less complicated and more complex, as the artist pursued ever larger, monumental paintings depicting fairly undistorted domestic interiors, landscapes, and street scenes with interventions and interruptions of both an iconographic and a "purely painterly" nature. The enormous *Souvenir I*, 1997, depicts a woman in her tidy, generically appealing living room, staring out at the world as she arranges flowers on a coffee table, but her arms have sprouted golden wings, and the room, its walls and its atmosphere,





Opposite page: Kerry James Marshall, *When Frustration Threatens Desire*, 1990, acrylic and collage on canvas, 80 × 72". Above: Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Altgeld Gardens)*, 1995, acrylic and collage on canvas, 78½ × 103". From the series "The Garden Project," 1994–95. Right: Kerry James Marshall, *Watts 1963*, 1995, acrylic and collage on canvas, 9' 7¾" × 11' 3¾". From the series "The Garden Project," 1994–95.

### The most profound philosophical tool Marshall has employed in his work is his literalization of blackness.

is filled with memorial images of martyrs of the civil rights movement, encircled (as is the painting itself) in gold trim. The effect is a collision of homemade needlepoint and church decoration.

Over the years, Marshall has worked primarily in acrylic paint, and starting around 2003 he developed a new physical support for his paintings: sheets of Plexiglas or PVC, mounted and framed with clean white-plastic molding. Superficially, the new support looks like stretched canvas, but it involves such material specificity that on consideration it becomes an update of the tradition of panel painting in Northern Europe—an association consistent with Marshall's historical obsessions. A series of portraits begun in 2007, several of artists, would seem to bear this out. Three paintings from 2009 and 2010—two called *Untitled (Painter)* and one *Untitled*—depict artists in their studios before large, unfinished paint-by-numbers self-portraits. Two of these artists are female, adorned with elaborate hairstyles and colorful (in both senses of the word) Afro-Caribbean studio garb, and they look out at us with self-assurance. Formally, these paintings are less adventurous than much of Marshall's other work, but the declarative conundrum of the subject matter forces a disturbance in the sub-

jectivity of the beholder: The entire notion of a paint-by-numbers self-portrait is paradoxical, if not absurd. What the artist is positing here is unclear, but one thinks of parallel tracks of history not (yet) realized where our "great artists" are black women and their contribution is a precise and literal mapping of the self in pictorial terms. There is also a level of futility to it all, and Marshall may be poking serious fun at the entire concept of "the master"; despite all the regal attitude, one is left with an artwork that "anyone could make," yet this also bespeaks a certain hope for the democratization of contemporary art practices, which are too often draped in obscurity.

Meditation on artists and their surroundings resulted in one of Marshall's most ambitious recent paintings (which is saying something), *Untitled (Studio)*, 2014. Here a woman artist, this time wearing a very practical dress, adjusts the pose of the woman she is painting, whose unfinished portrait is visible on an easel at the left edge of the visual field. In the background, a nude (male) model stares out at us while another man, partially visible behind the red backdrop the artist has set up for the portrait, changes clothes. The room is filled with the accoutrements of a painting studio; the atmosphere and the makeup of

the group seem to indicate that the vignette is taking place in an art school or some other environment where studio space is shared. The scene is played fairly straight from a representational point of view, although there is a primary-yellow dog under the table (a yellow Lab?) whose flank, like the jar of yellow paint on the tabletop above him, is enclosed in a thick black outline. As in other of Marshall's paintings, passages of clear representation can collapse or disperse into unfettered nonreferential mark-making.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this work is its narrative blankness; there really isn't much going on. The painting demonstrates a truth about artistic practice without serving up allegorical or metaphorical red meat, and in this it provides a more enveloping viewing experience. This is characteristic of the artist's general approach: Extremely dense fields of subjects, many fraught with significant cultural baggage, are allowed simply to present themselves, opening windows onto the experiential richness of personal and social realities that may not even be vaguely familiar to many seeing his work.

In the end, the most profound philosophical tool Marshall has employed in his work is his literalization of blackness: His painted protagonists and surrogates





Above: Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Blot)*, 2014, acrylic on PVC panel, 84 × 119 3/4". Opposite page: Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Studio)*, 2014, acrylic on PVC panels, 83 3/4 × 119 3/4".

are no shade or hue of brown—they are *black*. We throw this term around in daily conversation as a shorthand description of entire cultures and clans. In an apparently different world of discourse, the color black itself has a resonant history within “modern art,” and Marshall’s work conflates these precincts into one pictorial experience. It is unusual to see contemporary paintings of such historical sweep, even more unusual to see them claiming a place for the representation of “black” experience on a level playing field with the ubiquitous presence of “white” experience (assumed for generations to be the default mode of the “ordinary”), and formally both surprising and refreshing to see paintings so thoroughly colonized by black forms. To see Marshall as standing in dialogue with Rodchenko or Reinhardt (though his black-on-black figurative paintings must on some level nod to their seminal monochromatic black abstractions) as well as with Eldzier Cortor and Robert Colescott (where certain similarities are obvious) is perhaps a stretch, but there is something in all this to think about. Two of the most recent works in the exhibition—*Untitled (Blot)*, 2014, and *Untitled (Blot)*, 2015—are “representations” of ink blots, as in the proverbial Rorschach tests, and function ambiguously as both abstraction and not. Marshall will need

to pursue this line of inquiry further to make his intentions clear, but the works certainly speak to an interest in the history of modernist abstraction as well as in the psychological dynamic of projected meaning through associative relationships. I am unaware of any attempts yet by art historians to add a layer of racial interpretation to Robert Ryman’s insistent “whiteness,” but perhaps there is work to be done here as our collective understanding of recent and near-future developments deepens and diversifies. The protocols under which Marshall’s work explores “blackness” and Ryman’s explores “whiteness” have been seen in our culture to be utterly separate, but the clean border between these discourses may no longer be sustainable. Marshall’s entire project is a wake-up call both for painting and for the culture at large, reminding us of painting’s potential for cultural centrality while it facilitates the radical reshuffling of the conventions of our conceptual order. □

*“Kerry James Marshall: Mastry,”* organized by Helen Molesworth, chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Dieter Roelstraete, formerly senior curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; and Ian Alteveer, associate curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, is currently on view (through Jan. 29) at the Met Breuer, New York; travels to LA MOCA, Mar. 12–July 2.

CARROLL DUNHAM IS AN ARTIST BASED IN NEW YORK. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.) Visit our archive at [artforum.com/inprint](http://artforum.com/inprint) to read Jordan Kantor on the work of Kerry James Marshall (January 2011).

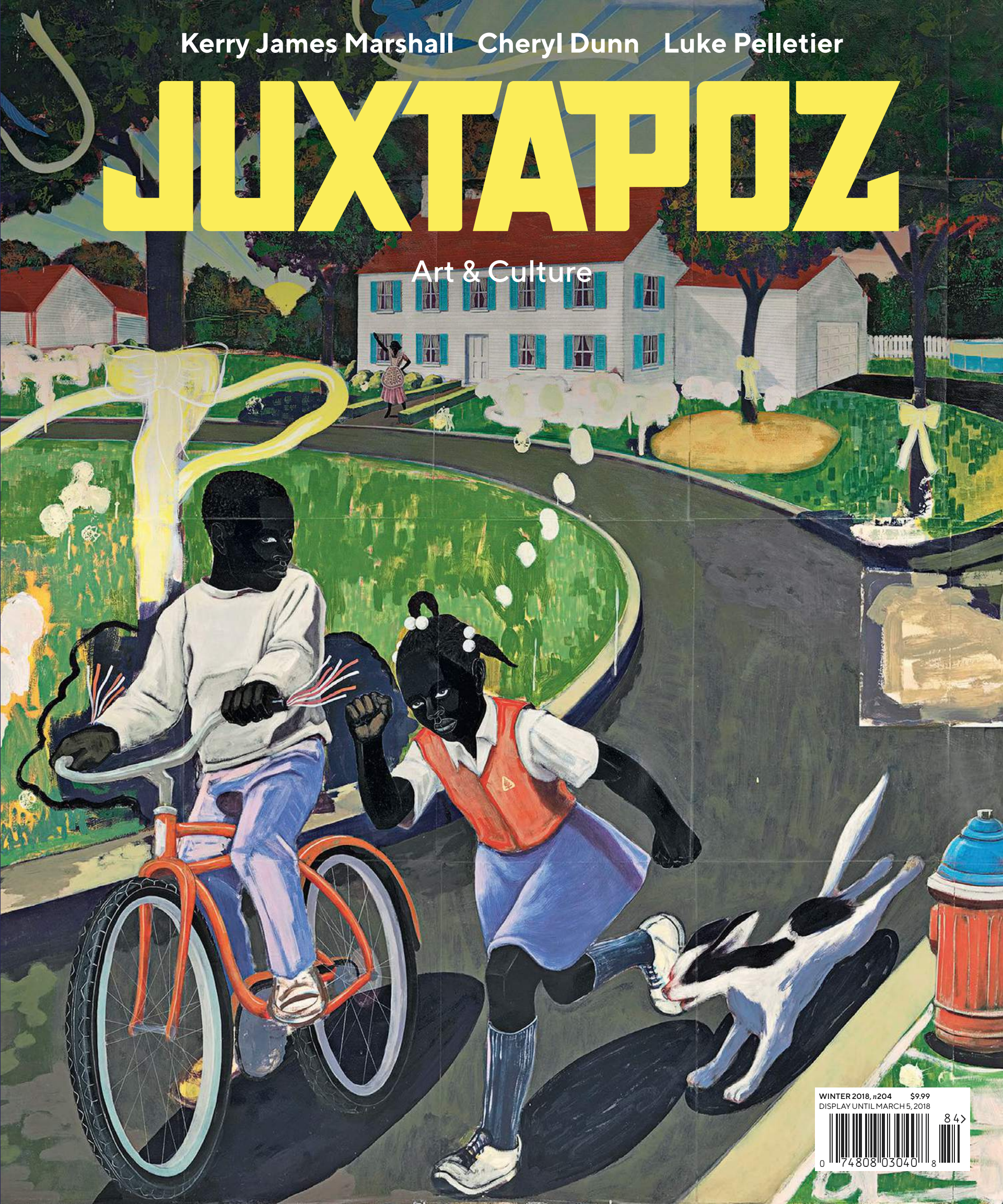




Kerry James Marshall Cheryl Dunn Luke Pelletier

# JUXTAPOZ

Art & Culture



WINTER 2018, #204 \$9.99  
DISPLAY UNTIL MARCH 5, 2018







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**66**  
Kerry James  
Marshall





## Issue N° 204

“... but you know what? That's the way it's supposed to be. It's supposed to get harder, and that's not really a problem. You're supposed to be more sophisticated and much more self-conscious...” —Kerry James Marshall

There was a conversation in our office as we refined the Winter 2018 issue that struck me as a good starting point for this letter. Thinking about Metacritic or Rotten Tomatoes, we started talking about the idea behind aggregate review sites, on which we base so much of our TV and movie watching habits. What made us laugh, as we went to print, was that *Thor: Ragnarok* had the same aggregate review “rating” as *Moonlight*.

I didn't see *Thor*, and perhaps Chris Hemsworth puts on a performance for the ages, but if you think about historically important films, groundbreaking pieces of art that will define generations, *Moonlight* is probably going to hold a tad more weight than *Thor: Ragnarok*. And that's just part of our point; the appreciation of art means so much to so many different people, and genres and styles all have their separate identities that make up the whole picture. In a world increasingly reliant on virality, sometimes the “aggregationalism” of our times is killing our love of nuance. Cue your “get off my lawn” commentary now.

In its 24 years, *Juxtapoz* has never been about reviews in the traditional sense. Yes, we tell you about our favorite art shows, break down the top book releases, and feature who we consider to be artists of the moment. Robert Williams founded the magazine with an outsider's mentality. *Juxtapoz* would act as a community of thoughts, ideas and heritage that would create its own art history. Artists could share their painting practices, and writers would open doors to the art world's previously overlooked. Pop-surrealists, graffiti and tattoo cultures, comic-book artists and the occasional hot rodder building their own language free of the critical lexicon of reviews—*Juxtapoz* was, and still is, for artists, by artists.

In the spirit of those founding years, and as *Juxtapoz* has expanded with a readership that is not only artists but an international audience of creative thinkers and those who keep up with the latest contemporary trends in art and culture, our return to the quarterly format reinforces the magazine's mission. The Winter 2018 issue covers a wide-breadth of genres, generations and genius (Kerry James Marshall is the cover story, after all) and examines just how important legacy and engagement are to the art world. Emerging artists like David Molesky and Kip Omolade are in

conversation alongside pioneers like Kerry James Marshall and Ron English. Underground heroes like *Beautiful Losers* stalwart Cheryl Dunn appears with the likes of Sarah Sitkin, Luke Pelletier and Anja Salonen, who are just beginning their exhibition careers. You have a twentieth-century symbolist master like Gustav Klimt sharing space with contemporary painter Daniel Rich, whose work examines the political and social uprisings of the past century that shaped how we live in our cities.

It's not so much a pass of the baton to the next era of artists, but emphasizing the idea that conversations matter so much in art. When I think of aggregate culture, I feel like we miss this dialogue, this lifeblood of art. And I hope, in some ways, *Juxtapoz* is part of a positive examination of art and culture for the times in which we live. Banksy's iconic statement fits, “Laugh now, but one day we'll be in charge.” For the first issue of the new year, here's to owning our art history and sharing nuanced ideas of inclusion and positivity.

Welcome to winter, 2018.





# Kerry James Marshall

The Key Figure

*Interview by David Molesky Portrait by Joey Garfield*







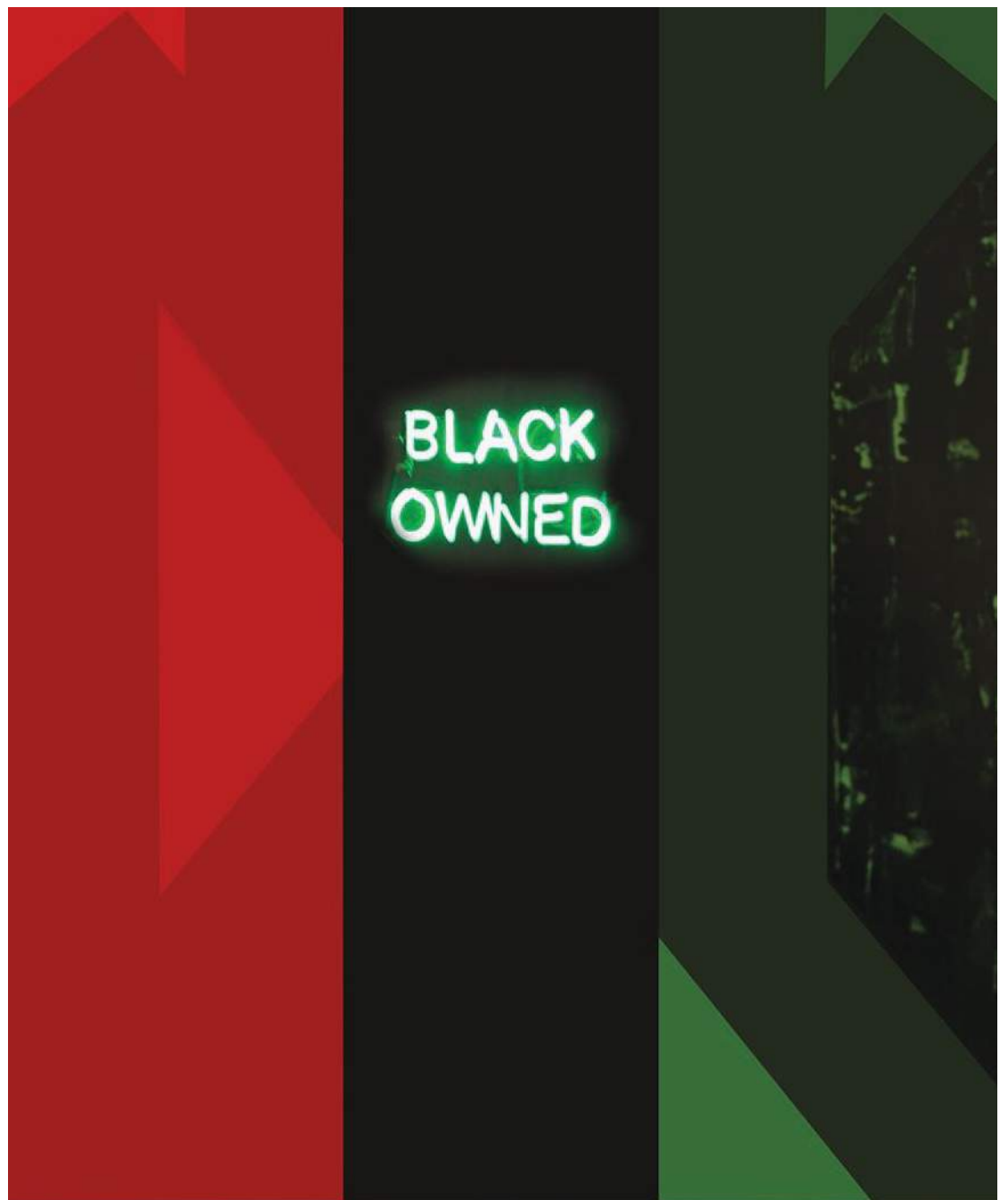
**In 2016, the Kerry James Marshall** retrospective, *Mastry*, traveled from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (MCA) to the Met Breuer. Standing behind the clear plexiglass podium, about to address the press, Kerry took a deep breath, looked down, noticed his descended zipper, corrected it, and then delivered his wonderfully disarming chuckle, effectively deepening the awe of the already starstruck audience. The exhibition fulfilled his biggest dreams, he explained, his work now in the Met alongside his own selections of great historical artworks from the museum's permanent collection.

The first room of the retrospective was breathtaking, with nearly a dozen unstretched canvases as large as 10 x 18 feet, painted with thick unblended passages, fixed to the wall by rivets. These masterworks of narrative compositions are astutely conscious of flatness, illusion, and draftsmanship, with dynamic brushwork and colors that freely incorporate comics and pop culture as much as they sample the grand tradition. The retrospective presented his entire oeuvre, including portraits, lightboxes, sculptures, photography, and comics called *Dailies*.

Perhaps even more inspiring is how Kerry's life path has provided the key ingredients for his ever-expanding creative universe. Born in 1955, Kerry moved with his family a decade later from Birmingham, Alabama to Watts in Los Angeles. During an era of rising racial tension, they moved a few years later to a housing project called Nicholson Gardens, just before the historic Watts riots.

Kerry knew early on that he wanted to be an artist and was selected from his Junior High School to attend advanced courses in drawing at what was then known as Otis Art Institute. While drawing a master copy of Otis instructor Charles White's lithograph of Frederick Douglass, he had a realization about the insularity of white figures representing ideal beauty throughout art history. He'd go to museums to observe masterful technique, but his appreciation was hampered because of the dearth of black subjects who seemed excluded from the whole genre.

At first, Kerry considered a career in children's book illustration and also dabbled, like many of his peers, in abstract pictures. *The Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison's novel about a black man whose skin color renders him marginalized, inspired Kerry to make his painting *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of his Former Self*. This seminal painting re-energized the use of the figure as his vehicle to bring politics and race into focus. The painting became emblematic of a lifelong artistic goal to fill the gaps of history, where black historical figures and black cultural ideas did not have representation.



In his late twenties, Kerry took a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the only museum in the US funded and operated by African Americans. In what was literally love at first sight, he would eventually marry the first person he met upon his arrival, the actress Cheryl Lynn Bruce, the museum's PR representative at the time. Working and living in a 6 x 9-foot room at the Harlem YMCA that was once home to Malcolm X, Kerry solidified a determination to continue his work, regardless of what situation or space was available to him.

In 1987, Kerry, focused and unwavering, moved to Chicago and got a break when he was hired as

an artistic director for a feature film. The salary afforded him almost a year of living expenses, spurring a significant body of work, and his momentum continues unflagged to this day. In 1998, he had his first major solo show at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. Now, Kerry's work is featured in an incredible roster of important museum collections, and he has been awarded an even longer list of residencies, grants, fellowships, and honorary degrees.

This past autumn, I called Kerry at his studio on the South Side of Chicago, and we talked about getting to work after the retrospective, and the exciting continuous evolution of his comic strip.





**David Molesky: You must be excited to get back to studio life after the tour of *Mastry*.**

*Kerry James Marshall: The whole experience was satisfying, but I couldn't wait until it was finished, so I could get back to a normal routine. The problem with big surveys is that it puts you in a position where you have to start to figure out what your next act is going to be.*

**Especially when you've achieved so much, the bar gets raised again.**

*Right. It's a challenge to exceed yourself. Every time I do a picture, I'm trying to do a better or more complex picture from my last. I try to push the limits of my abilities. With retrospectives, you make assessments of what you've done over time. You can see it all in front of you. You know more about what you're trying to get at and how to make it happen. And it's hard to look at things you've done 30 years ago and not think, "Oh, if I knew then what I know now, maybe I would've done this a little differently."*

**As a painter myself, sometimes it seems the more I paint, the harder it gets. I have to account for more perspectives while I'm working. You ever feel that way?**

*Yeah, but you know what? That's the way it's supposed to be. It's supposed to get harder, and that's not really a problem. You're supposed to be more sophisticated and much more self-conscious. As you know more, you have to consider more. It gets harder to make the next thing, because you have to have a good reason to do it.*

**How do you think new digital and virtual mediums will affect the future evolution of figuration?**

*Figuration is coming back. It's the foundation, but the reality was that it never went anywhere. There were periods where abstraction seemed more advanced. The issue is that it's not whether a thing is painting, photography, sculpture, installation, abstract, or representational. That's not really where the critical value of a thing lies. It actually has more to do with the particular treatment of each one of those different media.*

*The popularity of cheap instant cameras didn't increase the number of excellent images any more than going abstract made people better artists. When there is proliferation, it's another case where it becomes more difficult, and you have to take responsibility to marshal all the philosophical ideas, critical conceptions, and technical characteristics. You have to figure out a way to maximize their generated effect. This is how proliferation makes it harder to do things that are worthwhile.*

**It seems with greater knowledge comes greater responsibility.**

*If you're not going to surrender to chance, then you're going to target your efforts at achieving a very specific thing. That's how you keep it going. You're trying to get at something specific, you're not just waiting for any old kind of thing to happen,*









or hoping that something you did was interesting enough, you're really trying to make it that way.

When you were teaching, you'd tell students, "You have to ask why, to ask why always." What were some of the important "whys" you asked yourself, and what do you think are some of the important questions that younger artists should be asking themselves now?

People are not driven to make artwork because of some of internal emotional need. I believe it's always because you want to participate in something that you see other people doing. When you look at the history of how what you want to do has evolved, you have to ask: "Can I add anything to it?" Or will I be satisfied just mimicking what has already been done?

In the '70s, there was this notion that painting was completely obsolete. Would it be worth my effort to carry on a practice that people are claiming has already been exhausted? You have to ask yourself that in the face of what is going on around you. No matter what the technology or activity is, nothing has ever been completely exhausted. You can look around for those places that never got fully

## ***"It's a complete miscomprehension to believe that you don't need to do the same things that Rembrandt was doing."***

resolved, and then you can make an attempt at trying to resolve those things.

I came across an article in *Scientific American* about Fermat's Last Theorem. He was a 17th century mathematician who proposed a paradox that couldn't be resolved for over 350 years. About 20 years ago, it was proven by a man who, at 10 years old, became determined to solve it. So there are these novel ideas that pose a challenge, and somebody's got to check if it's worthwhile. You can do that in the art world, too.

**Contemporary history painting can shed new light on events by prompting a unique space and time for contemplation. How have current and recent events made their way into your work?**

The idea for *Rhythm Mastr* began with two recent

catastrophes: the spike in violence in Chicago in the '90s, and the demolition of high-rise public housing near where I live on the South Side of Chicago. There were moving people out and tearing down public housing. It was controversial and complicated in how it was handled. I want the narrative around these events to take on Homeric epic structure and form. I realized how this could have the same cultural impact as *Star Wars*, which initially was going to be five episodes, but now seems to be going on in perpetuity. The narrative allowed me to talk about the social consequence of high-rise housing and its demolition, as well as the consequences of gang violence in relationship to public housing projects and the surrounding neighborhood. It also gave me a chance to talk about the conflicts between tradition and modernity. The public high-rises on 35th Street were right across the street from a Mies Van Der





Rohe-designed campus for the Illinois Institution of Technology (IIT). The street literally divided two completely different worlds.

I have a character from the neighborhood in a program learning robotics at IIT, alongside a young man who lives in the projects. Also in this neighborhood is a brownstone building called the Ancient Egyptian Museum. This museum promotes the idea of Afrocentrism, where black people become healthy and gang violence stops when black people can revive who they were before they were enslaved people. To do that, you center your worldview around Africa and center creative capacities around the achievements of the Egyptians. In the narrative, the robotics student is the girlfriend of the kid who meets the Rhythm Man who teaches him drum patterns to unlock the power of African figure sculptures. They are both trying to solve the gang war problem. They don't realize that they're in conflict with each other: one using robotic technology, the other using African mystic power.

**What is your vision for the development of the graphic novel?**

For me, it needs to be something that operates like *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, or the *Harry Potter* cycles. You need to be able to get that much out of it. It needs to demonstrate that you can generate these narratives that can go on for generations. Its initial inception was for the Carnegie International, but it really started to take shape when I did a show at the MCA (Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago) where it became a daily comic strip called *Dailies*. I began building a series of comics around the *Rhythm Mastr*. Each component of the overall narrative allowed me to talk about things through barbershop-style conversations about history, culture, and politics.

There was one thread that started out as *Ho Stroll*. With a lot of prostitution and streetwalkers in the neighborhood, I had to give these working people a chance to contribute their inner philosophical life through conversation. So it really contains three narratives: the *Rhythm Mastr*, *P-Van*, and *Ho Stroll*, which has now become *On the Stroll*. I was going to build up enough narratives to fill a full-size page of the *Chicago Tribune* with black-oriented comics.

These separate narratives overlap and become the larger *Rhythm Mastr* story, with everything taking place in the same neighborhood. The *Rhythm Mastr* kids would pass the *P-Van*, they'd see the prostitutes on the street, they'd go by the Ancient Egyptian Museum, they'd be at IIT, and they would be at the projects. All of it gets woven together.

I'm still working on it. After the *Mastry* show closed, this was supposed to be the year that I would resolve the graphic novel form. In this process, I'm always making new factions of those stories and I'm actually in the middle of working on new *Dailies* right now.



**What is the overarching plot for the screenplay?**

The theme is really the conflict between tradition and modernity. In a drive towards the future, can an orientation to the past win?

**It's possible to use values from our past that will remain important to our species in the future.**

Yeah. This is something that people miss when talking about painting and all of its accompanying

skills. I don't know of a good film that didn't start out with the production designer making drawings of the sets. That's the same skillset needed for narrative paintings. It's a complete miscomprehension to believe that you don't need to do the same things that Rembrandt was doing. You have to think about how the lighting works. You have to conceive, construct, and refine the narrative. Look at all those paintings; there's virtually no













difference between the setup for Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* or a movie scene. You get actors posed in costumes with props, then find a location and organize it so that it conveys your ideas. I've never seen a movie that didn't do that.

**When *Rhythm Mstr* becomes a movie, do you think it'll be animated or do you think you'll use real figures?**

Ideally, it has to be animated first. You have a lot more latitude that way.

**Have you done animation before?**

I've done some animation and video that uses animation. When I was in high school, I participated in a program at Otis called "Tutor Art," which included hand-drawn animation. I learned how to do animation to a soundtrack. I also have every book on animation you can find. I watch all the Disney and

the Chuck Jones documentaries. I'm really interested in technique. I did production design for a couple of feature films, so I know a little bit about how films are made and how animation is done, so I'm ready for it.

**Any idea when folks might start hearing about the graphic novel coming out, or the animation?**

By this time next year, I hope to have the graphic novel ready for publication. This project first came into existence in 1999. It takes a long time. If you're really going to do it right, you really have to come to terms with the amount of detail that has to be invested in everything. When I started developing characters for the comic strip, I designed clothes with my then assistant who was also a fashion designer. This was just one part of building the archive and style that would ultimately be the graphic novel. In my studio, I use set pieces to development the narrative. You have to invent practically every detail, so I have models of

all kinds of things to draw from, including downtown. It gets more exciting as it comes together. It propels me to keep going, because I can see it being fulfilled. When you're in it, there's nothing but hard work. There's nothing but labor. And it's almost all physical.

**Any concluding advice for younger artists?**

There are some things that you can't even imagine unless you already believe you have the capability of making it happen. As you know more and have more skills, you can do more and imagine more things. That seems fundamental. I encourage people to do everything and take nothing for granted. There are no shortcuts. ■

*Kerry James Marshall's work will be featured in Figuring History alongside Robert Colescott and Mickalene Thomas at the Seattle Art Museum from February 15–May 13, 2018.*





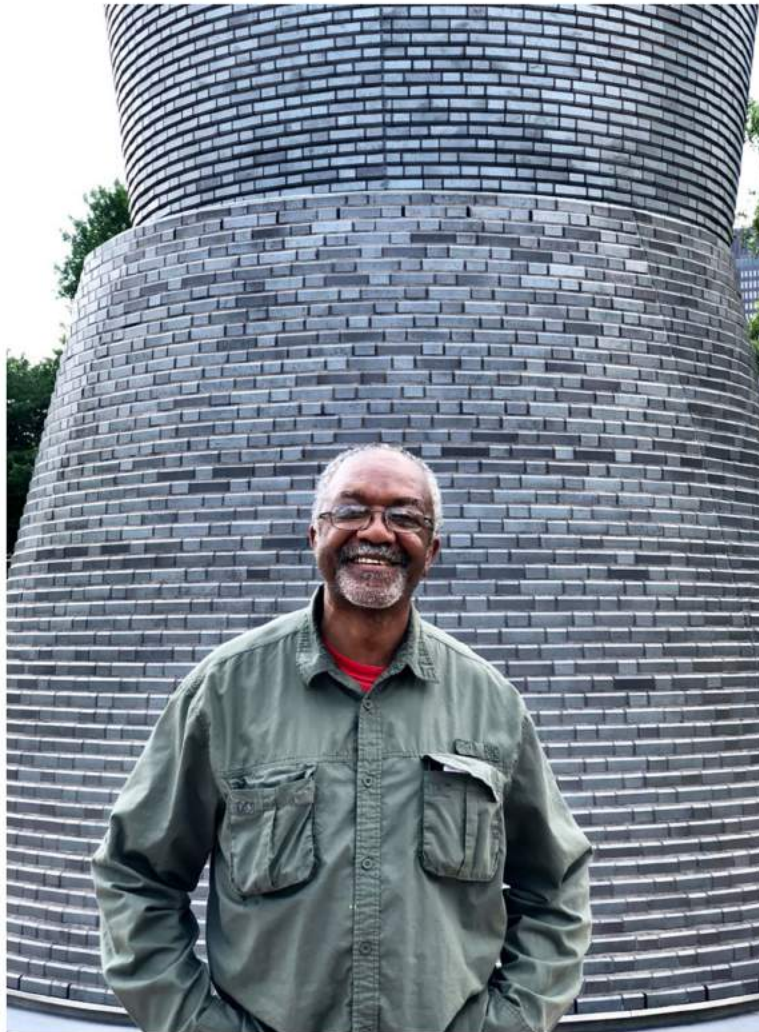
Above: *Still-Life with Wedding Portrait*, Acrylic on PVC panel, 48" x 60", 2015. Private Collection



# ‘It Was a Monumental Journey’: Kerry James Marshall Unveils a Memorial to the Country’s Groundbreaking Black Lawyers

The monument took 12 years to bring to fruition.

**Sarah Cascone**, July 12, 2018



Kerry James Marshall with *A Monumental Journey*. Photo courtesy of the Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation.

An important moment in the ongoing push for racial equality has been immortalized by artist [Kerry James Marshall](#), who on Thursday unveiled a monument in Des Moines, Iowa, to the pioneering group of African American lawyers who founded the National Bar Association. The sculpture stands 30 feet tall, weighs nearly 25 tons, and is clad in black manganese ironspot brick.



“I actually thought this was never going to happen,” Marshall told artnet News. He was first asked to create the memorial back in 2006, but because of difficulties obtaining funding and an approved site for the memorial, the project lay dormant for a long period. But while Marshall thought the monument was dead, there were folks behind the scenes at the National Bar Association and the Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation working tirelessly to ensure the project would come to fruition.

“It was a monumental journey,” Marshall said, riffing on the work’s title, *A Monumental Journey*. “It took us 12 years to get here, but we did arrive.”

The timing now seems fortuitous: In the wake of increased calls to remove Confederate monuments, there has also been a movement to erect new ones honoring the accomplishments of African Americans and other minorities whose contributions to US history have all too often been overlooked.



Kerry James Marshall, *A Monumental Journey*. Photo courtesy of the Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation.

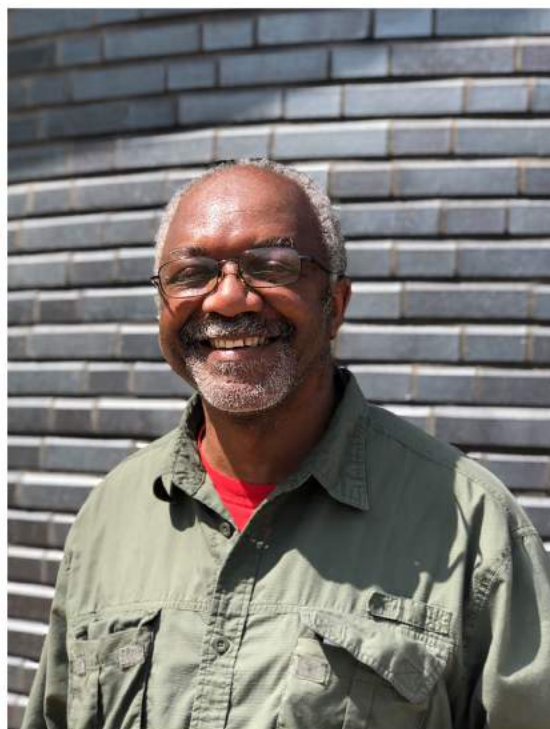


The piece takes the shape of two massive African talking drums stacked precariously atop one another, seemingly on the verge of toppling. Used by the West African Yoruba people for communicating over long distances, the talking drum was so named for its resemblance to human speech.

“There are a lot of languages that are tonal, where the inflection or the sound is used to carry a lot of the communication,” Marshall explained. “The talking drum has an hourglass-shaped form that has tension bands around it. Those are used to vary the pressure around the drum head, which is like a diaphragm. Varying the tension makes the drum vibrate at different pitches, much in the same way as our vocal chords. That’s how information can be communicated over long distances because that tonal inflection is like speaking.”

The sculpture’s form—recognizably African but eschewing stereotypically bright colors and patterns—represents the importance of communication between groups of people, and both the need for and the difficulty in achieving a balanced justice system.

“The legal system is supposed to be organized to bring justice, but it’s never a simple or straightforward matter. It’s always more dynamic and more complicated than it seems to be on its face,” said Marshall, who has inscribed the base of the sculpture with the names of the National Bar Association founders.



Kerry James Marshall with *A Monumental Journey*. Photo courtesy of the Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation.



In 1925, facing discrimination from the American Bar Association other legal organizations on the basis of their race, 12 black lawyers—11 men and one woman—established the National Bar Association in Des Moines. Its mission was “to strengthen and elevate the Negro lawyer in his profession and in his relationship to his people.”

Now the oldest and largest legal association to primarily serve black lawyers, the National Bar Association represents members in the US, Africa, the UK, Canada, and the Virgin Islands. The monument, which gives overdue recognition to this important chapter in Iowa history, is the brainchild of local judge Odell McGee, a former president of the Iowa chapter of the National Bar Association.

He conceived of the idea of an artwork memorializing the group’s founding in 2002 while speaking with fellow past president Evett L. Simmons at the organization’s 75th-anniversary celebration. In 2006, McGee approached the Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation about making his dream a reality, and to help find the right artist.



Kerry James Marshall with *A Monumental Journey*. Photo courtesy of the Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation.



The two groups considered Martin Puryear but ultimately approached Marshall later that year. “I had never heard of the National Bar Association,” Marshall admitted. “Unless you’re in the legal profession, it’s not something you would just know.” Nevertheless, he didn’t hesitate to get involved: “It’s always nice to have lawyers on your side,” he joked.

“When you get the opportunity to design something that is supposed to commemorate, memorialize, or recognize an important achievement, it’s always hard to figure out what kind of form that thing could take,” Marshall added. “The artist comes in like a hired gun from out of town—somebody you hope has a different perspective.”

Soon enough, the design came together, but fundraising efforts fell short, delaying the project, even after the artist personally fronted the cost of a costly water feasibility study. Further complications arose when they had to abandon the original project site in 2011. The foundation officially took over the project from the bar association two years later, securing the final location for the work in 2015 and raising \$1 million for its completion.



Kerry James Marshall, *A Monumental Journey*. Photo courtesy of the Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation.



A groundbreaking took place in November 2016, and fabrication began, finally, last year—in some ways, the most challenging part of the whole process. “Nearly every angle of the form is different, so you can’t just mass produce one brick and make that work. Every one of those bricks had to be cut by hand to make that cylindrical form consistent,” said Marshall. “The team of masons who they had working on the project was just masterful.”

In some ways, the prolonged timeline for *A Monumental Journey* is only fitting: The memorial’s intermittent progress mirrors the long, difficult struggle for racial equality—still ongoing almost a century after a brave group of African American lawyers banded together to form a bar association of their own.

“These people were able to achieve something that made a difference in the lives of a lot of people,” Marshall said. “The organization should live on in the memories of people way past our time... The more we remember, the better.”

*Kerry James Marshall’s A Monumental Journey is on view along the Principal Riverwalk at Hansen Triangle Park, Grand and 2nd Avenues, Des Moines, Iowa.*



# DOCUMENT

Above The Fold

## Kerry James Marshall created comic strip with black characters to show “it can be done”

Text by Ann Binlot

Posted October 15, 2018



Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled: RHYTHM MASTR Daily Strip*, 2018, detail, *57th Carnegie International*. Photo by Bryan Conley. Courtesy the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, David Zwirner, London, and Koplín del Río, Seattle

Undaunted by the lack of black comic characters he saw as a child, African-American artist Kerry James Marshall created a few for the 57th Carnegie International

When Kerry James Marshall was a young African-American boy growing up in South Central Los Angeles, he devoured the comic strips that used to come with the newspaper, but he noticed that there were no characters who looked like him. Marshall decided to take matters into his own hands several decades later for the 1999/2000 Carnegie International, when he debuted a comic strip with three different narratives—*Rythm Mastr*, *P Van*, and *On The Stroll*—in the display cases of the Carnegie Museum of Art’s Treasure Room. “The idea was when I grew up, you never saw black characters in daily comic strips in the newspaper,” explained Marshall. “I never saw it. So, I thought, well, there should be, so I decided if it was going to be, I was going to have to make it. So I started this project called *Rythm Mastr*, and I based it on the formats of comic strips in the newspaper.”



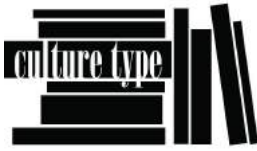
Fast forward to nearly two decades later; the 62-year-old Marshall has had a critically-acclaimed retrospective of his art that traveled from his current hometown of Chicago at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; to New York, the art capital of the United States, at the Met Breuer; and finally, to his childhood home, Los Angeles, at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Just this spring, *Past Times*—his 1997 masterpiece of an African-American family enjoying a leisurely picnic, echoing Georges Seurat's 1884 painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* and Édouard Manet's 1862 work *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*—fetched \$21.1 million at Sotheby's, shattering records for a living African-American artist. This weekend, Marshall unveiled the newest edition of his *Rythm Mastr* comic strip at the opening of the 57th Carnegie International, which runs through March 25, 2019 at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. “Over time, what's happened is that the project has expanded, so that it includes a variety of different narratives [that] sort of sync up with each other, so the goal is to sort of make an epic story that has all these different dimensions,” said Marshall.

The thin, 70-foot black-and-white strip runs along a wall in the museum's long lobby captures four narratives within Marshall's comic world, inspired in part by Bronzeville—the South Side Chicago neighborhood where Marshall resides. There's *Classic Comedy Comics*, that's based on a comedy club where black comedians perform historical African-American comedy routines; *The Platform*, which depicts a talk show; *Rythm Mastr*; *PVan*, which was inspired by a van parked outside of his studio where, according to Marshall, “some guys used to sit out there seven days a week, from morning to night, just hanging out”; and *On the Stroll*, based on the prostitutes that used to frequent the neighborhood, but Marshall takes them out of context. “I give them conversations to have, but conversations that you wouldn't expect to hear from them, like talking philosophy and art history, and criticism, stuff like that,” explained Marshall, who recalled that his actual conversations with them “weren't all that philosophical.”

When asked about Black Panther, which debuted in a supporting role to the Fantastic Four in 1966 when Marshall was just 10, he retorted, “Black Panther is a Marvel Comic property. These are characters that were invented by white writers, so they are almost no characters in comics that are invented by black writers.”

Marshall had another idea in mind at the suggestion he collaborate with Marvel. “The thing is, why should Marvel get all the glory?” asked Marshall. “Can't you do some things that compete with Marvel? That's the goal. That's why I do it. The only way that you can do it, you have to show that it can be done, and that's what my project is supposed to do—to show that it can be done, and that you can do it. You don't have to ask anybody for permission to do it. You can just do it.”





## Welcome to Culture Type!

Exploring art by and about people of African descent, primarily through the lens of books, magazines and catalogs, Culture Type features original research and reporting and shares invaluable interestingness culled from the published record on black art.

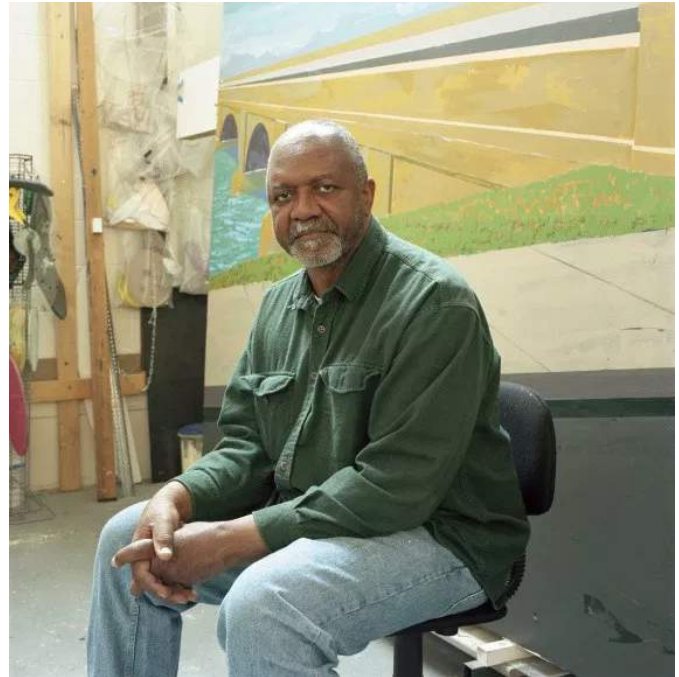
# Power 100: Artist Kerry James Marshall Ranked No. 2 Most Influential Person in Contemporary Art World

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Nov 11, 2018 • 8:58 am

THE SECOND MOST POWERFUL person in the contemporary art world is Chicago painter **Kerry James Marshall**, according to Art Review magazine. The London-based publication issues an annual Power 100 list ranking the most influential figures in the contemporary art world. The list includes artists, curators, critics, collectors, and dealers, among others.

In 2017, Marshall was on the bottom half of the list at No. 68. Then he assumed the mantle of the most expensive living African American artist in May when his monumental painting "Past Times" sold for more than \$21 million (including fees) at Sotheby's New York, an artist record.

Advancing all the way up to No. 2 this year, Marshall's ranking is the highest-ever for a black person since the Power 100 list was inaugurated in 2002.



*Advancing all the way up to No. 2 this year, Kerry James Marshall's ranking is the highest-ever for a black person since the Power 100 list was inaugurated in 2002.*

**Thelma Golden** of the Studio Museum in Harlem was ranked No. 8 in 2017, which was the highest ranking at the time and marked the first year a black person had placed in the top 10. This year, three African Americans rank in the top 10—Marshall, Golden, and poet/critic **Fred Moten**, who is appearing on the list for the first time.

Golden serves as director and chief curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem where construction of a new building designed by architect David Adjaye is expected to be completed in 2021. She oversaw a recent charitable auction at Sotheby's New York that, thanks to the largess of 42 artists who donated their works, raised more than \$20 million for the building project.

Describing his regard, Art Review said: "Moten's writing is an acknowledged influence on artists including Arthur Jafa, Glenn Ligon, Sondra Perry and Theaster Gates, with whom he shares a need to celebrate the radical traditions and rearticulate the contemporary experience of black Americans." His trilogy, "consent not to be a single thing" was recently published.



*“[Fred] Moten’s writing is an acknowledged influence on artists including Arthur Jafa, Glenn Ligon, Sondra Perry and Theaster Gates, with whom he shares a need to celebrate the radical traditions and rearticulate the contemporary experience of black Americans.”*



*Top right, Kerry James Marshall is No. 2 on the Power 100 List. | Photo by Broomberg & Chanarin; Above, Thelma Golden and Fred Moten rank in the top 10. | Photos by Julie Skarratt and Kari Orvik*

ART REVIEW’S POWER 100 LIST is developed in consultation with an international panel of invited writers, artists, curators and critics. The unnamed experts consider the stature, standing and sway of candidates over the past 12 months. The barometer is “based on their international influence over the production and dissemination of art and ideas in the artworld and beyond.”

Art dealer David Zwirner tops the list occupying the No. 1 slot. With locations in New York and Hong Kong, his gallery represents Marshall and just announced the addition of Njideka Akunyili Crosby to its roster, which also includes Stan Douglas, Chris Ofili, and the estate of Roy DeCarava, among more than 75 artists.

The No. 3 spot on the list is held by the #metoo movement. Established a year ago, the phenomena appears on the list for the first time. The “viral international movement denouncing sexual harassment and the abuse of women,” is a unique selection on a list that ordinarily features individuals.

In addition to Moten, collector/philanthropist **Pamela Joyner** (No. 36), curator and critic **Simon Njami** (65), and artists **Adrian Piper** (49) and **John Akomfrah** (94), are also new entrants on the list.

Joyner is board chair at the Tate Americas Foundation and also serves on the board of the J. Paul Getty Trust. Her extensive art collection forms the traveling exhibition “Solidary & Solitary: The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection” which is being presented at the Snite Museum of Art at the University of Notre Dame through Dec. 15.

Njami has greatly influenced the lens through which the world sees contemporary African Art. He curated the 2017 and 2018 Dak’Art biennials in Senegal and is editor-in-chief of *Revue Noire*, a French magazine devoted to African art.



A conceptual artist and philosopher, Piper was born in New York City. Her half-century survey exhibition is on view at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in partnership with the Institute of Contemporary Art Los Angeles (through Jan. 6, 2019). She moved to Berlin in 2005 and refuses to return to the United States because, according to her reconstructed Facebook page, she is “listed as a ‘Suspicious Traveler’ on the U.S. Transportation Security Administration Watch List.” Piper received the Golden Lion Award for Best Artist at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015) and Germany’s Käthe Kollwitz Prize (2018).

The Institute of Contemporary Art Boston just announced Akomfrah will present the 2019 Watershed installation. “Purple,” his immersive, six-channel installation will make its U.S. debut on May 26, 2019. On view earlier this year at the New Museum in New York, “John Akomfrah: Signs of Empire,” was the Ghanaian-born, British filmmaker’s first American survey exhibition.

Four African American artists return to the list from 2017—**David Hammons** (14), **Theaster Gates** (30), **Kara Walker** (50), and **Arthur Jafa** (87). Exploring African American identity through contemporary imagery, Jafa’s extraordinary video “Love is the Message, the Message is Death” (2016) is “a testament to [his] profound ability to mine, scrutinize, and reclaim media’s representational modes and strategies.” Compared with last year, Hammons and Walker improved their positions on the list; Gates and Jafa fell several ranks.

MARSHALL HAS CAPTIVATED the art world in recent years. On the heels of his European exhibition “Painting and other Stuff,” when “Mastry,” his 30-year career-spanning survey opened at MCA Chicago in 2016, the show was universally praised and his stature rose significantly. In public conversations and catalog essays, Marshall speaks with authority about his own practice, the work of other artists, and the history of painting.

In the wake of “Mastry,” an increasing number of paintings by Marshall began showing up at the major auction houses carrying higher and higher estimates.

Following the record established by “Past Times,” Christie’s announced “Knowledge and “Wonder” (1995), a painting by Marshall made for a Chicago public library for a fee of \$10,000, was set to come to auction with an estimate of \$10 million-\$15 million. When the artist, and many others, questioned the decision, the city heeded the outcry and reversed itself, pulling the painting from the auction.

“History of Painting,” Marshall’s first exhibition since “Mastry,” was on view at David Zwirner in London and closed yesterday. “Through its formal acuity, Marshall’s work reveals and questions the social constructs of beauty, taste, and power,” the exhibition release said.

*“Through its formal acuity, Marshall’s work reveals and questions the social constructs of beauty, taste, and power.”*

“Engaged in an ongoing dialogue with six centuries of representational painting, Marshall has deftly reinterpreted and updated its tropes, compositions, and styles, even pulling talismans from the canvases of his forebearers and recontextualizing them within a modern setting. At the center of his prodigious oeuvre, which also includes drawings and sculpture, is the critical recognition of the conditions of invisibility so long ascribed to black bodies in the Western pictorial tradition, and the creation of what he calls a ‘counter-archive’ that reinscribes these figures within its narrative arc.” **CT**



# Sean Combs Is Revealed as Buyer of Kerry James Marshall Painting



“Past Times” by Kerry James Marshall sold for \$21.1 million on Wednesday to the music mogul Sean Combs.  
Sotheby’s

**By Barbara Graustark**

May 18, 2018

Ever since the sale at Sotheby’s on [Wednesday night](#) of “Past Times,” a monumental painting by Kerry James Marshall with a narrative centered on black experiences, many people have been speculating about which collector or museum might have placed the winning \$21.1 million bid. The sale was an auction high for Mr. Marshall, and it was widely reported to be the most ever paid for the work of a living African-American artist.

“We weren’t the buyer, but wish we were,” Joanne Heyler, the founding director of [The Broad](#), said when asked if the new buyer was her boss, Eli Broad.

On Thursday night, [Jack Shainman](#), Mr. Marshall’s gallerist and dealer in New York, told The Times that the buyer was Sean Combs, the entrepreneur, fashionista, Grammy Award-winning record producer and subject of the documentary [“Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A Bad Boy Story.”](#)



“I know that this work has found a home in a collection with purpose and an eye toward preserving legacy — that of Sean Combs, and that means a lot,” said [Mr. Shainman](#), who has represented Mr. Marshall since his first show at the gallery in 1993.

The dealer said Mr. Combs was introduced to the painter’s work by a friend and sometime musical collaborator, the hip-hop recording artist and record producer Swizz Beatz. Swizz Beatz — who is performing this Sunday at [The School](#), Mr. Shainman’s gallery in Kinderhook, N.Y. — is an avid art collector with his wife, Alicia Keys.



Mr. Combs at the Met Gala this month. He was introduced to the work of Kerry James Marshall by his friend Swizz Beatz, a fellow music producer and an avid art collector.

Angela Weiss/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Mr. Combs came to Sotheby’s to view the work. Mr. Marshall learned the buyer’s identity when he was in London giving a talk at the Tate Modern this week. The museum had recently acquired one of his new paintings, “[Untitled \(London Bridge\)](#)” from 2017. The museum was very patient, Mr. Shainman said, waiting four years for Mr. Marshall to complete that work.

Long a local hero in Chicago, Mr. Marshall has been a rising star in the museum world, with major retrospectives at the Met Breuer, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. His portrayals of what it means to be black in America have expanded the frontiers of art, and the subjects his exuberant paintings embrace — youths, homes, nudes, and families at leisure — challenge racial stereotypes.



Classically trained, Mr. Marshall found inspiration with Veronese and Rembrandt, and told a Times reporter in 2016 that he had always hoped to “get up alongside them on the wall.”

Mr. Shainman said he didn't expect market success to change the artist.

“The world is recognizing Kerry James Marshall for the master that he is,” the gallerist said, adding that “what Kerry is happiest doing is working in the studio.”





THE STAKES

## **Q&A: PAINTER KERRY JAMES MARSHALL ON *MASTRY*** **AND REPRESENTING BLACK PEOPLE IN HIS ART**

**MARSHALL SPEAKS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE AND PUTTING  
MONEY BACK INTO YOUR OWN WORK**

DOREEN ST. FÉLIX 

02/21/2017

On this week's episode of "The Stakes," we sat down with painter Kerry James Marshall to discuss his show *Mastry*, which just finished a run at Metropolitan Museum of Art's Met Breuer building in New York. Marshall talks about the meaning of the spelling of "mastry," the representation of black bodies in his art, and the importance of putting your money back into your work.



**Doreen St. Félix:** I'd love to hear you talk about *Mastry* and the misspelling of "mastery." To me, it kind of felt like a visual pun with a lot of meaning behind it. We would love to hear about the notion of "mastry" and how it looks, via the spelling.

**Kerry James Marshall:** Right. So, you take the conventional definition of a "master." For black folks, you read that through the history of slavery and things like that, in the sense that "mastery" was somebody who had possession of oneself and control over the bodies of others. So there's two aspects of it, which seem to contradict each other on some level. You have a master who's in control of himself but also in control of the bodies of others who have lost the control of themselves. That's the way we think about what it means to be a master.

Before the title of the show, *Mastry*, I had started to develop a comics project called "Rythm Mastr," and that was the first time I had adopted a different spelling of "mastery," by eliminating the "e" and the "y." So in "Rythm Mastr," not only is the "rhythm" spelled wrong — dropping an "h" — but, in *Mastry*, I dropped both the "e" and the "y." Part of the reason I wanted to drop the "e" and the "y" was to undercut the implications of control of other peoples' bodies that's associated with the term "master" but preserve a certain idea of self-control, and the ability of somebody to ... implement a regime of power on their own behalf. That's how the spelling arrived.

There's a panel in the early version of the Rythm Mastr project I did called "Dailies," where I put the definitions: I explain why I spell both "rhythm" and "master" the way that I do. In the "master" definition, it has this ... way that I just explained it to you, that I wanted to preserve a certain implication of control but to eliminate the aspect of it that imposed that control on other people.



**Thinking about control, you've created a body of work that, when a lot of black viewers see it, they feel intense moments of both recognition and representation, which are a little bit different from each other. Is that a daunting feeling for you? Do you feel a responsibility?**

**Marshall:** Do I feel a responsibility for providing it?

**Not necessarily for providing it, but for the possibility that there might be reactions that are intense in that way.**

**Marshall:** Well, I would hope so! I think the fact that I chose to represent those black bodies with the intensity of black that I do already sets it up for a response to the work that could be in the most extreme. There's the possibility of both extremes: there are some people who could experience an extreme repulsion to the body because of the way blackness has been figured in our imaginations and in our consciousness as a kind of position of deprivation — a lack. Lack of agency, lack of power, lack of authority, lack of self-control: I mean, that's sort of how a lot of us understand what it had meant to be black, and that there are black people who flee from the notion that they need to be identified as "black."

Then you have, on the other side of it, this notion, if you think of the Black Power movement from the '60s, '70s, and into the '80s, we have Black Power and "black is beautiful." That declaration that "black is beautiful" has to somehow be embodied also, as a kind of countermeasure to the way in which black had been seen as a kind of way of being diminished.

I'm prepared for both, but I think the treatment of the subjects in the work, and especially in the way the work has evolved over time, has demonstrated that my intentions actually are to render that body in the extreme, but in the most powerful extreme, and also the most desirable extreme.

**I wanted to ask you about geography. So many of your works have very definitive geographic markers there. A lot of those are in America, but there are also a lot that harken back to Haiti. I'm actually Haitian —**



**Marshall:** Oh, you are?

**I was amazed to see —**

**Marshall:** The Veves?

**Exactly! Just the vocabulary of Vodou there, and the vocabulary of agrarian existence. How do you think of the black diaspora outside of America? How do you place yourself within it?**

**Marshall:** So, the black population in the western hemisphere ... why is there a black population in the western hemisphere in the first place? It's because we were carried to the western hemisphere to be used and profited from. We were brought to all these places. Black folks were brought to Haiti, black folks were brought to Jamaica, black folks were brought to Trinidad, black folks were brought to Brazil, they were brought to Mexico.

We've been carried to all these places, and the community of what we call "black people" now has been informed by all that transportation. But one of the things I recognized early on, doing whatever studies of black history I have, is that even though black folks were transported as slaves, into servitude, when they were carried out of Africa they left empty-handed, but they didn't leave empty-headed. They carried with them the culture they knew, the culture they had, and that culture reconstituted itself in all the places they went.

And because, regionally, on the African continent, most of the slave population was derived from a fairly limited area, there's now similarity in terms of our experiences and the things we believe and the things we see, whether we're in Alabama, whether we're in Brazil, whether we're in Haiti. The only difference between those things is intensity.

One of the ways that intensity was able to manifest itself was that in Haiti, the population of black folks was larger and more concentrated. In America, it was larger but more diffuse, more dispersed. But even in that dispersal, there's still evidence of the same kinds of practices and beliefs and behaviors that you'd see in Haiti, or in Jamaica, or in Cuba, or someplace — you could see that stuff in Birmingham or in South Carolina.

I'm sure, since you were just talking to [cinematographer and artist Arthur Jafa], you mentioned *Daughters of the Dust*. South Carolina — the Sea Islands around there — because of the conditions of the marshes and swampland, the black population there was larger and more concentrated. There were fewer white people there, so they were able to reconstitute some of those cultural practices in a way that people who were spread out in other parts of the country weren't able to.



These concentrations of black folks can be equated with a concentration of whatever the cultural memory, the cultural history, the cultural practices Africans had before they were taken off the continent. They just simply reconstituted those things but then added to them dimensions that came from a group of people who were, say, in Benin state, as opposed to Congo state.

I see it as a thing that I feel fundamentally connected to, even if I am not a devotee or a practitioner. There are things that I believe in and sort of respect as a kind of foundation mythology that are rooted in some of those practices. I also think if those practices are ever to mean anything, we have to find a way to make use of them in the modern and contemporary world that gives us the same kind of sense of power that you find in superhero narratives, comic books, science-fiction movies: They're largely based on Greek and Roman mythology or Nordic mythology. It's like, we're still talking about Thor. *[laughs]*

For black people in the western hemisphere, if you can't generate a mythology that creates models of heroism and power out of the mythology that you had, then that means that somehow the mythology you had was not only feeble and weak, but that you are ultimately a powerless people. That's a notion that, I think, that can't be accepted.

**Mythology informs history in many ways. When I look at your paintings, sometimes I feel like I'm caught in this liminal space of being right in the moment of the picture, but then also considering their eventual — in the span of centuries — the way they will become historical documents. Do you think of them as historical documents in contemporary time?**

**Marshall:** Yeah, I do. This is one of the functions of institutionalization: You allow for an object to be institutionalized, it becomes fixed in a certain kind of narrative that can be told and retold over time. This is the way in which history becomes at once a kind of calcified narrative but also a living narrative. Because then it's able to be transmitted again to another generation that wasn't a generation when the thing was first made.

I think that matters, because it's a way of acknowledging to people that they are rooted in the world and rooted in history, that they didn't just arrive as they are *[laughs]* a moment ago. I think it's important for people to feel like they're part of something that's enduring.



**You seem to exude this sense of presence, this sense of freedom. When did that kind of come to your senses, like, *Oh man, I can gain more freedom by owning property*, and these types of things. Do you remember a moment when that kind of sparked in your head?**

**Marshall:** Well it wasn't so much being free because you own property, it had more to do with understanding. So, number one, capitalism [*laughs*] was the vehicle in which we were commodified as property and brought to the western hemisphere!

You know, the first freedom is to be in possession of yourself — to own yourself, to not be subject to the will of somebody else. In a capitalist society, that means having a certain economic wherewithal so that you can do what you wish to do without having to ask permission.

I learned a lesson from a friend of mine once, who had come into a substantial amount of money [and then] did all the things which I think, subsequently, you're not supposed to do when you come into a substantial amount of money. In a short time [he was] living back with his mother, broke! [*laughs*] So this is like a cautionary tale right there.

I decided that the whole idea of what it means to be an artist was that somehow you are ontologically oriented toward poverty [*laughs*]: "As an artist, you don't make money." I had to figure out some kind of way to guarantee that I'd be able to continue doing the work that I wanted to do, whether I made money from the work I was doing or not.

One of the ways to do that is to not be a debt prisoner to somebody else. So if you have a mortgage to make and a car note to make, that means you buy it outright, which means you own it and you don't have to keep paying it off or worrying about somebody coming and repossessing it. So we bought a house that we could afford to pay for, did the work, and that allowed us to use, then, all of the resources we had and were accumulating to put directly into our work, because we didn't have a mortgage payment to make! We weren't looking for the landlord!

We had a secure base, we had a lot of space, we could do whatever we wanted to: We didn't owe anybody anything. When we worked, we worked to put money back into our work, and I think that matters.



## **Do you feel that confidence kind of lets itself back into the work?**

**Marshall:** Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. You can't underestimate the value and confidence that provides. Here's the thing. Every now and then you hear one of these self-help guru programs, and they say something that actually means something. *[laughs]* I heard one of these financial planner people do a lecture once, and the concept that made the most sense was to pay yourself first.

I had read a biography of Andrew Carnegie in which he said, "When I was working, shining shoes, if I made 10 cents, I saved a nickel, if I made 50 cents, I saved a quarter. I saved 50 percent of everything I earned — I put it aside until I got enough money to buy out the interests of the other guy I was shining shoes with, and then I hired him to shine shoes for me. And then I'd take a percentage of what he made when he was shining shoes."

He said, "The first time I got paid for work I didn't do, that changed everything for me." So, to make a long story short, the logic of this "pay yourself first," this guy said, "Take 10 percent off the top of everything you earn, set it aside, put it in another place." He said, "what you discover is not the amount of money per se, but that at a certain point, when you've accumulated a certain amount of money, it changes your outlook on the world completely, because you know you have a resource below which you cannot fall." And, in case of emergency or even in case of a desire, you have a resource that you can go to, again, without having to ask somebody for permission to do so.

So for me, this whole freedom thing, that's what it really means to get free. I mean, in some ways you still have to buy your freedom, but that's because you live in a social structure that's organized around capital, and capital does equate with a certain kind of freedom, especially if you can start to generate capital on your own.

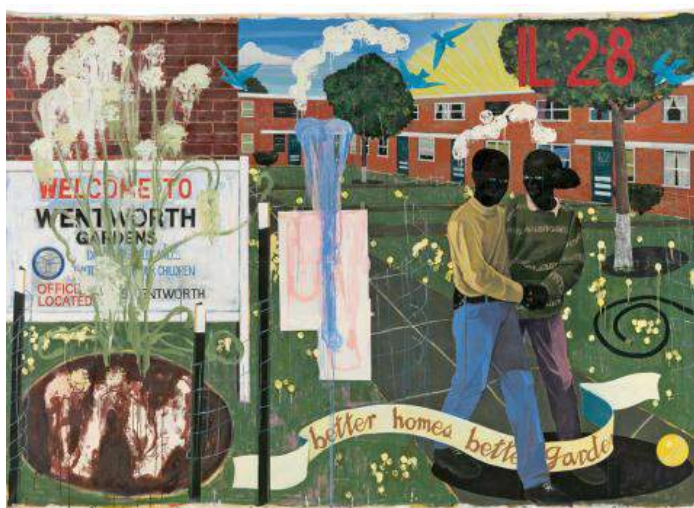


# Art in America

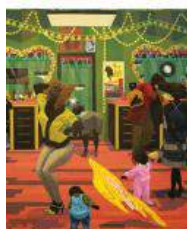
## Kerry James Marshall

NEW YORK,  
at the Met Breuer

by Tatiana Istomina | April 3, 2017



Kerry James Marshall: *Better Homes, Better Gardens*, 1994, acrylic and collage on canvas, 100 by 142 inches; at the Met Breuer.



The title of Kerry James Marshall's retrospective, "Mastry," functions on multiple levels. It alludes to Marshall's comic strip "Rythm Mastr" (1999–), which features black characters wrestling with problems in African American communities using the power of new technology and the mythologies of the African past. It additionally evokes the old masters whose work Marshall often cites in his paintings, as well as the artistic mastery he himself has achieved over the past four decades. The title also, of course, conjures the power relations of slavery, whose traumas and inequities still pervade this country.

Issues of race are central to Marshall's work. The African American artist was born in Alabama in 1955, during the Jim Crow era, and grew up in Los Angeles, where he witnessed the 1965 Watts Rebellion and the rise of the civil rights and Black Power movements. One can see the beginnings of his investigation of race in the earliest works in the exhibition, which was organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, where it debuted; the Metropolitan Museum, which presented the show at its modern and contemporary branch, the Met Breuer; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, where the show is on view through July 3. In the 1980 painting *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, a man rendered primarily in black on a black ground stares at the viewer with an unsettling grin, the whites of his eyes, teeth, and shirt collar gleaming in the dark.



Inspired by Ralph Ellison's modernist novel *Invisible Man*, the portrait captures the book's complex mood—a mixture of slapstick humor, ferocious satire, and tragedy. A later diptych, *Two Invisible Men (The Lost Portraits)*, 1985, features a version of the same portrait on the right, and a monochrome of light pink—often dubbed “skin tone” in premixed paint sets—on the left. The visual disparity between the two panels produces a strong psychological tension: the near-invisibility of the black figure prompts viewers to peer more closely into the other panel—and despite its apparent emptiness, the pink monochrome seems to gaze back at them with invisible eyes. The diptych reverses the traditional terms of art history by spotlighting the black figure and wiping out its white counterpart, but, paradoxically, the empty panel maintains a powerful presence in the piece.

The forces of an unseen white presence are felt in much of Marshall's work. His world of low-income neighborhoods, barbershops, nightclubs, and homes populated with black characters may appear autonomous and self-sufficient, but it exists within a universe whose rules and standards have been determined by white people. Even though white people are not portrayed directly in the paintings, they are invariably present in oblique symbolic or referential ways. Sometimes we hear their judgmental voices, as in *Beauty Examined* (1993), which depicts a black woman on an examination table with critical remarks floating about her body: BIG THIGHS, BIG HIPS, BIG ASS, etc. Sometimes the white presence is suggested through the socioeconomic factors that shape the black characters' living conditions and their lifestyle ideals. Taken as a whole, Marshall's practice functions within the traditions and conventions of Western art history: his works echo and respond to those of white “masters,” filling in their erasures and omissions and challenging assumptions concerning which artists and subjects are worthy of canonization.

At the Met Breuer, the lavish retrospective presented a historical progression of Marshall's work over two floors of the museum. His early works have densely packed surfaces, with every plane and shape modulated or textured; they combine painted figures with abstract gestural marks, stenciled patterns, fragments of text, and collaged book and calendar pages. A 1992 piece, *Could This Be Love*, shows a black couple undressing in a bedroom while listening to a romantic song, its musical notation and words drifting above their heads. The pair appears vulnerable and slightly self-conscious: the woman looks at us sideways as she pulls her red dress over her head; the man faces us with an uncertain smile, his left hand feeling inside his underwear, a line of text

floating by his lips, WHAT A WOMAN WHAT A WOMAN. In a distorted echo of the scene, a cover for a plantation romance novel attached near the bottom of the canvas shows a shirtless black man, presumably a slave, pulling the red dress off a fevered blonde.

Perhaps the most important works of Marshall's early period are those of the Garden Project (1994–95)—five large paintings that offer semi-fantastical portrayals of life in public housing projects in Chicago and Los Angeles, depicting children playing and adults relaxing amid the idyllic-looking grounds of the urban locations. These paintings and four others that are thematically related but generally show suburban settings covered the walls of a single gallery at the Met Breuer, forming a loose narrative sequence resembling Renaissance fresco cycles. The scenes, with their realistic imagery and pastoral character, might bring to mind Socialist Realist paintings if not for their artificial, staged atmosphere and the solemn, inscrutable expressions on the characters' faces. Amid the richly decorated compositions are floating banners bearing equivocal inscriptions: BETTER HOMES BETTER GARDENS, WE ARE ONE, etc.

In the late 1990s, Marshall's work changed stylistically and began to suggest a different psychological position. The paintings he has made from this time on bear tighter, more carefully constructed compositions and demonstrate greater control in execution; gone are the collage elements and stenciled patterns, the spills and drips, that complicate his earlier works. As Marshall's approach has become more conventional and restrained, his characters have grown tougher and more assertive. The 2014 *Untitled (Club Couple)* shows a young black couple sitting at a table with cocktails before them, their smiles wide and happy, their fingers entwined, their faces pressed close together as if for a snapshot; behind the woman's back, the man flaunts a small jewelry box that suggests the occasion for the photo. Unlike the partially exposed, vulnerable-seeming couple from *Could This Be Love*, these figures present themselves the way they wish to be seen and admired by strangers.

Self-display and self-styling have become dominant themes in Marshall's recent work. A magnificent canvas, *School of Beauty, School of Culture* (2012), shows the interior of a beauty parlor, with more than a dozen figures conversing, posturing, or primping themselves in front of multiple mirrors. The scene has an oddly disturbing detail hovering in the foreground—an anamorphic image of Disney's Sleeping Beauty that provides a pop-culture echo of the skull found in Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors* (1533). Another



echo, this one of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), occurs by way of a photographer figure reflected in a mirror at the back of the room. While present in the reflection, the man is absent from the visible space of the parlor and appears to be standing where the viewer of the painting would be. He captures the scene but is himself largely unseen, since his camera's white flash blots out his face in the reflection and his body is blocked by another figure.

The logic of mirrors, reflections, and optical deceptions is at the heart of Marshall's practice. His work points toward the major paradox of vision: while we may choose to see or not to see others, we remain somewhat obscure to ourselves and need a counter-presence to throw back at us our more or less distorted reflection. To depict the black figure, Marshall employs and inverts traditions, stereotypes, and expectations established by white culture. The image he constructs becomes another mirror, in which black and white Americans may face themselves and each other.



# Kerry James Marshall

Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
New York, USA



Every so often, a museum stages the correct show at the correct time. This is, without a doubt, the case with the Met Breuer's masterful new exhibition, 'Kerry James Marshall: Mastry'. In light of the recent election of Donald Trump and the rise, in a new cast, of very old American white identity politics, the success of Black Lives Matter, over the last few years, in reframing the conversation on state violence against black and brown people and the prison-industrial complex, and the final months of Barack Obama's eight-year tenure as the first black president of the United States, 'Mastry' stands as a counterstatement, a tribute and a memorial.

'Mastry' is the largest retrospective to date of one of America's finest artists. It includes almost 80 works, most of them paintings (as well as a small sample of his photography), and provides numerous opportunities to reflect upon the tenuous period we are now departing

and the uncharted one we are about to enter. Marshall is clearly steeped in Western and global pictorial traditions as well as in black aesthetics and culture, from the most refined to the popular and vernacular; his life and career have paralleled the numerous, momentous shifts in contemporary American and black history of the last half century. He successfully captures and reflects these trajectories, while also keeping a celebration of the black figure, and blackness itself, at the centre of his art.

Born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955, Marshall grew up in Watts and South Central Los Angeles, graduating from Otis Art Institute, with a stop at the Studio Museum in Harlem's prestigious residency programme along the way. He now lives, teaches and makes art in Chicago. His paintings, often described as 'narrative', index both his own personal history and the broader story of Black America and the diaspora through a variety of formal and representational

approaches, including historical tableaux, landscape, genre painting and portraiture, as informed by everything from murals to comic strips.

The first two paintings that greet viewers, *De Style* and *The Lost Boys* (both 1993), initially marked a new level of fluency in his career. These magnificent, large-scale works, in acrylic with collage, feature many of Marshall's visual hallmarks, including references to black working-class life, spiritual and numerological symbology, and a wink – with a bit of shade – at prior Euro-American art, especially in terms of its structural composition. Another (and perhaps the primary) Marshall trademark is his inclusion of black figures, whose skin – representing the antithesis of the Western ideal and a touchstone for a new standard of beauty – appears almost matte at first but reveals subtle nuances of hue and warmth upon closer inspection.

*De Style* depicts Perry's House of Style, a black barbershop. Historically, such sites were key repositories of African-American culture and exchange. Amid the expected imagery – which includes Ultra Sheen, an *Ebony* magazine hair conditioner ad, a cropped Joe Louis photo and the marbled black tile floor (with pools of kinky shorn hair included) – there are also more mysterious elements, such as the 'K7s' floating in pink stars above the shop's workers and customers, and a collaged image of a woman's reproductive organs, as if to arrest a simplistic reading. Riffing off the old masters' compositional bones as well as modernism's flattened perspectives (including *Dé Stijl* grids), most of *De Style*'s figures directly engage the viewer's gaze, except the one at the centre, whose side glance – like his crown of dreadlocks and natty suit – hint at stories that this, and Marshall's paintings in general, know yet never fully reveal. *De Style* and *The Lost Boys* are also a memorial to children killed by gun violence, years before the murders of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice and so many others; Marshall thus welcomes all viewers into the painting's frame, but with the proviso that only through a deeper engagement with the black imaginary from which the paintings derive can we hope to truly crack their visual code.

Literary and historical figures recur throughout Marshall's oeuvre, beginning with *The Invisible Man*, a 1980 diptych in acrylic, in which





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he contrasts a tiny peach monochrome – like white flesh under a microscope – with a caricatured self-portrait of a black man, almost invisible against a black ground. This work manages simultaneously to critique American minstrelsy and white supremacy, to pay homage to the protagonist in the eponymous novel by Ralph Ellison, who inspired Marshall's return to figurative painting after a stint with abstraction, and also to humanize blackness. *Invisible Man*, a 1986 revision of the previous painting, enlarges the canvas, eliminating the lighter monochrome altogether in favour of the other. This painting is almost completely black on black. Marshall again references racist caricature, but repurposes the imagery, in part through the figure's physical modesty and beacon-like eyes, which symbolize Marshall's aesthetic vision and point to multiple future directions the artist will pursue in subsequent paintings. (Interestingly, they also prefigure Kara Walker's silhouettes and Chris Ofili's *Blue Rider* paintings.)

Marshall's maturation as an artist, as well as his shifts in scale and focus, are continuously on display. Some of his finest paintings, such as *Slow Dance* (1992–93), depict black heterosexual romance on an intimate scale, while sacrificing none of his imagistic mystery. Others, such as the 'Five Gardens Pictures' project, a series of nine mid-1990s paintings shown together for the first time in this exhibition, collectively and collaboratively create narratives about urban black life. These works especially succeed, to stunning effect, in wringing beauty – and sublimity, given the immense size of the canvases and the barely hidden horror and dark symbolism in many of them – out of the vast, increasingly inhuman warehouses and laboratories for economic and social neglect

that public housing projects became in the US and, particularly, in Chicago.

In addition to showing Marshall's work, the Met invited him to select and exhibit works by other artists from its collection. This curated display on the third floor of the Breuer building not only enriches but sharpens the viewer's sense of Marshall's achievements, demonstrating how essential African-American art and artists are to any understanding of the American and Western aesthetic traditions, but also how aesthetic dialogues always flow in multiple directions. His selections open up a genealogy via the layered media and commanding spiritual power emitted by a Dan face mask, George Seurat's pointillistic precision, Jacob Lawrence's flattened planes and vernacular tableaux or Tsukioka Yushitoshi's complex compositions.

Marshall's art seems as much in conversation with, as counternarrative to, some of Western art's commonplaces: the ghostly whiteness of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres's *Odalisque in Grisaille* (1824–34), for instance; the almost insolent pinkness in the face of John Graham's *Celia* (1944), who stares back as if in shock at the figures in nearby rooms; or the mocking leisure of Balthus's *Thérèse* (1936). Marshall's female figures, even in joy, appear aware of history's spectre, of the necessity of double vision: and only in the rarest cases do they fully let their guard down.

'Mastery' is art America needs, and needs to see right now. The Met Breuer, as if prescient, is running the exhibition right through to Inauguration Day. Don't miss its mojo, because you just may need it in the years to come.

JOHN KEENE

1  
Kerry James Marshall  
*Bang*, 1994, acrylic and  
collage on canvas, 2.6 × 2.9 m

2  
Kerry James Marshall  
*7am Sunday Morning*, 2003,  
acrylic on canvas, 3 × 5.5 m

3  
Walker Evans  
*Female Pedestrian in Print Blouse*,  
Detroit (for *Fortune* magazine  
article 'Labor Anonymus'), 1946,  
gelatin silver print, 10 × 7 cm



3



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# Flash Art

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KERRY JAMES  
MARSHALL

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# Learning is Problem Solving

*Helen Molesworth in conversation with Kerry James Marshall*







**Helen Molesworth:** *You've been interviewed a lot, and your biography is very much out there for people. It's typical, I think, for a story like yours, which dovetails in this extraordinary way with certain cultural events, that that [aspect of the biography] has been repeated a lot. So, I was hoping that maybe we could talk about some other stuff. I thought we could examine a part of your career that isn't spoken of very often, which is that you were a teacher — what that was like, and what that might have meant for your studio work and for how you thought about art. You taught at the University of Illinois.*

**Kerry James Marshall:** In Chicago. The downtown Circle Campus is what it used to be called.

**HM:** *For how many years?*

**KJM:** I was first hired in 1993, and I think I stayed there for about eleven years before I left.

**HM:** *Does that mean you went through the tenure process? You ended up being a tenured full professor and all that kind of jazz?*

**KJM:** Yeah, I was actually a tenured professor. I went for tenure in the first three years because I got hired under what they call the queue contract. What that exactly means I don't know, but I didn't apply for a job at UIC. I started out there as a sabbatical replacement hire for Phyllis Bramson, for one year. With a queue contract you have to make tenure in three years, because that's

when the review comes up. But, instead of going up for tenure as an associate, they put me up for tenure as a full professor. Literally while the review was going on and my papers were under review was when I got the MacArthur Fellowship.

**HM:** *Oh, I bet that played in your tenure favor.*

**KJM:** Of course there was no way they could say no. In that period, a lot of other things started to happen. I was in a lot of big, high-profile shows. I got lots of recognition, got a number of grants and awards. All that stuff year after year after year started to pile up. And it all just happened to coincide with the time I was having to put my tenure papers together.

**HM:** *What was teaching like for you? What did you think about it? Did you like teaching? Did you see it as a form of community service?*

**KJM:** When I left school, I wanted to prove a point, because I was disappointed with the education I was getting. It wasn't anywhere near as challenging as I thought it should be.

**HM:** *You mentioned that a little bit in the letter you wrote to younger artists ["Young Artist to Be," from Letters to a Young Artist, edited by Sarah Andress, Shelly Bancroft, and Peter Nesbett, New York: Darte Publishing, 2006].*

*Page 49:*  
The Academy (2012)  
Courtesy of the Artist and  
Jack Shainman Gallery,  
New York

*This page:*  
Untitled (Studio) (2014)  
Courtesy of Purchase,  
The Jacques and Natasha  
Gelman Foundation,  
Acquisition Fund and The  
Metropolitan Museum of  
Art, New York



Untitled (Porch Deck) (2014)  
Courtesy of David Zwirner,  
New York/London

**KJM:** Yeah. Of course my idea of what it meant to go to art school was shaped in part by reading biographies of artists from the renaissance, Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* and stuff. There was something about that whole apprenticeship process, and what seemed to be a step-by-step procedure toward complexity. There was discipline associated with the things you needed to know.

That was what I was hoping for when I went to school. That there would be a program laid out where you are required to know, understand and demonstrate your ability to implement different ideas about the ways in which pictures were made and how representation worked, how vision and visuality worked. I thought you were supposed to know all of that stuff, and that it would help you in some way.

In 1977, that's not how it was. After finishing undergraduate school, it didn't seem like going for an MFA meant much. So I wanted to prove that you could do

all of the things that somebody who got an MFA was supposed to be able to do without having to get one.

One important thing was that you couldn't really teach at the college level without an MFA. I found a way to get myself into a teaching position by writing proposals for classes I wanted to teach at the community college.

At the time, my teaching philosophy was to provide for my students all the things I thought I should have gotten when I was in school.

**HM:** *What kind of things were those specifically?*

**KJM:** Well, I thought learning was problem solving. On a project-by-project basis you were in school to exercise your aptitude for sophisticated solutions to problems.

I made my students responsible for knowing something about the history of the ways things were done.





Previous page:  
Untitled (Mirror girl)  
(2014)  
Courtesy of David Zwirner,  
New York/London

I set projects where they had to write a proposal before starting a project. You had to explain what your objective was, and then show how you were going to get there. I thought this required more of an intellectual investment in the work if you made it that way.

My ideas about art school were also shaped by an encounter with a graduate student I met after dropping my portfolio off at the Otis College, in Los Angeles, for review. He made me believe I wasn't going to get into the school because I had done the wrong thing with my portfolio.

Of course that wrong thing was that I had too much variety. I thought I was supposed to show the things I was already able to do. But he told me it wasn't focused enough on a single idea, and because of that I wasn't going to get in.

This dilemma of not knowing something that was expected of you that others apparently do know, really shaped my thinking about ambition and what I needed to do. I could no longer accept somebody else's authority, alone, determining whether I moved on or not. This idea of knowing what you are up to, it really mattered.

**HM:** *When you were asking your students to submit a work plan, what kind of competencies did you think they needed? Did you think they needed to read certain things or look at certain things? Were you sending them to the Art Institute of Chicago? Or were you doing color theory? What were the competencies you felt were really important?*

**KJM:** It was all those things. But, for me, the first level of competency was drawing. Your ability to draw and render what you saw was the foundation. This was not just a mimetic exercise. That skill goes a long way in demonstrating how well you understood the building blocks of imagery. I had my students do lots of preparatory work, and composition was a key component to that.

I always told them that if distortions are in your work, it should be something you decided on, not something that happened because you didn't know better.

I had them do a kind of schematics. If we were doing a still life, I had them break it down into schematics first and then figure out what the composition was going to be at that stage, and then do a finished drawing after that based on the drawing studies you made, not just on what you were looking at.

I used the Art Institute, and I used reproductions that were clipped from art-history books and things like that. Style was a choice. I taught a painting class where the entire semester was all self-portraits. Everybody did a self-portrait and then every self-portrait after that had to be different from the one you did the first time. You chose different styles because you needed to know why that would be a better choice than another mode you could select.

That's the way I thought education was supposed to go. Then, you were equipped now to do anything you wanted to do.

**HM:** *You said at the beginning though that you felt ambivalent about teaching. Where did that ambivalence*

*come from? What was the part of it that caused you to have second thoughts, so to speak?*

**KJM:** Teaching eats up a lot of energy. If you are really doing what I think needs to be done, which is constantly challenging the students' ability to do a thing and building up a repertoire of technical capabilities and understanding, that's what it takes, and that is a lot of work.

It eats into your ability to do your own work. There was always this thing where I had said to myself: "I didn't get into making art because I wanted to be the best art teacher I could be. I got in because I wanted to become the best artist I could be." At some point, you have to be able to give all of your energy over to just simply making the work, because if you keep having to divide your energy and your attention between teaching, then there is a way in which it compromises what you do.

Then there is something about being in the academy that in time begins to change your tastes to fit into the academic mold. So then everything starts to become the same kind of thing. That was something that I didn't like. You can lose your sense of judgment about the value of things because you have to talk about everything as if it is equally important.

Those were some of the dangers I felt being in the academy. The other part of it was that I had so few opportunities to work with black students, because there were so few black students in those programs. It just felt like you were constantly reinforcing the same privileged access that white students already had to the best kind of education. It was nearly impossible to cultivate a large enough class of black students or Mexican students or Korean students who might want to do work that might be different.

A competitive capacity has to be encouraged where people of color are revved up to challenge the dominant white majority in the art world. Not just hoping they are welcomed into the mainstream, but to really go after a place in the art world because your pursuits are truly transformative. I mean, it's the same kind of pursuit that leads to the Nobel Prize or to the standing of artists like Donald Judd or Jackson Pollack or Andy Warhol. They are the artists whose productivity shaped the conversation about what kinds of things are possible in making art.

I think you need an army of people who are aimed at doing that. It's challenging when there are so few artists of color in programs so you don't really get a chance to do that with them, but you constantly have to keep doing it with students who already have access to that kind of experience.

**HM:** *Why do you think in Chicago, at the sort of flagship city college, you weren't able to garner students of color to the art program? Chicago is a very diverse city. And you are talking about the public university. Where was the gap there?*

**KJM:** Well, there are two ways that has to be understood I think. One is that within the visual art world, you're still going up against this idea that you are not





likely to be able to make a living with a degree in the arts. For people of color, going to school for four or five years and being able to make a living matters. You will find more people of color going into art education.

**HM:** Right, that's sort of a professionalized way to be in the art world.

**KJM:** There is a program, a course of action, and then a job at the end of the line. It was more likely that — when they had an art therapy program, you would find more people of color in the art therapy program for the same reasons. Because there was a payoff at the end. But in fine arts, you are on your own. To the degree that most people don't consider undertaking this path. When ideas about what's relevant in fine art, let's put it like that, are articulated, they sound like nonsense to a lot of people. I mean, you are not going to get a lot of people signing up for that, people who are already, in some ways, barely making it to the school in the first place. That's one thing.

The other side of it is that there not only were few students of color coming into the program, but I was the only black faculty in the art program. That matters too, because when the selection process for reviewing stu-

dents for graduate school and stuff comes in, of course the sensibility of the faculty determines who gets in and who's not in. They will keep reproducing the things that they are interested in. That's just the way it goes. I mean all the things that remind them of themselves when they were at that stage are appealing.

That's the other part of it. I only had one vote, and I've heard more than a few times: you cannot put together classes based on what people's ethnicity and race is. Then it becomes that quality thing. Part of what happens with universities is they seem to all be choosing students that are already doing the kinds of stuff that you saw in the gallery yesterday.

—  
*"Kerry James Marshall: Mastry," the artist's first comprehensive survey, is on view at The Met Breuer, New York, from October 25, 2016, to January 29, 2017. It travels to MOCA, Los Angeles, in March 2017.*

*Helen Molesworth is chief curator at MOCA, Los Angeles.*

*This page:  
 Untitled (2009)  
 Courtesy of Yale University  
 Art Gallery, Janet and  
 Simeon Braguin Fund and  
 Jacqueline L. Bradley*

*Next page:  
 Untitled (Beauty Queen)  
 (2014)  
 Courtesy of David Zwirner,  
 New York/London*







KERRY JAMES MARSHALL, *DE STYLE*, 1993, ACRYLIC AND COLLAGE ON CANVAS 104 X 122 IN., LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART, PURCHASED WITH FUNDS PROVIDED BY RUTH AND JACOB BLOOM, PURCHASED WITH FUNDS PROVIDED BY RUTH AND JACOB BLOOM, DIGITAL IMAGE © 2015 MUSEUM ASSOCIATES/LACMA, LICENSED BY ART RESOURCE, NY

## The World According to Kerry James Marshall

A retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art shows Marshall rewriting history

March 6, 2017 | Marielle Wakim | Art | 0 Comments

The artistic trajectory of painter Kerry James Marshall was determined by civil rights movements. Born in 1955 in Birmingham, Alabama, he observed an upheaval before his family relocated to Watts in 1963, where he'd witness the Watts riots. But his experiences were never the ones portrayed by master painters he admired. And so, two years before graduating from Otis Art Institute, Marshall painted *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self* (1980), his first image of a black figure. The piece depicts a man's coal-black face set against a black background, his only discernible features being the whites of his eyes and a cartoonish rictus—a commentary on the way a black man might be perceived in a white world, which is to say, barely at all. Marshall has painted black figures ever since, less to criticize Western art and more to insert the largely absent African American into a narrative that has captivated him since his first visit to a museum—LACMA—at the age of ten. On March 12 *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry*, which showcases nearly 80 of the artist's works, opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art. “One of the effects of a Kerry James Marshall show is a call to thinking,”



MOCA cocurator Helen Molesworth says. “Are we prepared to let go of the fantasy that whiteness equals wealth, beauty, fill in the blank?”



**Kerry James Marshall, A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self, 1980, egg tempera on paper, 8 x 6.5 in., Steven and Deborah Lebowitz.**

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHEW FRIED, © MCA CHICAGO

The paintings in *Mastry* fulfill Marshall’s mission to render the daily rituals of black life on a grand scale. In 1993’s *De Style* (above), he ennoble barbershop culture—the barber is even haloed à la medieval-era saints—while saluting his predecessors: The title refers to the shop’s name, Percy’s House of Style, but also De Stijl, the Dutch art movement that embraced primary colors and geometric shapes. (Mondrian was a founder, hence the



palette of blues, reds, and yellows.) It was the first of Marshall's paintings to enter a museum collection—LACMA's, fittingly—though his most famous work is *The Garden Project*, a group of five paintings that focus on public housing, including Watts's Nickerson Gardens (all are on view in *Mastry*).

Today Marshall's pieces fetch more than \$2 million at auction and are in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian and the Met. "On the one hand, he's an artist painting his own experience," Molesworth says, "and on the other hand, he's correcting historical record."



# Kerry James Marshall Brings Blackness to the White Walls of a White Space

BY CATHERINE WOMACK

TUESDAY, MARCH 21, 2017 AT 9:03 A.M.



Kerry James Marshall, *Vignette*, 2003

*Defares Collection, photo courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, London*

**There are exceptions, but for the most part art museums are very white places.**

White walls are covered in the works of white artists. White nudes are illuminated by white lights. Marble sculptures reveal ivory-white skin. White people look at art made of, for and about the white experience.



Kerry James Marshall is a black artist who paints black people. The men and women in Marshall's paintings are not people of a range of colors. They are not painted in differing shades of brown. They are painted in the darkest, inkiest black, consistently, exclusively, insistently and masterfully.

"Mastry," a much-lauded retrospect of Marshall's work, has just opened at MOCA's Grand Avenue location in downtown L.A. This is the the third and final stop for the painting show, which began its North American tour at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and landed next at the Met Breuer in Manhattan. Critics in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles have consistently called it a must-see show, but I say it's actually a must-see-at-least-twice show.



Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Club Couple)*, 2014

*The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, promised gift of Mandy and Cliff Einstein*

Just one of Marshall's paintings holds enough layers, textures and allusions to occupy a viewer's mind for the better part of an hour. Multiply that by 78 -- the number of works on display in the MOCA retrospective -- and you can see how a return visit is practically required. (If multiple \$15 admission fees are outside your budget, remember that MOCA is always free on Thursdays from 5 to 8 p.m.)



Marshall is not a greedy artist, demanding your time selfishly. He is, in fact, an incredibly generous one. Every minute spent with his paintings is rewarded. Take, for instance, *Black Painting*, a work Marshall painted from 2003 to 2006. At first glance across the gallery it appears to be exactly what its title implies: a simple, large, monochromatic black square of a painting, emphatically framed in black.



*Brian Forrest*

But if you take the time to stand in front of *Black Painting* and let your eyes adjust as if to a dark room, figures and objects emerge. There is a couple in the bed. Is that an Angela Davis book on her nightstand? Look at how the flag on the wall is so beautifully draped and what its message implies about the people in the room or the world they live in or Marshall's larger point. There's a lot to unpack in this seductive work, every bit of it thoughtful, intentional and smart as hell.

MOCA curator Helen Molesworth says that with *Black Painting*, Marshall is flexing his painterly muscles, showing off his mastery of the medium by taking



something that is already difficult to work with (black paint) and pushing it to the extreme.

Marshall's technical mastery as a painter is alluded to in the show's double (or triple?) entendre of a title. The depth of his knowledge about the history and art of painting on display in this show is stunning. Marshall is constantly alluding to the great (white) master painters of the past. He does so not to imitate but to acknowledge, to thrust himself and his blackness into that history and open a dialogue.



Kerry James Marshall, *Past Times*, 1997

*Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority, McCormick Place Art Collection, photo by Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago*

Marshall plays with all the tropes. Still lifes and landscapes and portraits and nudes. He inserts black people into scenes we've never seen them in before in art. Think of a typical "portrait of the artist" painting. The artist is always white. In Marshall's portraits, the artists are black. They are women. They are



defiant, afro-coiffed, fist-raised black men. They are holding palettes whose messy surfaces themselves immediately call to mind (white) German expressionist paintings. They are a direct and purposeful insertion of blackness into a white tradition.

Of course, for truly great artists like Marshall, mastery of technique is never the end. It is the means, the necessary tool for expressing a larger truth about the human experience. For Marshall, who was born in Alabama during the civil rights movement's most violent years, grew up in Los Angeles against the backdrop of the Watts Riots and ultimately made a life for himself in Chicago, race is always at the forefront and technical mastery is a given, but love is the message.

"There is no freedom without love," Molesworth said on a recent walk-through at MOCA, pointing out the intense ways in which that feeling emanates from so many of Marshall's paintings. In his depictions of couples and children and housing projects and barber shops and beauty parlors and a young Harriet Tubman, love is palpable.

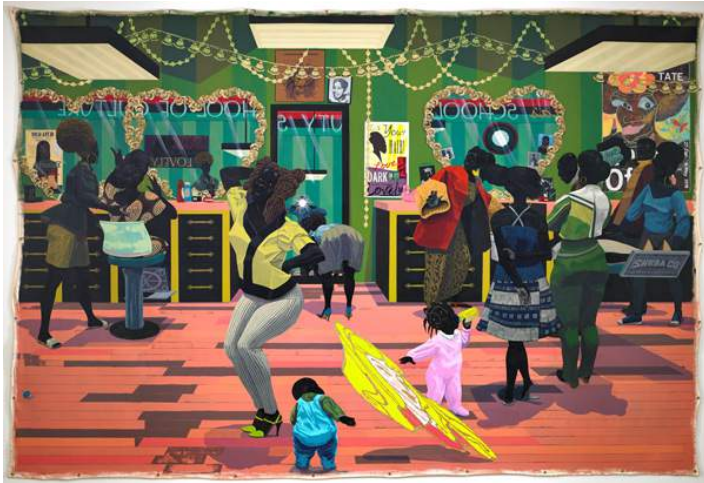
Love, of course, is not black or white. It is human. For so long in the Western art tradition, human beauty and love and truth were depicted as exclusively white. Marshall depicts them as black.

With "Mastry," we see that he has spent his entire life knowing deeply what has only recently become a hashtag -- that black lives matter, and that it is way past time for our museums to regularly include depictions of beauty, love and truth that are black.

*"Kerry James Marshall: Mastry," MOCA Grand Avenue, 250 S. Grand Ave., downtown; through July 3 (closed Tuesdays).*



# ARTILLERY



Kerry James Marshall, *School of Beauty, School of Culture*, 2012, photo by Sean Pathasema

## THE MANY SHADES OF KERRY JAMES MARSHALL

"Mastry" at MOCA

by Max King Cap

March 7, 2017

It's cold. He looks even larger in his winter coat. He is a large man. Tall and broad-shouldered. In football, he might be a tight end; I've stood next to several players for the Bears. He would not seem out of place among such large men except that the hair on his head and beard is flecked with gray. He has just arrived at his studio—a swift bike ride from Soldier Field (yes, Chicagoans ride their bikes in winter, even in weather this cold)—and hasn't even taken off his coat.

The Bears' season was over a long time ago, but the season of Kerry James Marshall—from its home opener at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art to its blowout performance at New York City's Met Breuer, to the eagerly anticipated matchup at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles—has been an unqualified success. Yet the schedule has been exhausting, and the long, successful season has taken him away from the studio. Marshall seems delighted with the weather, though. He was a Californian in his youth but has shed that skin; after enduring two-dozen Chicago winters he is made of sterner stuff. "It actually warmed up today," he says. "Yesterday was really cold, but you know what it's like." As a Chicagoan for 30 years, I do. He continues, "19 degrees is like a heat wave because it was nine below zero the other night. Now it's actually going to be in the mid-30s for the rest of the week." Still, I'm glad this is a video chat.

Today is a studio day. Marshall and I are going to talk about painting. Not the painting that most of the recent articles—and there have been many—have focused upon, not about the refusal to paint any more white people. That is by now too easy a journalistic hook and it doesn't delve into the complexity of his motivation and means. We are talking about the artist in the studio and the



research, physical labor, experimentation, failure and invention that takes place there. “In a way, the studio’s a kind of refuge,” Marshall tells me, “It’s the one place where you have a certain amount of control over whether people can get at you or not. I go into the studio every single day. If I’m in Chicago, I’m in there. After taking care of some of the mundane everyday things you have to take care of, you take care of your stuff at home. And then I get to the studio; and for the most part, once I’m in there, then it really is like a sanctuary. I can do any of 100 things that I might want to do. The less contact I have with people while I’m in there, the better.”

Marshall’s studio is in Bronzeville, a section of Chicago’s Black Belt, a region of the city that

has since the Nixon administration been home to a nearly undiluted concentration of black people. There are pockets of whiteness though: The Illinois Institute of Technology, home of Mies van der Rohe; and the University of Chicago, home of Leopold & Loeb. According to Steve Bogira of the Chicago Reader, “This African-American subdivision of Chicago includes 18 contiguous community areas, each with black populations above 90 percent, most of them well above that.” The blackness of Chicago’s Black Belt would seem impenetrable. It has, however, been nibbled at its edges. The University of Illinois-Chicago, where Marshall was a professor until seven years ago, has enveloped its surroundings including the notable Maxwell Street area, refuge for Eastern European Jews and Dixie-fleeing Bluesmen—it produced Benny Goodman and Jack Ruby. The South Loop, the neighborhood of Marshall’s old studio, featured light industry and SRO hotels. It now has macrobiotic brew pubs, sushi bars and million-dollar condominiums. Marshall’s new, purpose-built studio is now more than 20 blocks south of this relentless creep.

Like these neighborhoods, the population of Marshall’s paintings has been resolutely black. Yet if one considers the complexion of all the people in the paintings of Fairfield Porter it hardly bears mentioning. We are talking mainly about form now, not content. How though, I ask, does one go about the representation of figures that, pictorially, have both absence and presence, in



both form and content, and how does the form engender the content? Marshall explains, “I tried to figure out how much of a suggestion of volume you could get out of a thing that was essentially flat without any modeling in it that required you to do a light and dark value scale. I was trying to preserve an essential flatness in the images, and by using a variety of textured marks while I was making the painting, try to figure out if there was a way I could suggest there was volume in the thing. I worked that until I felt like I reached the limit of where I started to think I needed more definition—because the silhouettes by themselves just never quite got to the place where I wanted the image, the way I wanted the image to resonate.”

Marshall micromanages the tension between hard-edged shape and illusory volume: “That’s almost the way I started out, trying to do a simultaneity where you have simultaneous presence and absence, but with an emphatic presence. This has to do with lighting. I started trying to figure out a way to not compromise the fundamental blackness of the figure but create enough density and volume so that the thing seems solid as opposed to simply a kind of cut-out. By really exploiting what you could get from the already available three different colors of black, from the Mars black, which is iron oxide, to bone black, which they call ivory black, to a carbon black. They look the same in the jar basically, but they’re really different from each other, especially when you stack them on top. Then I started further modifying those by adding a cobalt blue into the carbon black and then adding a yellow ochre and then adding alizarin turquoise, so that gave me six or seven different value and chromatic changes that I could work with.”

Ambivalent flatness creates much of the visual tension in his work. While the subtleties of his blacks can make a Barnett Newman seem garish, his placement of very warm colors in the background often forces his figures aggressively toward the picture plane, requiring the viewer to feel equally observed.

Two images, painted 15 years apart, vividly illustrate the stylistic change in Marshall’s approach to rendering portraits as dexterously black as the pearlescent dermatological surrealism of Ingres. *Supermodel* (1994) and *Frankenstein* (2009) both possess a Kool-Moe-Dee-How-You-Like-Me-Now brazenness, but the former is linearly defined, pressed against the window, framed in high contrast by his funereal nimbus. The latter, however, grippingly modeled as if carved from obsidian, maintains a spatial détente. He doesn’t expose his wound, Christ-like, as does *Supermodel*; *Frankenstein*, in all his nakedness, is not standoffish but indifferent because he has no fucks left to give. Yet these figures, now blacker, often glossier, exist and perform within a defined picture box. In this way



Marshall becomes a director and set designer, deciding what goes in the scene and what remains offstage. Those figures must also be costumed.

“I [was] building on those [Garden Project] paintings almost like...doing a collage, but once I started working on the comic strip project [Rythm Mastr], a whole series of challenges started to present themselves that made it really hard to do. I needed to find solutions to that, and where I found the solution was actually something I had experienced while doing production design for [the 1991 independent film] *Daughters of the Dust*.”

Marshall struggled at first to do that comic strip, but soon realized that the problem was being unsure of how to place these various objects and characters in a manipulated yet believable space. Studying set design and perspective drawing for theater taught him the formulas. “You have to have locations, scenery, interiors that are dressed and decorated,” he tells me. “And then you have to have costumes for your characters.” His initial searches through photographic sources were inadequate, so he turned to creating the costumes himself.

At the time Marshall had a studio assistant who helped him make the tiny costumes, but the process became so elaborate she went back to college to study fashion design. After completing her degree, he turned over all of the costume

design to her. He discovered there are patterns for those tiny doll clothes.

“I started using 12-inch action figures as mannequins. Then I started taking things that weren’t meant to be clothes and making them into clothes for these action-figure mannequins. When you see the figures wearing sweaters, a lot of those sweaters, in the beginning, started out as socks.” The artist learned from another artist: “Tintoretto used to set up stage settings with little wax figurines and use those as a compositional tool to develop his paintings. He would light them; that’s how he got that dramatic lighting he used with candles through a small-scale model set with wax figurines draped with cloth.”



This attention to detail, this *mise-en-scène* deftness is particularly visible in the “Vignettes,” 2003–07 series where in five paintings a man joyously lifts and twirls a woman. The action is a 360-degree sequence, but the setting is different in each of the five images. It is as if one is witnessing the climactic scene in five different productions of the same musical. The lovers are bordered by the word “LOVE” in outsized letters and the artist’s florid signature. These subliminal prompts suggest 19th-century illustrators denoting 18th-century paintings referencing early cinematic melodramas. These repurposed motifs —still carrying their birthmarks—visually connect these tableaux to the revered canon in not simply an art-historical sense but in an artist-to-artist-how-did-you-devise-this-solution sense. “If you accept that the canon has any value at all,” Marshall elaborates, “that the baseline foundation of the whole idea of progress and development and mastery in our history, that upends our relationship to the narrative and to the museums and things like that... That always appealed to me—being able to deploy a classical technique for contemporary purposes, perfectly.”

Although he stopped teaching years ago he continues to be generous to artists seeking advice. “I still talk to a lot of people. As far as going forward, I think if I have any influence on anybody’s perception on what they want to do as an artist, I think it’s to reinforce the idea that you can be more in control than you think you can be. If you want to reach a certain level or certain place, you shouldn’t think that being programmatic is a problem—that being programmatic is a limitation. Being programmatic is just the strategy that will help you be clearer about what you think your objectives are and whether or not you get there.

“I never miss a chance to say to anybody who feels like they’re not sure if they’re being



understood or insufficiently recognized: If you pick clear objectives, go for those one at a time. When you get to one place then that will tell you whether you should zig left or zag right. It's clearer than people think it is, I believe. As human beings, we don't really do anything that's really incomprehensible to other human beings because we're operating within cultures that have history and precedent." Marshall seems really concerned with your success in your lifetime.

Years ago, he had his first retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. He felt he wasn't ready, that the body of work was not yet deep enough, so he used the opportunity to experiment with his work—sculpture,

photography, installation—and he invited other artists to participate as well. He was fully hands-on in the planning and installation. For this current exhibition, "Mastry," this coast-to-coast survey, his participation in the planning and curating was minimal. On this occasion, he submitted to being curated: apotheosis complete.

Yet there are two developments that belie this apparent anointing; *The Image of the Black in Western Art* and the Chicago Cubs. *The Image of the Black in Western Art* is a 50-year project of Reconquista against erasure. Its 10 weighty volumes are not a secret. They are, after all, published by Harvard University Press—no small imprint. The Chicago Cubs have now, after a 108-year period of futility, won the World Series. The first is a reckoning. A recognition of something we knew but ignored because, let's face it, we considered it of tertiary value. The second is merely the end of a statistical aberration. Yet we cleave to our prejudices, vile and tender, until they become as undeniable as physics.

Kerry James Marshall has been here all the time, busy in his studio all along.

***"Kerry James Marshall: Mastry" is on view at MOCA Grand Avenue in Los Angeles March 12–July 3; [moca.org](http://moca.org).***

## For Kerry James Marshall, the mission is clear: Bring portraits of black life into very white art museums

By **Barbara Isenberg**

MARCH 7, 2017, 3:00 AM

**F**or much of his adult life, the artist Kerry James Marshall has been on a mission to redress a big omission: “When you go to an art museum,” Marshall says, “the thing you’re least likely to encounter is a picture of a black person. When it comes to ideas about art and about beauty, the black figure is absent.”

Marshall has spent 35 years working to rectify that absence, creating powerful paintings of black figures in everyday life and, often, in settings referencing earlier work by artists from the Renaissance to Edward Hopper and Frank Stella. Marshall, 61, has been rewarded for that effort with residencies, fellowships and other accolades, including a MacArthur grant in 1997 and the acquisition of his work by the likes of the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#), the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the Art Institute of Chicago.

The Chicago-based artist’s first major U.S. retrospective, “Kerry James Marshall: Mastry,” opens Sunday at the Museum of Contemporary Art in L.A., one of three co-organizers of the show. The exhibition ran last year at the [Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago](#) and this winter in New York at the Met Breuer. The New York Times called the show “smashing” and its subject “one of the great history painters of our time.” The New York Review of Books and Artforum magazine put large images from the show on their January covers.

“I’ve been acutely aware that museums are behind their academic colleagues in terms of thinking of representation and people of color,” [MOCA](#) chief curator Helen Molesworth says. “I find Kerry’s paintings ravishing — they are drop dead, great paintings — and they have an extra level of reward for people who hold in their heads a history of Western painting.”



Marshall is a compelling storyteller, whether on canvas or in conversation. Talking at length during a visit to MOCA, he is easygoing but eloquent, recalling his neighborhood in Birmingham, Ala., where he was born in 1955, or about growing up black there and in Los Angeles. He remembers the names of teachers who encouraged him — as far back as his kindergarten teacher, Mary Hill.

Hill kept a scrapbook full of greeting cards, pictures from National Geographic and other images that she would show her students as a reward for good behavior. “Her class was my first encounter with imagery that let me know I wanted to be an artist,” Marshall says. “It sounds extraordinary, but the truth is nothing had as much impact on me as looking through that scrapbook. It was clear those cards were made by hand, and if somebody else could do it, you could do it too.”

His world view also was shaped early on. In 1963, a pivotal time in civil rights history, Marshall’s family moved from Birmingham to the Watts area of Los Angeles. Their first home here was in the then-new Nickerson Gardens housing project, subject of one of his most poignant large-scale paintings. When the Watts riots came in 1965, he watched from a nearby friend’s attic window as flames consumed stores, and he describes the scene in as much detail as if it happened last week. .



Kerry James Marshall's *Untitled (Painter)*, 2009. (Nathan Keay / MCA Chicago)

Marshall paints a verbal portrait of himself as an insatiable learner as a child, studying images wherever he found them. He learned to paint flowers in the third grade and first went to a library in the fourth grade. There, he says, “I looked at every single book on the shelf about art: every how-to book, every art history book, every monograph about an artist.”



In the sixth grade, he went on a field trip to LACMA, “which is how I learned there is such a place as an art museum,” Marshall says. “It was the first time I saw an original artwork.”

Still in middle school, he was selected for a special drawing class at what is now the Otis College of Art and Design. Among his heroes was the black social realist painter Charles White, and one day his Otis teacher showed slides from White’s 1967 book, “Images of Dignity,” then took the students upstairs to look at White’s on-campus studio.

“That was for me a life-altering experience,” Marshall says. “I saw for the first time what an artist’s studio was. You could see work just starting and work that was almost completed. I clearly understood that making artwork wasn’t magic. It doesn’t just happen. You have to work at it.”

White came by his class that day and was soon mentoring Marshall, whose first job after high school graduation was washing dishes in a local hospital kitchen. The first person in his family to go to college, he worked there and elsewhere until he made it to Los Angeles City College and got the units he needed to study at Otis, where he graduated in 1978. He was on his way.

Asked when he first began to notice a lack of black subjects in museum artworks, Marshall answers a different question.

“You have to take an overview of how the culture is structured,” he says. “Even before I got to museums, I was interested in comic books. When you grow up looking at Superman, Batman and all those superheroes, you take it for granted that is what superheroes are supposed to be. So then, when I see art books at the library, and I’m seeing Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo and Rembrandt, I think that’s what artists look like.

“At a certain point, you have to decide whether you’d be satisfied always acknowledging the beauty and the greatness of what other people create or if you want to be in the same arena. You can’t keep saying that a superhero is a white guy with a square jaw and broad shoulders because every time you say that, it means you can’t be a superhero. You have to demonstrate that you believe you have the capacity to be a superhero too. Or the capacity to be an ‘old master.’”



Kerry James Marshall's "Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self" (Museum of Contemporary Art)



of a smiling black man whose black face, hat and coat nearly disappear into the background, the blackness offset by only the whites of his eyes, teeth and collar. Says Marshall: “When I did that painting was the moment in which I reset my priorities.”

Now comes “Mastry.” Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Director [Madeleine Grynsztejn](#) said she and MOCA curator Molesworth wanted to do the show as far back as eight years ago. “But Kerry didn’t feel quite ready until he was approaching 60,” Grynsztejn says. “He felt it was a good landmark for him to look back. This is a man with a million ideas to paint, so every minute he spends looking backward is a minute he isn’t in his studio.”

Although there are excerpts from Marshall’s ongoing graphic novel/comics project, “Rythm Mastr,” as well as some photographs, the 80 works in the MOCA show are mostly paintings of black figures, many in landscapes and seascapes, neighborhood outings, Boy Scout troops, artist studios and romantic idylls. The slave Nat Turner and abolitionist Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr. and President John F. Kennedy also make appearances.

“The paintings, particularly the larger ones, also revel in details that make the story more narratively complex,” Molesworth says. “In a Kerry James Marshall painting, nothing is arbitrary. Everything has been thought through. He is building a picture from the ground up.”

There are plenty of details in “De Style,” Marshall’s 1993 mural-size painting of a black barbershop, a high point of the exhibition. The painting, acquired by LACMA shortly after it was shown in a gallery, marked Marshall’s first museum sale.



Kerry James Marshall's "De Style." (MOCA)

“‘De Style’ combines a deeply stirring realistic setting in conversation with art history,” says Stephanie Barron, senior curator of modern art at LACMA, which has loaned the piece for the exhibition. “It’s kind of a Norman Rockwell scene which is loaded with art references, including Dutch 17th century paintings, the De Stijl movement and Piet Mondrian with his rectilinear compositions and reliance on only primary colors.”

In the bigger picture, Barron says, Marshall is regarded as one of the key artists to emerge in the 1990s. “He is a master of representational and figurative painting, refined during the time when neither was popular,” she says, “and he has created a body of work that recognizes beauty and gives dignity to all of his subjects.”



As a longtime professor at the University of Illinois, Chicago, Marshall has had considerable influence on future generations of artists.

“I’m working with artists today who were greatly influenced by Kerry,” reports his longtime dealer, Eleana Del Rio at Koplín Del Rio gallery in Seattle. “He paved the way for a lot of younger artists who are not only talking about black identity but all identity.”



## ‘Kerry James Marshall: Mastry’

Where: Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 S. Grand Ave., L.A.

When: Sunday-July 3

Admission: \$8-\$15

Information: (213) 626-6222, [moca.org](http://moca.org)



Kerry James Marshall's "Beauty Examined" (MOCA)



Stamberg, Susan. "Kerry James Marshall: A Black Presence In The Art World Is 'Not Negotiable.'" *NPR*. 28 March 2017. Online.



FINE ART

## Kerry James Marshall: A Black Presence In The Art World Is 'Not Negotiable'

March 28, 2017 · 5:01 AM ET

Heard on Morning Edition



SUSAN STAMBERG



Kerry James Marshall has spent his career depicting black lives on canvas. He says inclusion in the art world shouldn't be contingent on "whether somebody likes you ... or somebody's being generous to you." Above, his 2014 work, *Untitled (Club Couple)*.

*The Museum of Contemporary Art*

With his large-scale, exuberant paintings, artist Kerry James Marshall is on a mission: to make the presence of black people and black culture in the art world "indispensable" and "undeniable." Now 61, Marshall was a young artist when he decided to paint exclusively black figures.

"One of the reasons I paint black people is because I am a black person ..." he says. "There are fewer representations of black figures in the historical record ..."

Marshall was born in Birmingham, Ala., in 1955, just before the Montgomery Bus Boycott began. He grew up in South Central, Los Angeles, and was living in the Watts neighborhood in 1965, when riots broke out in protest of police brutality.

"The hope was always to make sure these works found their way into museums so they could exist alongside everything else that people go into museums to look at," Marshall says.

And it's worked — a 35-year retrospective of his work has appeared at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, and now, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

His paintings depict daily life — people planting gardens, picnicking and getting haircuts. Helen Molesworth, curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art exhibit, points out Marshall's 1993 work, *De Style*. "I consider this to be Kerry's first great painting," she says. It's a massive canvas that shows a scene in a barbershop.





*De Style*, acrylic and collage on canvas, 1993

LACMA, licensed by Art Resource, NY/Museum of Contemporary Art

"He's going to give you an image of blackness, of African-American culture, of daily life that is both rooted in everyday pleasures, but also transcendent at the same time," Molesworth says.

Molesworth's favorite painting, *School of Beauty*, *School of Culture* is monumental. It bursts with riotous colors and spirited life. The work shows women's space — little kids play as ladies pose and primp.



Kerry James Marshall, *School of Beauty, School of Culture*, acrylic and glitter on unstretched canvas, 2012

Sean Pathasema/The Museum of Contemporary Art

"One of the things that these pictures show us over and over again is that the category of beauty is really large," Molesworth says. "If whiteness is the only form of beauty you see, you are operating in a pretty small universe."

People can get emotional in front of these paintings.

"I've seen people kiss in front of Kerry James Marshall paintings ..." Molesworth says.

"These paintings are emotional — they are filled with love."

It's not all happiness on these walls, though — there are funerals, killers, lost boys, anger and grief — but always depicted in bright, bold colors and powerful shapes.

Marshall's 1994 "Garden Project" series shows the early, utopian days of public housing in Chicago and Los Angeles. Lovers stroll along groomed lawns, men rake and plant flowers, children ride bikes and run dogs.





Marshall's 1994 "Garden Project" series shows the early, utopian days of public housing in Chicago and Los Angeles.

Brian Forrest/Museum of Contemporary Art

"There's kind of a mixed message and it has everything to do with what people expect in a painting that's about housing projects," Marshall says.

In one, a man sits on one hip, leaning forward on the grass, supported by extended arms. He stares directly at us — very seriously. Behind him, white paint blots a big sign that says *Welcome to Altgeld Gardens*. [Click here to get a closer look at the painting.](#) Some might perceive desperation in his eyes — but not the artist.

"I know better," says Marshall, who has lived in public housing. "I know it's not so despairing. ... When I look at his demeanor, I see contentment. That's what I see. The gaze out at the spectator, there's a certain uncertainty about the way he sees himself being perceived by the spectator."

These are not romanticized images; they are vivid, energetic, real-life reports — and Marshall wants those reports on museums walls. His works have sold at auction for \$1 million and \$2 million. And his paintings are part of the permanent collections of the Met, the National Gallery, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston and more.

"What you're trying to create is a certain kind of an indispensable presence," Marshall says. "Where your position in the narrative is not contingent on whether somebody likes you, or somebody knows you, or somebody's a friend, or somebody's being generous to you. But you want a presence in the narrative that's not negotiable, that's undeniable."

# HYPERALLERGIC

MUSEUMS

## Kerry James Marshall and the Politics of Visibility

The retrospective of the work of Kerry James Marshall demonstrates a deep knowledge of blackness and a desire to expand the world of art with it.

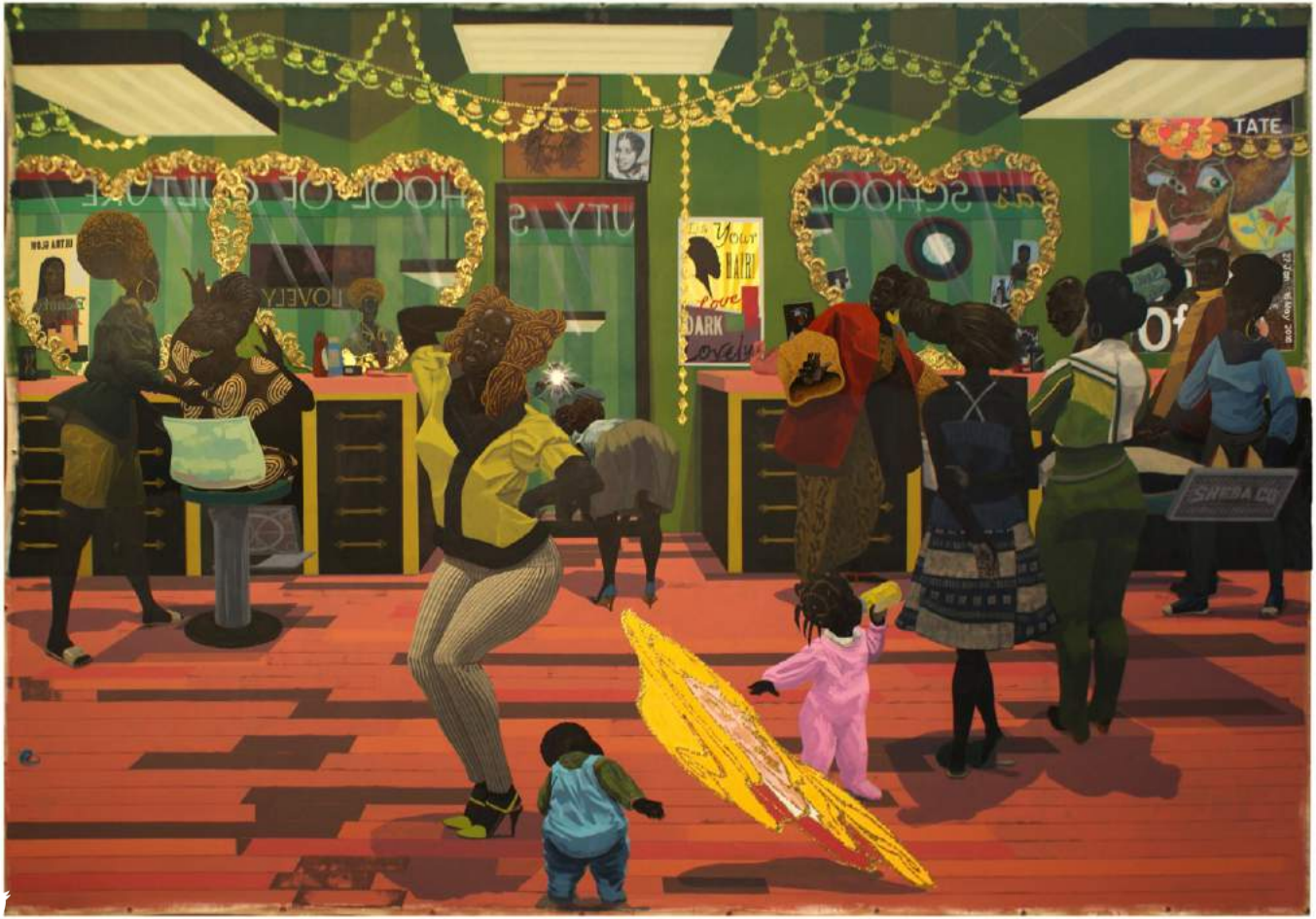
Seph Rodney



Kerry James Marshall, "Vignette" (2003) Acrylic on fiberglass 72 in. × 9 ft. (All images © Kerry James Marshall)



“I / Is the total black, being spoken / From the earth’s inside.” This is how the poem “Coal” by Audre Lorde begins. Near the end of it, her speaker says “I am black because I come from the earth’s inside.” These lines beg the question: If one were to come from the inside of the planet, attempting to articulate one’s discrete being by intoning that key pronoun “I,” if you are underground how can you be heard? Kerry James Marshall is one of the key figures in the world of visual art who actively seeks to make this black voice heard, really, given his particular powers, make the black body housing that voice, visible. It has been publicly acknowledged that, “there is no meaningful history of black figures in the Western painting tradition.” When such figures have rarely appeared, they have mostly been ancillary characters supplemental to the plot, or providing a glimpse of an exoticized creature valued for the visual pleasure available in its obvious contrast to the presumed viewer. However, in Marshall’s work, the figures are central and almost always black, resolutely black, obsidian black, a struck-match black, the black that comes from being enveloped by a planet. And in canvas after canvas of his, these figures appear, sometimes depicting historical characters, sometimes modeling the customs of domestic life, sometimes acting as icons for abstracted values such as struggle and liberation. As Marshall says about his work, “blackness is non-negotiable in these pictures; it’s also unequivocal.”



Kerry James Marshall, "School of Beauty, School of Culture" (2012) Acrylic and glitter on canvas 8 ft. 11 7/8 in. × 13 ft. 1 7/8 in. (Photo by Sean Pathasema)

Here, in the second leg of the first ever retrospective of Kerry James Marshall's work, *Mastry*, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, in collaboration with the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles the figures are unequivocally black but the contexts in which they come to have being are complex. It has been pointed out by other critics that Marshall draws on a wide range of source material for his paintings: from Byzantine iconography to the French Neoclassical painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, to the Impressionist Edouard Manet, to Frida Kahlo, to symbols borrowed from the practices of Haitian Voudon and Santería.





Kerry James Marshall, "Many Mansions" (1994) Acrylic and collage on canvas 9 ft. 6 in. × 11 ft. 3 in. (Photo © The Art Institute of Chicago)





Kerry James Marshall, "Past Times" (1997) Acrylic and collage on canvas 9 ft. 6 in. × 13 ft. (Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago)

This complexity comes to the forefront in the *Garden Project* paintings that show his black characters in urban housing projects with aspirational titles like Wentworth Gardens ("Better Homes, Better Gardens" 1994). In the painting "Many Mansions (1994) I see three men identically dressed in black trousers and white shirts tending a community garden. Around them swirl modernist painterly gestures — splashes of color that block off and obscure parts of the figures interrupting the narrative flow, or appearing as filigree around subsidiary objects, or as repeated designs that might approximate flowers.

Marshall's painting style allows blobs of paint to sometimes drip down the canvas, to mark these works as *contemporary*, not a naïvely straight telling of a story of black uplift. As he says [about his aims](#) regarding the art historical canon: "My interest in being a part of it is being an expansion of it, not a critique of it." He gives you a range of socio-political contexts in which these black bodies, and by extension, all bodies politicized as



*black* belong: urban housing projects, rural areas, bourgeois idylls with the golf courses and lakes. And crucially, the bodies are not stripped of their ethnic physicality to model other bodies. He shows off rather than shies away from the thick thighs and big asses and a coolly resolute gaze that exists in the various forms of feminine “I” being spoken from the inside of black communities.



Kerry James Marshall, “7 am Sunday Morning” (2003) Acrylic on canvas 10 × 18 ft.



Kerry James Marshall, "Untitled (Painter)" (2009) Acrylic on PVC panel 44 5/8 × 43 1/8 × 3 7/8 in. (Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago)

Given all this, why is it then that Marshall picks not *one* woman artist among the approximately 31 works he chose to present alongside his own work in *Kerry James Marshall Selects* section of the exhibition? How is it that women who feature so prominently in his conception of the expansion of Western painting, can cite no painter who has influenced him or impressed herself on him — even if that influence or



impression was an indication of what he did *not* want to do? Mind you, it's not that Marshall or any artist needs to carry around a checklist and tick off accomplishments of the work as he goes, but this omission seems odd, a blind spot in an otherwise insightful and panoramic vision. If nothing else, the conversation around intersectionality has convinced many (me included) that the degree to which concerns around the power and visibility of blacks intersects with and informs the set of concerns around the power and visibility of women, we cannot march into the future unless we hold hands. To be able to do so, we have to *see* our partners and for that to occur sometimes it is incumbent on us to shine a light in corners that have been un-illuminated , to hold someone's hand and say "we."

*Kerry James Marshall's Mastry will be exhibited at The Met Breuer extension (945 Madison Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan) until January 29, 2017.*

## The Politic



### Mastry and Our Moment: Questioning Western Portrayals of History

Mastry, Kerry James Marshall's new exhibit at the Met Breuer, explores African American experiences throughout American history while alluding to classical Western themes. Marshall comments on the dominance of Western narratives within art and depicts an artistic engagement with the past. Mykolaj Suchy '19 broadens this discussion, investigating the prevalence of the Western canon within museums and how institutions can counter an exclusionary view of history.

**THREE DARK MEN** take the foreground wearing suits. Easter baskets sitting amongst them in a field full of spring flowers seem to suggest that the men could be just returning from an Easter mass. In a Chicago housing development they are working on a garden that seems to have overgrown even the welcoming sign at the entrance of the projects.

Yet when closely examined, the abstract technique of the flowers resemble graffiti dripping down the material of the welcome sign. The two men working on the garden could be digging rather than planting, picking, watering, or feeding flowers. Their garden patch seems geometrically irregular – the size and shape of a grave rather than of any traditional bed of flowers. One man's black jacket hangs from the welcome sign, taking a shape that appears to be that of a specter over the man's shoulder. But it is Easter and death comes with rebirth. Viewers see an image that at once acknowledges and includes romantic idealisms and contemporary realities.



This piece, titled *Many Mansions* (1994), is part of Kerry James Marshall's Five Garden Project. The Five Garden Project was born out of Marshall's time in Chicago, during which he noticed that many of the names of Chicago's housing projects had idyllic names often with the word "garden" in them. Kerry James Marshall had previously lived in Birmingham, Alabama and moved to Los Angeles, California in 1963, the same year of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. After experiencing the 1965-Watts Rebellion in Los Angeles, Marshall became "a child of the civil rights movement."

Marshall masterfully rebuilds elements of Western art history and introduces an excluded narrative. Pivotal paintings in the exhibit depict the contemporary difficulties of being an African-American, while at the same time celebrate black culture. Marshall's work develops visions of this narrative with a level of optimism, embracing ugly contemporary and historical realities as a means of expression that takes the initiative to herald a bright future. Kerry James Marshall synthesizes a current historical moment that Emily Vey Duke, professor at Syracuse University, described as "the new moment that we have entered is partially from movements like Black Lives Matter, but then its also from work of feminists, people of color, post-colonial theorists, who have been working to create more fairness in institutions for years."

Many themes discussed by Marshall are inspired by his experiences as a black man in America. Using direct allusion such as the careful placements of a saint's halo and a depiction of Adam and Eve, Marshall constantly engages with the classical Western narrative that we know through the collection of texts and arts that have historically been the most influential in Western culture. He presents the telling of a story that has been reiterated throughout history – powerfully challenging the Western narrative not just as it lives in today's world, but by going back to the foundations of what we conceive as the world we live in today. By doing this he creates a natural space for identity and a generative conversation with his audience – a conversation that starts, but doesn't end, with Marshall's art.

Pamela Franks, Deputy Director for Exhibitions, Programming, and Education and the Seymour H. Knox, Jr., Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, at the Yale University Art Gallery (YUAG) commented on Marshall's work in an interview with *The Politic*.

"[Marshall] has studied art history and he is deeply familiar with the Western canon and his career as an artist has been devoted to thinking about himself as a black artist and where he fits in that history and actively making a place for himself as an artist in that history. He's changing the cannon through his work, but also engaging with it in a way that has changed the direction that the ongoing history of art is taking."

This addresses the incredible vacuum that has existed in art museums throughout the United States. In an interview with *The Politic*, artist and professor Emily Vey Duke described how institutions, especially art museums, play a role in perpetuating the stories we value and that rooms, series, and exhibits dedicated to American Art all over the nation are dominated largely by white artists. While this is changing, it is doing so in a gradual lumber.

Likely for the sake of tradition's expediency and commonplace, institutions largely rely on the same narratives despite the fact, as Franks said, "The history of African-American art is an integral part of American art and is such an important part of the history of American art."

This conversation must be allowed a certain emphasis in light of events national and local. Yale University takes a quintessential place in this – the university is an origin for American's own edition of the Western narrative. As an institution and a community, Yale confronted questions that pressure this narrative.

Erica James, Professor of History of Art, praised the YUAG for developing holdings that present not just an account of traditional artistic excellence, but also form a narrative in a richer intellectual and artistic context. Franks spoke about the YUAG's institutional commitment to holistically representing American art, commenting that they have incorporated African American art into the broader exhibits. However she recognized a lack of representation and thus has prioritized the acquisition of African American art in the last two decades.

*American History Revisited*, on view at the YUAG, incorporates art from esteemed photographer Carrie Mae Weems and paintings from Yale graduate Titus Kaphar. This exhibit brings these questions of narrative to the fore, both in the global context of Western imperialism but also in a more precise beam, directed specifically at Yale, making Elihu Yale himself a participant in the works. The works actualize an important institutional realization on Yale's part – a developed and critical self-awareness. This postures for an increase in knowledge through the realization of a more complete story and the acceptance of that story as part of Yale's own history.

We can break from this Western binary when observing the Kerry James Marshall's *Tree of Life*, wrapped in a police line with a fruit full of bullets or Percy the barber in the pose of a saint with a dapper client that has a hairstyle resembling a royal headdress or the other customer sitting and waiting his turn with a hairstyle reminiscent of a papal mitre. Here, Marshall takes us on a thoughtful course of careful engagement with and examination of past and contemporary history. He offers us views into the past that re-inform and redefine how we know our preset selves, abandoning no one and forgetting nothing.

This lesson extends past the boundaries of Yale and even the West. Kerry James Marshall offers observers of his a work a window into the African American experience. He tells a story that is decisively black, but offers universal historical, political, intellectual, and humanistic interpretation. His work depicts struggle, celebration, and an examination of life's questions that can be appreciated no matter one's background. Marshall uses his understanding of the history of art to transform and redirect that history, at once making it his own and all of ours.

## HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

# Kerry James Marshall And The Limitless Power Of Black Paint

His staggering paintings use the language of Western art history to paint the black experience.

© 12/02/2016 09:26 am ET



**Priscilla Frank**

Arts Writer, The Huffington Post





In his expansive retrospective spanning 35 years of work, [Kerry James Marshall's](#) paintings range from urban pastorals to Renaissance-inspired portraits, subtly shifting abstractions to romanticized, domestic interiors. Yet regardless of style, substance or setting, the works converge on a single element: the undiluted blackness of their subjects' flesh.

The vast majority of paintings that make up the Western art historical canon feature, of course, white subjects. Marshall's painted world doesn't only pass over these white subjects, his subjects' skin features not a single splash of white paint. The artist's formula for flesh features three shades of black: carbon black, mars black and ivory black. He will occasionally incorporate yellow and blue shades to round out the color, but no one figure in any painting is darker or lighter than another. Each exists outside a spectrum of shading or valuation; black is black.

["Blackness is non-negotiable in those pictures,"](#) Marshall explained in an October interview with T Magazine. "It's also unequivocal — they are black — that's the thing that I mean for people to identify immediately. They are black to demonstrate that blackness can have complexity. Depth. Richness."



KERRY JAMES MARSHALL

Kerry James Marshall. "Untitled (Studio)," 2014, Acrylic on PVC panels. The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Foundation Gift, Acquisitions Fund and The Metropolitan Museum of Art Multicultural Audience Development Initiative Gift.

A breathtaking exhibition featuring 72 of Marshall's works, titled "[Kerry James Marshall: Mastry](#)," is now on view at the Met Breuer in New York City. The paintings reflect Marshall's extensive command of Western art history to generate vivid representations of the African-American experience, past and present.

Marshall's oeuvre is extraordinary in its ability to confront the injustices of art and American history head-on, while still celebrating the power and beauty of blackness. Its tenor contrasts with the rhetoric employed by president-elect Donald Trump, who has described African-Americans as "[living in hell](#)," presenting a combination of optimism and activism that offers not hope but pride and productive vitality.

Marshall was born in 1955 in Birmingham, Alabama, and relocated with his family to the Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts in 1963, where they lived 12 blocks from the Black Panther headquarters. Growing up, Marshall witnessed many incidents of violence, though these traumatic experiences were scattered among happy memories of a loving family and happy home life, as well as the enchanting impact of art.

At 10 years old, Marshall visited the Los Angeles County Museum of Art for the first time and was mesmerized by what he encountered. "[I went from floor to floor looking at everything](#), in the same way that in the library I went down the stacks and looked at every art book, without discrimination," he told The New Yorker. Three years later, he took a summer drawing course at Otis College of Art and Design, where he would later attend art school, becoming the first in his family to go to college.





NATHAN KEAY/MCA CHICAGO

Kerry James Marshall, "Untitled (Painter)," 2009, Acrylic on PVC panel, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gift of Katherine S. Schamberg by exchange.

From his earliest encounters with art, Marshall was well aware of the dearth of black bodies represented in museum archives. Yet his reaction was not resentment but determination, to master the art historical trajectory that excluded black bodies and expertly incorporate them into it.

[“When you talk about the absence of black figure representation](#) in the history of art,” Marshall said to T Magazine, “you can talk about it as an exclusion, in which case there’s a kind of indictment of history for failing to be responsible for something it should have been. I don’t have that kind of mission. I don’t have that indictment. My interest in being a part of it is being an expansion of it, not a critique of it.”

His dizzying array of art at the Met Breuer expands upon the shamefully limited scope of Western art history in myriad ways, too many to recount or even fully digest on a single visit. Yet one room addresses the issue of art history most straightforwardly, with a series of black painters depicted in the midst of creating their self-portraits.

The mythic artists, both male and female, meet the viewer’s gaze with regal composure and resolute solemnity. Donning sculptural hairstyles and vogueish ensembles punctuated by dramatic collars and splashes of color, Marshall’s subjects seem aware of their statuses as works of art themselves. The paintings address the absence of black artists and black subjects simultaneously, while providing fictitious black artists the rare opportunity to depict their own image on their own terms.

The wall text reads: “The commanding presence of these figures is also an empowering one — if you are an artist of color or if you are an artist who is a woman, the answer to the question, ‘What does an artist look like?’ might just be you.”





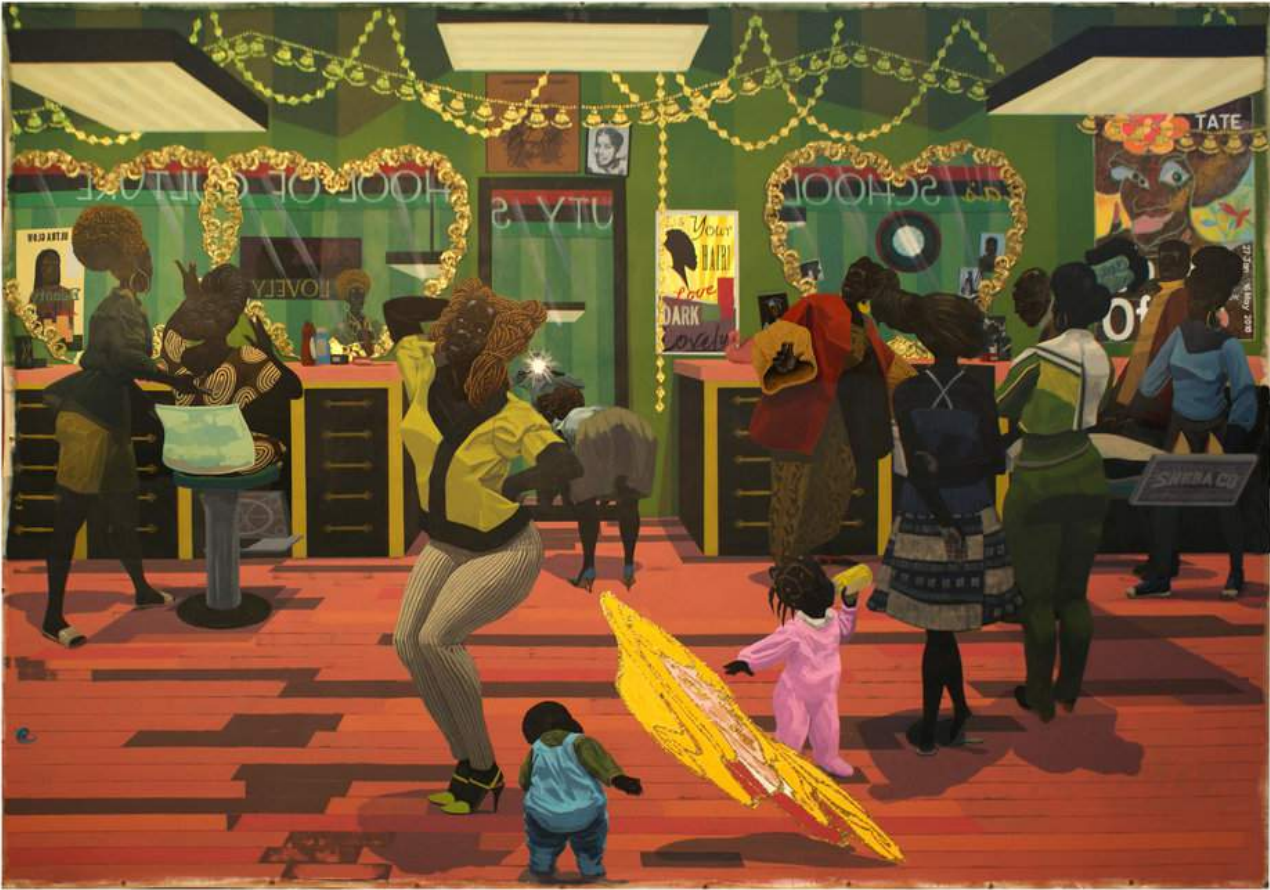
NATHAN KEAY/MCA CHICAGO

Kerry James Marshall, "Past Times," 1997, Acrylic and collage on canvas, 9 ft. 6 in. × 13 ft. Metropolitan Pier and Exhibition Authority, McCormick Place Art Collection, Chicago.

The self-portraits within the paintings, unfinished, rest propped up on easels in the backdrop. Closer examination reveals many of the canvases are paint-by-numbers, a craze popularized in the 1950s. As Holland Cotter wrote in his New York Times review of the exhibition: "[It was a type of painting for anyone and everyone](#), universal in that way. And although the subjects were fixed, the colors were not."

The paint-by-numbers canvasses implore those who wish to upheave racial bias in the art historical canon to do so by partaking in the universal practice of making art themselves. The activity-book-like format nods to the uncanny relationship between race and color, illuminating how simple it would be and has always been to dip a paintbrush in black paint instead of white. And yet even the painted figures have yet to render their self-portraits in their black likeness, as though even today the act of painting a black subject remains a radical act.

And yet, of course, Marshall has accomplished said act, over 70 times and counting. The 61-year-old artist, who was awarded the MacArthur Fellowship in 1997, shows up all day, every day, to his studio, where he paints sans assistants from morning until night.



SEAN PATHASEMA

Kerry James Marshall. "School of Beauty, School of Culture," 2012. Acrylic and glitter on canvas. 8 ft. 11 7/8 in. × 13 ft. 1 7/8 in. Birmingham Museum of Art, Museum purchase with funds provided by Elizabeth (Bibby) Smith, the Collectors Circle for Contemporary Art, Jane Comer, the Sankofa Society, and general acquisition funds.

The fact that Marshall's retrospective is on view at The Met, of all places, is hugely significant. As Ian Alteveer, the Met curator who organized the exhibition along with Helen Molesworth and Dieter Roelstraete explained to The New York Times: "[There are 5,000-plus years of art history here](#), and that's the history he wants to be a part of and to paint to be a part of."

Marshall's depictions of black creativity and power extend beyond the art studio, depicting barber shops, public housing developments and intimate bedrooms. The retrospective is a remarkable achievement, a testament to Marshall's knowledge, skill and spirit.

In response to an art historical narrative that failed to represent him, Marshall studied and mastered its shape. And in a composite visual language, weaved from threads of Théodore Géricault and Frank Stella, Giotto and Piet Mondrian, Marshall tells his story, the story of black America. A portrait, a love letter, a celebration, and a battle cry.

[\*"Kerry James Marshall: Mastry" is on view at The Met Breuer until Jan. 29, 2017.\*](#)



## ART REVIEW; In Civil Rights Ferment, A Conflicted Nostalgia

By **HOLLAND COTTER** OCT. 2, 1998

Kerry James Marshall, an artist based in Chicago, has described his work as history painting, and he has taken black life in America as his primary subject.

In the large-scale pieces he contributed to last year's Whitney Biennial, black children played in housing projects that resembled those he had lived in during the 1960's in Los Angeles. The settings were carefully detailed, but surreal. Urban buildings had the look of American-dream suburbs. Hallmark card sunrises and bluebirds filled the skies. But parts of the pictures were obliterated with smeared paint.

The emotional tone was complicated, at once sentimental and tough, mixing affection and reproach. It was as if each picture had started out as a fond, idealized depiction of a life remembered, then gradually turned into a disillusioned statement of a life denied.

In "Kerry James Marshall: Mementos" at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, these complexities deepen, formally and conceptually. For his first museum solo, the artist has moved into multimedia installation and has tackled the huge, and hugely conflicted, topic of the civil rights struggles of the 1950's and 60's.

As always with his work, history is both social narrative and personal experience. Mr. Marshall was born in Birmingham, Ala., in 1955, the year the bus boycott began. He was a child there when the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed, killing four girls, and when George Wallace prevented black students from entering the University of Alabama. He lived in Los Angeles during the Watts riots and the shootout between the Black Panthers and the police. And all of these events were played out against the deaths of President John F. Kennedy, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, national catastrophes that charged an era with a mood of anger and grief.

The Brooklyn installation, organized by the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, opens on a funerary note with a bannerlike commemorative painting. On a solid black field framed by a decorative border of gold glitter appear the portraits of the three dead leaders, accompanied by the words "We Mourn Our Loss" in Gothic script.

Similar pieces recur throughout the show, though no two are exactly alike. A portrait of Malcolm X is inserted in one. Another turns into a tribute to the artist's father. In a third, iconic faces are blotted out by a swipe of paint. Each panel also incorporates handwritten words in pencil and ballpoint pen -- Bible quotations, personal names, the initials of political groups -- like entries in a funeral parlor guest book or graffiti on a wall, history inscribed by whoever is passing through.

Words play an important role in Mr. Marshall's work. They appear in all of his paintings and they are the only images in a recent series of prints of civil rights era political slogans. They range from the pacifist anthem "We Shall Overcome" to the militant "Burn, baby, burn" and together chart the shifting political mood of a decade. Mr. Marshall created the prints with five-foot-high handstamps, and these appear in the show, like abstract sculptures, along with outsize ink pads in red, green and black, the colors of black nationalism.

Also included is a series of four paintings, each titled "Souvenir," in the artist's signature format -- mural size, on unstretched canvas -- and they are extraordinary. In each, an orderly living room, carefully observed in every detail, is occupied by a middle-aged black woman. The scenes look straightforward enough except that the woman has angel's wings and is accompanied by apparitional presences.

In one painting, the faces of black musicians from the past float above her head; in another, the names of artists and writers who died in the 1960's: Zora Neale Hurston, Augusta Savage, Lorraine Hansberry and Bob Thompson among them. In a third, the ghostly portraits of Black Panthers and the four girls who died in the Birmingham church hover on high.

The title of the exhibition's centerpiece video work, "Laid to Rest," seems to promise a resolution to the paintings' mix of regret and celebration. The film, which can be viewed only through eyeholes cut in the side of a wood enclosure painted as a mock-mausoleum, shows a wake in progress with an open coffin banked by flowers.

But the atmosphere is agitated. Animated images flash by in a quick-cut sequence over the bier, accompanied by an aggressive soundtrack of couples battling and drug deals being made. And over the coffin, above where the head would be, a pair of Lincoln pennies, intended to close the eyes of the corpse, spin in midair.

The image can have several meanings. Many of the problems addressed by the civil rights movement have not died; nor have the movement's heroic ghosts found repose, despite being enshrined in history books. The work they initiated needs to be advanced, just as the outsize handstamps, with their exhortations to action, need to be put to use.

They are being used, of course; the prints Mr. Marshall has included in the installation attest to that. And political changes stemming from the civil rights era are in progress, though often in subtle and oblique forms. Such changes are suggested in a group of small paintings that are not part of the installation, but hang in a gallery nearby.

Each is a three-quarter-length portrait of a single black sitter dressed in a traditional American scouting uniform. A Boy Scout in regulation beige looks out at the viewer, his head surrounded by a fiery halo. A Cub Scout den mother with close-cropped hair wears small gold rings in her nose and ears. A scoutmaster has an American flag stitched on his sleeve and his hand clenched in a fist.



Here, Mr. Marshall's complex historical perspective is distilled. In these portraits, time-honored American values -- community, leadership, duty -- that were also the bedrock of the early civil rights movement, are reconfirmed and radically recast. The scout figures wear familiar uniforms, but with a difference: as militant citizens claiming a place in the mainstream but sustaining a revolution within. It's a difficult position to negotiate, but a powerful one, and it seems to form the foundation for much of this challenging artist's work.

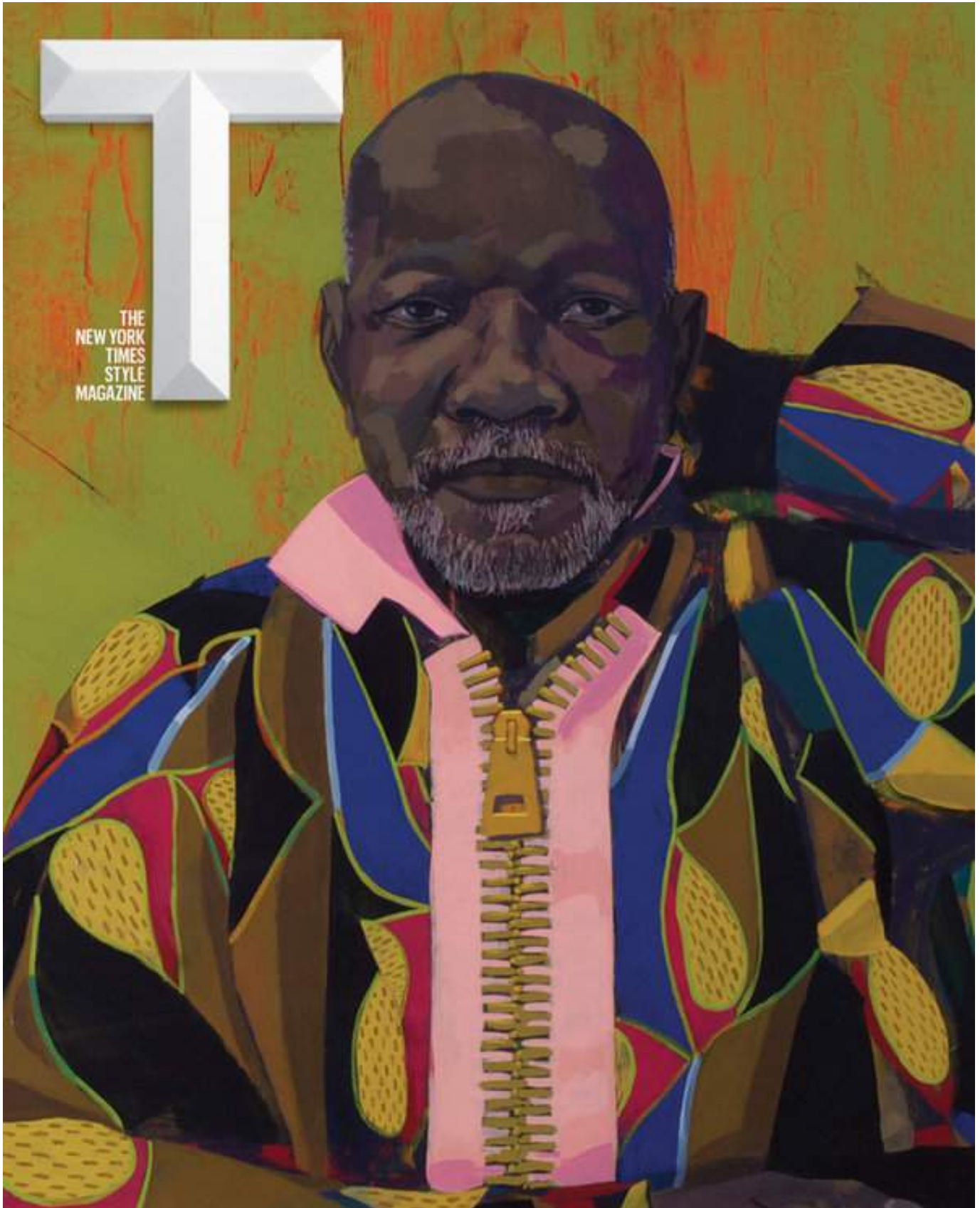
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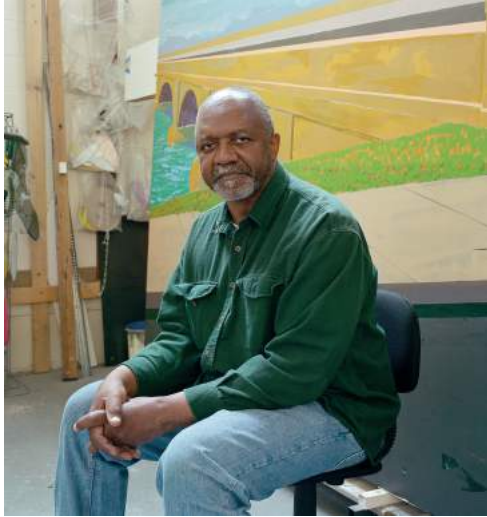
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# T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE





# Kerry James Marshall Is Shifting the Color of Art History



For more than 40 years, the Chicago-based artist has made it his mission to paint black figures into the canon.

By WYATT MASON OCT. 17, 2016

WE COULD BEGIN IN Birmingham, Ala., where the artist Kerry James Marshall was born in 1955, his father a postal worker whose hobby was buying broken watches, fancy ones — Baume & Mercier, Piaget, Patek Philippe — that he'd pick up in pawn shops for a song, figure out how to fix with the help of books he'd find used, and resell. From that story, we could derive the practical idea that Marshall, a companion on his father's expeditions from a very early age, saw that something rarefied and complex, in which one had zero training, could be approached, deconstructed and — with education and application — mastered. Or we could begin by talking about Marshall's older brother, Wayne — one year and nine days older, who, straight out of high school, went to work for the post office like his father and worked there until he retired — Wayne who was always first at everything, whom Marshall was always chasing, from whom he was inseparable except at school where their ages kept them in different grades, Marshall trying to catch up but always falling short, one year and nine days short. From that story, we could understand that Marshall is a man who, from the beginning, has been hustling to get to where he wants to go. Or we could begin in Watts, in 1963, when Marshall was 7, when his family moved there in time for the riots, 12 blocks from the Black Panther headquarters, a neighborhood where he learned things you're not supposed to know about when you're a kid. We could talk about how their mailman, a really nice guy, got killed on Marshall's best friend's front porch, in a robbery gone wrong, two doors down. How, on another day, coming home from school, cutting through the alley he

always cut through, he found three grown women rolling around in the grass of a front yard, stab wounds all over them, stabbed by a young man who'd been discharged from the Army with problems, a man who'd just stabbed his mother, his aunt and his grandmother 70 times. And how, later, when Marshall was voted homecoming king of Jefferson High and was on his way there in his suit for the first homecoming parade in a decade — Jefferson having gotten kicked out of the conference because there'd always been problems — he arrived to find everybody heading the other way: Three people had just been shot on the field, friends of his. That was the kind of world Marshall grew up in, a world where he knew founding members of the Crips, and where a lot of the people he knew are now dead of unnatural causes and have been for a long time. From those stories, we'd be amazed to learn — as he told me in August when I visited him on the South Side of Chicago where he's been making one masterpiece after another for three decades — that “it didn't stop me from developing the sense that, still, everything is possible. I was never in despair.”

FROM THE HISTORICAL sense that, throughout the American experiment, very little has been possible for black people; to a generational sense that, despite a great deal of change in American society through time, a great deal still isn't possible; to Marshall's personal sense that, nonetheless, everything is possible: That's the short version of the story that his work has been telling — mostly in paint but also in sculpture, photography and installations — since he became the first member of his family to go to college, graduating from Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles in 1978. In that interval, Marshall has become a preeminent American artist, one whose work is in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian, the National Gallery of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and a dozen other major American museums. He has received a MacArthur fellowship and his paintings can command over 2 million dollars at auction. This past spring, Marshall's career became the subject of its first major retrospective, a chronological march through 35 years of extraordinary creation, a vast show that opened in Chicago at the Museum of Contemporary Art and moves to New York this week — opening at the Met Breuer on Oct. 25 — before its final stop in Los Angeles, at the MOCA, next year.



Let's look at the very first painting you come to in the show, one that Marshall made when he was 25, a painting called "A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self." The first thing you notice is its size — 8 by 6½ inches — small by any measure but particularly so given the monumentality of the paintings Marshall has become famous for since. From this small vertical surface, seen as if in silhouette, a black face stares. Male, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a heavy coat, he's all eyes and grin. Literally: The only features that one can discern in this carbon-black face are two cartoonishly white eyes and, rooted in dark pink gums, 18 large white teeth with a gap dead center, a top incisor mysteriously gone, a void in a face that, in its way, is itself a void. In Chicago, I watched one museumgoer after another walk up to it and reflexively smile back, and I can report — as one of those people — that you get an odd feeling when you do, the sense that you shouldn't be smiling. For the only other pictorial detail on that little canvas is a bright white glimpse of shirt peeking out from the general darkness, and the funny thing about the shirt is that if you stare at it long enough, its sharply drawn dimensions finally snap into focus: It looks like the blade of an axe, one poised at the neck of that huge, haunting, gap-toothed smile. This portrait of the artist as a shadow of his former self looks like something out of minstrelsy, a white actor in blackface. What we have before us is a portrait of a black man by a black man, but one that looks the way a black man might feel about being looked at in a white world by people who see, in the face of a black man, not a person but a shade, a shadow, a pigmentation: blackness.

"Everything changed when I made that painting," Marshall told me in his studio this summer. Marshall, still powerfully built at 61, with short-cropped hair going gray and a tidy beard gone grayer, is a large presence in this large set of workspaces, some 2,200 square feet on two floors. We were speaking upstairs, in front of an angled drawing board to which several works in progress were pinned: the beginnings of a plan for a large canvas, mapped out on a grid in linear perspective, a figure in the foreground, a window at the rear; a small storyboard for a series of comic-strip panels that will be blown up into enormous lightboxes; and an ink-wash study for a portrait of a woman smiling, a woman who stands in a gallery before what looks like the very portrait before us, the smile on her face as unburdened as the smile on the 1980 portrait was haunted.

“The person that I was in 1980,” Marshall said in a voice that’s still inflected here and there with Alabama vowels, “was really starting to understand how you could start with a premise and see it all the way through. What I wanted the work to be able to show, over time, is that it was possible for the image of the black figure to evolve.”

That the image of the black figure has needed to evolve through time is a bald fact of American political life, but what makes Marshall’s work as a painter unprecedented, beginning with that first self-portrait, is how he’s been engaging with that evolution as an aesthetic project. “Stereotypical representations of black figures,” Marshall explained, with the clarity and persuasiveness of the professor of art that he was, teaching at the University of Illinois until 2006, “had always been this sort of flat, cartoony cypher. If you read in any of the meditations on beauty, if you read Thomas Jefferson’s ‘Notes on the State of Virginia,’ he talks about [blackness] as unbeautiful.”

Marshall’s paraphrase doesn’t begin to suggest the nature of Jefferson’s remarks on what separates whites and blacks. The words retain their charge:

“The first difference which strikes us is that of colour ... is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immovable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race? Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, their own judgment in favour of the whites, declared by their preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black women over those of his own species.”

There is very little one can think to say, after reading this secular saint’s testimony on beauty and race, except that we might bear his words in mind on a visit to a major Western art museum where an idea of beauty is everywhere apparent — one in which black skin has had no place. While you’ll see a lone black body in a teeming canvas by Bosch or a turbaned Turk in Delacroix, there’s no meaningful history of black figures in the Western painting tradition. “When you talk about the



absence of black figure representation in the history of art,” Marshall told me, “you can talk about it as an exclusion, in which case there’s a kind of indictment of history for failing to be responsible for something it should have been. I don’t have that kind of mission. I don’t have that indictment. My interest in being a part of it is being an expansion of it, not a critique of it.”

In the large paintings for which Marshall has come to be known, art history is always part of the picture, if not as corrective, then suggestively. “De Style,” 1993, spanning over 8½ by 10 feet, frames five black figures in a barbershop, a barber working an electric clipper at a client’s head. If the content of the scene sounds Rockwellian, to an extent it is: a modest scene from quotidian black life, one altogether different from the miserable bulletins that make the evening news. And yet the style is anything but Saturday Evening Post. The barber’s hand is benedictively raised behind his client’s head, his own head emanating rays of light in a nod to the Flemish masters, their images of beatification. The painting’s background is subtly sewn through with the rectilinear blues and yellows and reds and white of Mondrian’s work, to which the painting’s title playfully alludes.

I asked Marshall about his sewing in of references. “It’s negotiating the problem of what makes paintings complex,” he told me, “on top of it, what makes artwork modern. And if modern means in some way that the images become more fragmented and less clearly defined, then there’s no way to escape the trajectory laid out by Picasso. There’s another answer. And the answer to abstraction is not the jettisoning of representation.”

“The Lost Boys,” from the same year, represents a further pictorial permutation of that answer, a canvas of similarly large scale, in which two black boys, one holding a pink water-gun, another sitting in one of those 1-dollar car rides that vibrate outside of supermarkets, or did. The painting’s foreground features a tree whose trunk is rung with yellow police tape that’s snaking its way toward the branches, branches blooming with a strange sort of fruit, yellow bullets glowing as if with inner light. The snaking tape makes visual allusion to Michelangelo’s “Fall of Man” in the Sistine Chapel, Satan’s snake ensnaring Adam and Eve before their expulsion. Marshall’s painting depicts the instruments of these children’s possible martyrdoms — guns and cars — adult machines that have hurried too many young black boys to

their untimely falls from both innocence and life itself. Marshall has called this painting a “kind of a memorial painting to lost innocence,” but it’s also a monument to an idea of a painting as a thing that needed not to be looked at so much as read.

In all these paintings, the one unchanging feature is the uniform blackness of the skin of the lives depicted. Though they’ve been rendered with greater modeling through the years — with more roundness and shading than in the initial self-portrait, its annihilating flatness — the absolute blackness has remained. Marshall uses three kinds of black — carbon black, originally from soot; mars black, from iron oxide; and ivory black, originally from burned bone — each subtly different. To further model the black, he adds in color — yellow ocher, raw umber, two shades of blue — to give him seven blacks to work from, shades which differ chromatically, differing in color as opposed to differing in “value,” the term in art for distinguishing lightness and darkness, the value of a pigment changing when white is added. The blacks in Marshall’s paintings have an absolute value, if you see what I mean, and what he means: blacks into which not a drop of white is added — a working method that’s also, clearly, an essential conceptual feature. “The idea of those paintings,” Marshall told me, “is that blackness is non-negotiable in those pictures. It’s also unequivocal — they are black — that’s the thing that I mean for people to identify immediately. They are black to demonstrate that blackness can have complexity. Depth. Richness.”

This is a political impulse that is being aesthetically expressed, but Marshall makes very clear that, despite the strength of his political convictions, the essence of his endeavor is a painterly one, that of a painter responding to the history of art and its peaks of invention, peaks at which no black painter for 2,000 years was pictured planting his flag. “You are required to respond to it because it exists,” he said. “It can’t be denied. Or ignored. I never bought into the idea that what I was doing was trying to express myself.”

So what was he doing it for?

“You’re driven by the need to succeed. It comes in part from a way of reading history, the history of black people. There are a couple of questions you’re going to have to answer, and one of them, for me, has always been: How come it was possible



for black people to be enslaved in the first place? What were the conditions, the circumstances? What made it possible for that to happen? And when you find out what that is: Don't do that anymore!" Marshall laughed, though there should be another word for the kind of laugh that's an expression not of humor but of rage. "One of the things was that when Europeans arrived on the continent they had a technological advantage over Africans that Africans have been trying to make up ever since. So one of the things you have to do is, at the moment you have to find yourself down, you have to start thinking strategically about how to get yourself into a position where you're not that vulnerable. This is precisely how I see the world."

AFTER A FEW HOURS in his studio, Marshall and I got into his Toyota minivan and drove around his neighborhood, Bronzeville. In the 1920s it was known as "Black Metropolis," home to Gwendolyn Brooks and Louis Armstrong and the families of the Great Migration that left the South in search of a better life up North. So here we were a century later, in this neighborhood two miles south of the Chicago Loop's southern border, staring east across 53rd Street as if through a void in the world: You could see the overgrown green of empty lots extending for three blocks in the distance, in several distances, emptiness crossed by the elevated train line, by a boarded-up building, by a little cinder-block rescue mission hung with a sign reading "DOOR OF HOPE."

We drove on, Marshall taking us through the intersection of Pershing and Indiana a few blocks north, and I recognized it as the vista that appears in his 2003 painting "7am Sunday Morning," an urban landscape painting with, in its blurred passing car, a nod to one of Marshall's favorite painters, Gerhard Richter, but which moreover showcases the real storefronts of Rothschild Liquors and, adjoining it, Your School of Beauty Culture, the latter of which I stared at in something like wonder. Closed and unappealing from the outside, its interior is depicted in Marshall's extraordinary 2012 painting, "School of Beauty, School of Culture," a companion to "De Style," the two making a diptych of a kind: two intimate spaces in which men and women reimagine themselves, paintings that themselves reimagine what a black life looks like from the outside.

"That block and that block," Marshall told me, pointing forward and then back, as we at last pulled to a curb on South Calumet, "there was a period when both those

blocks were dominated by two different gangs.” He pointed to the right. “In the CHA building” — Chicago Housing Authority, low-income project housing — “was another gang.”

We were parked in front of a pretty, two-story red-brick home that Marshall and his wife, the actor Cheryl Lynn Bruce, have shared for nearly a quarter century. They bought the 100-year-old structure in 1992 for \$15,000 — its plumbing and electric looted, its roof rotten, its interior walls in decay. But Marshall, upon seeing it for the first time, said: “I think we can do something with this.” The couple spent many years doing the demolition, the reconstruction, making it habitable, making it lovely.

“A little girl was shot on the corner, once,” Marshall told me, as we got out of the car. “A boy was killed in that block by another kid who shot him in the head while he was walking down the street with his girlfriend. Someone from that CHA building” — since torn down — “shot into our house two years in a row on New Year’s Eve, into our kitchen. The light was on. We were sitting at the table, Cheryl and I. The curtain was like — pfoom! — like that.” Marshall laughed that same laugh that should be a different word. “And then somebody shot into this window from down there” — he pointed to a window on the north side — “and a police car was driving by and I said, ‘What should we do?’ And the police said, ‘Stay away from the window!’ ”

“There used to be drive-bys,” Marshall continued. “I came home one day and that block was a slalom course; they had TVs and sofas and chairs in the street so nobody could drive through. Sometimes you have to put the sofa and the TV in the street so nobody can shoot up your house. Those are tactics people had to have.” He paused. “We were here from the beginning, we stayed through the whole thing, we weren’t going anywhere. I wanted to be here.”

I asked if I could ask a dumb question.

“Why?” Marshall laughed, and at last that was the right word for it. “Well, there are two reasons. If people who are successful always run from the neighborhood, it’s a guarantee that the neighborhood’s going to go the way of the gangbangers. We’ve had to fight in a way to stay here. Somebody’s got to say, ‘We’re not going to be afraid to live in our neighborhood with our own people.’ South Central L.A. wasn’t.... I’ve seen some rough things. I’m not frightened by things that happened. Some of



the things that happened, time and little bit of ingenuity you can remedy some of that. The other thing was that I wanted to be in a neighborhood where kids knew somebody who was trying to do something. That you could be their neighbor.”

“That’s Mr. Marshall,” I said. “He’s a painter.”

“Yeah,” Marshall said, before he led me inside, where we visited with his wife, stepping out into their back garden, appreciating their tomato plants, their flower beds, tasting the last of the mulberries on their tree, Marshall finding a dead junebug (“You don’t see these that often in Chicago. We used to catch ’em and wear ’em like a scarab.”), appreciating its shining metallic carapace, green and blue and silver in the light.

But Marshall wanted to show me more of his neighborhood, and so we were back in the van, heading another mile south, into Englewood. “You would think you were in Mississippi,” Marshall said, in amazement. “The level of emptiness. I’ll show you this one section. Cheryl and I, we drive around sometimes and it’s stunning, still, even to me.”

I have never seen anything in an American city like what Marshall showed me: We were five miles from the Willis Tower — roughly the distance between NYU and Columbia universities in New York — and here we were, surrounded not by lots so much as vast fields of high grass and brush interrupted by the very rare derelict house to which the few remaining residents had clung. “Where are we?” he said, astonished. “You have kids who started kindergarten and they’re walking past those vacant lots on their way to school when they started kindergarten, and when they graduated high school, they were still walking past those same vacant lots. What an impact that must have on their conception of what’s possible.”

A bit later, we sat at a restaurant and spoke more, but I was distracted by the recollection of what we’d just seen, a derelict city overgrown with grass. It reminded me of a picture in Marshall’s retrospective, one that I was now seeing in a new light. Called “Vignette,” from 2003, the title references paintings by the French Rococo master Fragonard, paintings in which romantic love is celebrated. In Marshall’s version, a black man and woman, naked as in Eden, with the exception of an Africa pendant worn by the man, run against a background of high lush grass, trees in the

distance, birds and butterflies soaring around them. I'd read the picture as a — what? I'm not sure — but certainly not an urban scene. And yet, there in the foreground left of the huge canvas was a fringe of concrete. These lovers, these pure hearts: They were running in Englewood, being chased, or chasing. Where were they going? What could they hope for?

“When you look at a thing,” Marshall told me, as our meals were served and we prepared to eat, “the experience you've had in solving other problems in other domains gives you the information you need to solve that problem too. You need a wide base of knowlege and experience — with your own hands. That optimism. This is why I have that optimism.”

I suggested that optimism was a kind of hope.

“No. I don't believe in hope,” Marshall said. “I believe in action. If I'm an apostle of anything: There are always going to be complications, but to a large degree, everything is in your hands.”

***Correction: October 22, 2016***

An article on Page 174 this weekend about the artist Kerry James Marshall, who shows the writer Wyatt Mason around derelict areas of his Chicago neighborhood, gives an outdated name for the city's Sears Tower. It was renamed the Willis Tower in 2009. A version of this article appears in print on October 23, 2016, on page M2174 of T Magazine with the headline: Kerry James Marshall.



## AN INTERVIEW WITH KERRY JAMES MARSHALL

By Charles Rowell

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*This interview was conducted by telephone on February 9, 1998, between Charlottesville, Virginia, and Chicago, Illinois.*

**ROWELL:** What occasioned your series called "Lost Boys"? What were you trying to achieve in it?

**MARSHALL:** Well, what brought it about, or where the idea originated, I guess, had something to do with a slightly autobiographical situation. Not myself directly, but my youngest brother who ended up in prison—he spent seven years in prison—and went into jail just shortly before I started the Lost Boys series. A part of the reason I started that group of paintings was a reaction to how I felt about him being incarcerated. I mean it's one thing when you know other people or hear about people who are taken to jail or to prison and especially through certain violent kinds of incidents. But it's another thing when it's now at home and it's your own brother. I mean the impact of that experience was really kind of extreme for me. And so I just . . . I thought about it a lot. And thinking about that plus the weight of the numbers of black men who end up going through a lot of traumatic experiences kind of sat heavy on my mind. I have always been interested in children's literature, because there was a point at which I had wanted to be a children's book illustrator. And one of the books that struck me was Peter Pan by J.M. Berry and the whole situation of the lost boys . . . you know, a group of young boys who were lost down in Never, Never Land, where they never really had to grow up, a kind of willful underdevelopment on their part. But if I apply that concept of being lost in a Never, Never Land to a lot of young black men, where in some cases it wasn't that they had a willful desire never to grow up, as much as they often never had an opportunity to grow up because there were far too many young black men cut down very early in their lives, you know. And many of them probably with promising futures. Futures that are kind of wasted. And so it was thinking about that book and that concept of being lost from Peter Pan and then applying it to a concept of being lost: lost in America, lost in the ghetto, lost in public housing, lost in joblessness, and lost in illiteracy. And all of those things sort of changed . . . all of those things kind of came together with the fact that my own brother now seemed to be one of those lost. And that's why I started that group of paintings.

**ROWELL:** What is the relationship of the technique or style in these paintings to the rest of your work? What about its imagery also? What, if any, is the relationship of your painting to tradition in American painting in general?

**MARSHALL:** If I think about them in terms of the traditions they address in painting, I wouldn't say that it was limited so much to a tradition in American painting as much as a tradition of painting icons and/or a kind of elegiac portraiture. Look all the way back to Egyptian funerary portraits. So I would link them more specifically to that kind of a tradition and then from there into more medieval and early renaissance traditions of portraiture than I would to any particular kind of American style of painting. If anything could be said to be an American component to the painting, there's a certain element of gestural abstraction in those portraits, especially in the background. And also a certain quality of graffiti in the application of that kind of gestural kind of abstract painting in the back. If we had to link that to something that might be peculiarly American, that might be the closest. The Lost Boys was a way of combining various styles of painting into one painting so that you can have a representational image, very stylized, like the figures are, and then you add to that or superimpose on it or overlay a different style of painting. Instead of taking a particular moment in history and making paintings that are a response to that, I'm looking back and taking all of our history and trying as many of these formal styles as I can and incorporating them in my painting—as many as will support the idea that I'm trying to communicate, not just taking things at random, but as many as I can to support the idea of what the pictures are about.

**ROWELL:** Will you say more about traditions? How you are working with or against or within traditions?


**MARSHALL:** Well, I'm never actually working against traditions, because I think as artists in the late 20th century, we inherit or are the beneficiaries of all of the stylistic and conceptual developments that artists from previous generations have handed down to us. And it's not that we necessarily have to react against it all the time, but I think we simply incorporate it and then find ways to synthesize all of those things into something that none of the artists who preceded us had access to or had an opportunity to achieve. If I look back at da Vinci, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, you know, Raphael, Delacroix, all of those people. If I look back at those artists' work, none of them had access to the kinds of formal developments that came with people like Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock and De Kooning and Rothko. They didn't have access to that. So there was a way in which they didn't have the ingredients to put things together in ways that artists who are operating in this historical moment can. So I'm not reacting against tradition—I'm simply trying to find a way to extend the dialogue and make paintings that appear to be fresh in some way.

**ROWELL:** I like the idea that you're trying to make things fresh. When I study your work, I get the feeling that you are also reinventing in a positive sense—actually, that you are not only reinventing but also holding conversations with other artists. You seem to counterstate those artists who misrepresent or maliciously distort the image of black people. That negative representation of black people is also a tradition in American art. In your paintings you reposition the black figure in his/her landscape; you make a subject of the black figure for the world to see and identify with.

**MARSHALL:** An important part of my project as an artist is to address that issue. There has been a tradition of negative representation of black people and the counter-tradition to that has been a certain kind of positive image, a thrust on the part of some black artists to offset the degradation that maybe some of the other negative stereotypical images present. But both, in a lot of ways, ended up being a kind of stereotype that denied a certain kind of complexity in the way the black image could be represented. So I thought, well, there's got to be a way to do both, to do two things at once. One is to take on the whole issue of negative representation that referred to it, without being it at the same time. And then to not fall into the trap of swinging to the other side and assuming that every representation that a black artist makes of a black person has to somehow present a positive kind of picture of him. But to try to find ways that operate right on the borderline, so that whenever you saw it, saw the image, maybe your first reaction might take you back to something that appears to be a negative representation. And a lot of people react to my work like that initially because the figures in the paintings are so black. Well, you might initially react to the work like that, but upon closer inspection of what's actually happening in the figures themselves, you can see that it's not what you thought it was in the first place. I mean there's actually nothing negative about the representation of those people, except if you sort of assume that this extreme blackness of them . . .

**ROWELL:** Do you mean black in color?

**MARSHALL:** Black in color, yeah. If you assume the idea of blackness as being somehow negative, then you might react that way to them when you first see them, and might be blind to the subtleties, the subtleties of character that I try to develop in all of the figures. The reason why I painted them as black as they are was so that they operate as rhetorical figures. They are literally and rhetorically black in the same way that we describe ourselves as black people in America; we use that extreme position to designate ourselves in contrast to a white power structure of the country or the white mainstream. Now, for me as a black painter, I'm as interested in participating in a general dialogue about art-making as anybody else. But I want to be able to do it in such a way that I don't have to leave behind that black representation. So what I try to do is make the paintings be as much about the way paintings can be done, meaning, you know, historically and technically, how paintings look and how they incorporate style and, at the same time, seem to be as much about the subject that is represented in them, so that



when you see the painting, somehow the way it's painted has to be so undeniably compelling that you can't separate the image that's pictured in it from the way the painting is made. So that you have to take them both as a whole package. And one of the reasons why I took that on as a project was because there was a period when a lot of black artists, who, like anybody else, wanted to be part of the mainstream, assumed they had to let go of the black representation and go into something that was more fully abstract; and by it being abstract, maybe you couldn't see up front that the person who made the painting wasn't just like anybody else who made a painting that was abstract, maybe like De Kooning or Rothko or somebody. Because I think there had always been this way in which the moment a black artist presented images of black people, then the issues in the work seemed to always collapse into simply social and political issues, and any sort of aesthetic value that the work could have seemed to slip out of the discussion, so that the work was seen as a social phenomenon rather than an aesthetic phenomenon and, as such, it was easy to compartmentalize that work and put it into spaces where it was appropriate at the moment to show off black artists, which is why you see a lot of black artists who don't get the opportunity to do exhibitions until February, you know, in Black History Month. And so I'm just saying that a part of what I'd always wanted to do was really to make work that operated in very complex ways, aesthetically, formally, and also content-wise and conceptually. And to do that in a way that had a visual authority that had to be addressed along with the image that was there.

ROWELL: Will you speak about some of the paintings? For example, will you juxtapose "Lost Boys, AKA Black Sunny" and "Lost Boys, AKA Black AI"? What are you trying to achieve in these two paintings? There is a certain kind of complexity about them.

MARSHALL: I'm not sure you could really juxtapose those two, because they're a part of the same group and they try to do the same thing; but one of the things I tried to do, what I really tried to do, at the same time that I reduced their presence or their value, their color value, to an extreme black, was to try to always make sure that they all had individual identities, so that the only way you could say that they kind of all look alike in a way, was simply the fact that they were both black. But when you look at them individually, they have very different and individual personalities. You know, because they are sort of composite portraits that are based on people, so that they don't really collapse into looking exactly the same, which makes them less a stereotype of that sort easily transferable from one to another, and more I guess you could say a kind of archetype, being archetypically black.

ROWELL: And then in "Lost Boys, AKA Eight Ball" and "Lost Boys, AKA Baby Brother," flowers form the backdrop. But in "Lost Boys, AKA Baby Brother," there's not only the use of flowers; there are also images of women. Will you talk about how the flowers and the images of women function in these two paintings? Why are the women white?

MARSHALL: There's a way in which the flower pattern in a lot of those paintings, especially where it's more lush and kind of rich, helps foreground the matter-of-fact, that these are as much about painting as they are about the image that's in there. And that's what happens in the painting AKA Eight Ball. I mean, there's a lot . . . there's a lot of stuff going on in the AKA Eight Ball; it's a more densely painted floral background. But in the Baby Brother painting, even though there's a lot of patterning back there, it's kind of not built up with the same kind of rich, lush, imposto of paint that's in the AKA Eight Ball painting. There aren't the same kinds of loose, fluid paint. The ones on the AKA Baby Brother are more clearly stamped on, than they are in the other ones. And as far as those images, before I started the Lost Boys paintings, I had been doing a series of paintings with the covers of Harlequin romance novels collaged onto the canvas, and those images in the background of the AKA Baby Brother painting, are from those Harlequin romance novel covers. One of the things I was thinking about while working on that painting was in a way, you look at those images on the Harlequin romance novel covers, and they're a certain type of stereotype themselves. They are a stereotype of white women, they're a certain kind of stereotype of the beauty of white women. And then you have this image of Baby Brother, who is this guy . . . I mean that plastic bag on his head. It's like, the shower cap, the Jheri curl cap, and stuff. Well, in a way they're sort of clashing two different kinds of stereotypes in that painting. One is to say something about beauty and desire and the other which says something about a combination of desire and repulsiveness at the same time. Because there was a period when Jheri curls were really kind of popular and kind of sexy, but there was also this part where a certain group of black men who did the Jheri curl thing also wore those plastic bags on their heads out in public. And wearing that plastic bag, being able to wear that plastic bag out in public, signified a certain level of coolness. And I haven't thought about these things in a long time, so it's taking me a while . . . but in order to pull off that level of coolness, to go out in public with your Jheri curl bag and stuff on, there had to also be a certain level of notoriety in terms of being notorious. To be able to go out in public with that bag on and not be ridiculed for having it on, like even in the black community, you had to have a certain kind of heart, I guess, and a certain kind of toughness. And I thought, in a lot of ways, most of the people who were able to go out and do that--and I think I saw a lot of them do it--were a lot of gang bangers, people who weren't really all that concerned about what somebody thought about them, partly because if you were in the neighborhood, you kind of knew who they were and wouldn't dare say anything that might even be remotely critical about their appearance on the street with the Jheri curl bag on their head. It also signified in a certain way that the way you look now is key to the way you're gonna look later when you're out, at your most cool and your most sexy, your most attractive. So it says a little bit about your status as a player. And one of the things that was a stereotypically high level of achievement for a real player was to be able to get white women. So that was another level of cool. Maybe that's as far as I can go now in talking about the inclusion of those images, the white women's images in the Baby Brother painting. And so those are just some of the things that I was trying to refer to or was thinking about with the inclusion of those images in that painting. Because I think there's always been this sort of historical imperative that your success is incomplete in a way without a white woman.

ROWELL: Will you talk about "Dark and Handsome"? Will you speak again about technique as well as cultural particulars in that painting? The face in this portrait is partially enclosed by a circle. There are points of light--as if they were reflections--in his face. What do you want us postmoderns anywhere in the world to see in this portrait? You are not making paintings about being black; you are using black subjectivity to raise questions about humanity at the close of the 20th century.

MARSHALL: Well, yeah, I mean, just living in the world. It's like they are and are not simply about being black. There's a kind of matter-of-factness about their blackness, which is one of the reasons why I think I make them that extreme. And so then it's not a question. They are emphatically what they are; they are black figures. Now, beyond that, what else are they? In Dark and Handsome and Dark and Lovely (they were a pair of paintings), there was a woman that went with it. And the title comes from that . . . you know . . . is it a Johnson Product? Dark and Lovely?

ROWELL: Yes, Dark and Lovely is a hair product.

MARSHALL: Right. It's a hair care product. But the notion of dark and lovely, at some point in history had been a contradiction in terms in a way. You know, in terms of color consciousness in the black community, there had always been, and still exists in some ways, a kind of reaction against the whole notion that somebody who is very dark can also be very pretty and attractive at the same time. And so a part of the reason I did this Dark and Handsome painting as a companion piece to the Dark and Lovely painting was just to propose the idea. Just to propose the notion that just as blackness is apparent, their beauty can also be apparent in their blackness. And those little stars, those little lights you see, kind of hovering around his face--these are sort of points of brilliance where you see the kind of luster, the shine, the sparkle. It's that kind of twinkle in the eye, a reference to a kind of gleaming beauty, you know, a twinkling, sparkling kind of beauty. That's what those things represent.

ROWELL: How many paintings are in the Lost Boys series?

MARSHALL: There are actually only nine portraits and then the one big painting called "Lost Boys." That was the centerpiece of the exhibition I did. The painting is a 10 x 10 foot square.


ROWELL: What is the subject there?

MARSHALL: Well, the subject is kind of the same thing, this loss of innocence, this loss of youth. It's kind of a memorial painting to lost innocence.

ROWELL: One figure or many figures?

MARSHALL: There are actually two black figures and then a small red cupie doll-like figure standing in the foreground of the painting. And these two figures are in what could be a toy land; it's not like they're actually in a space that looks like a toy store or anything, but they are playing with toys and playing with very adult toys. One of the figures in the painting is sitting inside in a model of a fast car, but it's a car that's connected to one of those twenty-five cent rides where you put your money in the thing and the little car rocks back and forth. It's one of those toys you see out in front of department stores and things. So one of the figures is sitting in that, but it's a black car with fire details and stuff like that on it, so it's a very adult kind of racing car. And then the other figure is standing at the base of that ride with a pink water pistol in his hand. And all of this stuff takes place on a floor plane that's broken up into a black and white checkered pattern and in between, on the two sides, what looks like a pair of white gates, and then there's the cupie doll figure in front, standing between some calligraphies that are laid out on the floor behind it. And then written near each one of the figures are dates: one is June 21st and the other is September 1st or 3rd or something like that. And those dates are important because they bracket summer vacation from school. It's from the last day of school till the first day of school after Labor





Day. And that period, especially for kids, for young people, is a period with no real responsibility, the period when they spend the most time simply being children and playing and experiencing things without a lot of structure around them. So if you think about all of this in terms of this whole notion of the Lost Boys, here are these two kids playing with these grown-up toys, grown-up toys that in a lot of cases end up being the death of a lot of young black kids. A part of the reason why this came about was a story I had read in the L.A. Times in the mid- to late-1980s about a little kid who was shot by a police officer who saw him turn towards him with what he thought was a gun but turned out to be a water pistol. The figure in the painting that has the water pistol in his hand actually comes from a painting I tried to make years before, unsuccessfully. But I don't think I had really internalized the event enough then and certainly hadn't developed the level of skill and complexity I really think I needed in order to articulate this idea successfully. This kid who was a latchkey kid in a way, left home by his mother, and she had locked him into a room in the apartment. But some neighbors heard some noise and called the police. When the police got there, they saw the doorknob of this room tied to a piece of furniture outside. They heard noise inside, and the kid was in there at dusk, you know, sort of in the evening watching television. And so when the police officer kicks the door in, the little kid turns to see what's going on, and he has this water pistol in his hand; and the police officer, as soon as he sees something that looks kind of like a gun and a figure, he just shoots and kills this little kid. I was affected by that and wanted to do something about it, but at the time the only thing I could do was make an illustration of it, which wasn't what my objective was really. I wanted to do something more meaningful; I had more levels at which it could be read. And it took awhile for it to come back, but it did, in this painting called the Lost Boys.

**ROWELL:** In your paintings, what do you do for yourself? And what do you want to do for us?

**MARSHALL:** Well, I tell you there are a couple of levels at which I achieve satisfaction, I guess, or at least fill a need I think I need to satisfy. It's part egocentric in the sense that a part of what I've always wanted to do was to make paintings that were so undeniably compelling that they couldn't . . . that there was no way they couldn't find their place in mainstream museums amongst other works that had the capacity to move people. Works that had to be taken on their own terms as paintings first, and then as paintings from a black source and about a black subject. I wanted to find a way to make sure that when young black kids went to the museum, that they didn't just have to be inspired by the work of European artists but could also be inspired by the work of a black painter and by work that didn't have to be segregated into a black section of the museum, like there must be something a little deficient or something about it. And I wanted to do work that entered into the museum on a scale that was equal to anything else you might see in there. That was something that was always really important to me. Because I know, when I started out as an artist, there were books on the work of black artists that I had seen in the library, but when I went to the museums, I hardly ever, if ever, saw any of that work. And if I saw it, it existed in the museum on such a modest scale that it never had the same kind of imposing presence that a lot of the big major works you saw in museums seemed to have. And so I thought, well, I would like to do work that entered the museum on that level, that wasn't sort of tentative about its existence. That sort of declared itself to be worthwhile in a very confident and authoritative voice. And the voice I chose was a painting voice. When I finally got into school at the university level, there was this notion that painting was a kind of dead medium, kind of an exhausted practice. That was sort of the more prevalent idea in the academy at the time I entered school, and, if I accepted it as the case, then that meant that there was probably going to be no chance that paintings by any African-American artist would ever enter into the museum or the historical record to be available for another generation of artists, like myself, to be inspired by. And so I also set out to find out if there was still some way that a person could make paintings that existed in a contemporary context and held their own in the face of all of these other options that artists in the late 20th century had available to them, and held their own in a very meaningful way. So, that's how I saw myself; I was on a mission, you could say, and I had a project that required a certain understanding of the historical development or the trajectory that art had followed from the Renaissance or before until now. I had to find a way to strategically place myself and the work I did in relationship to that history and to do it in such a way that it had a chance to be included in the general discourse about art-making and painting in particular. Another part of what I've always been interested in as an artist, above being simply a painter, was that--if you look at what artists can do, and I mean this in terms of film, video, photography, sculpture, anything, there's a way in which I wanted to demonstrate how one person alone without a lot of money to either go to college or buy expensive materials or have a lot of expensive equipment or a crew of people to work with--can make significant and important work in spite of this lack. Because you're drawing and painting, it doesn't mean you can't produce significant work simply because video or film seems to be a more dynamic and dominant medium to work with nowadays. There are a lot of black people who probably would like to make films, but they can't raise the kind of money it takes to make them. Even filmmakers who've been quite successful make so few films that it in some ways stunts their development, because they are not able to practice the craft regularly enough to develop a certain level of mastery in it and to make enough mistakes, so that they can, out of all that, do some really significant work. But if all that's required is some skill that comes from you alone, then there isn't much limit to what you can do. You don't have to ask anybody whether you can, you don't have to depend on anybody to let you do it. You just go and do it yourself. That's been an important issue for me. You can say something really important and significant in something as simple as drawing and painting. And then you can take the skills you acquire in that discipline and apply them to other disciplines and find a way to do something in that too. So you can achieve a lot as an individual in spite of the fact that you can't afford to go to college for six years to get a Master of Fine Arts degree; you simply have to have the will and the desire to do it. So the way I've approached my whole career has been to help demonstrate that to people who in a lot of ways come from situations that are similar to the one that I came from.

**ROWELL:** What do you mean when you refer to "the situation" you "came from"?

**MARSHALL:** Well, in the sense that I came from a family where going to college was not encouraged, because it was never something that even came up in discussion. I came from a family who thought that you went to school until you got out of high school and then you got a job.

**ROWELL:** Where was this?

**MARSHALL:** That was in Los Angeles. I was the first person in my immediate family to go to college. And only the third person in my extended family, that I knew of, to have gone to college. It certainly wasn't something that my father encouraged. It was something that I had to decide I needed to do on my own. I know there are a lot of people who grew up in families like that. They're not planning to send their kids to college. I mean if they get there, then it will be by some other means. But I hope if my life becomes an example in any way for somebody, it's partly to show that going to school is a wonderful opportunity; but if you can't find the means to go to school, that doesn't mean that somehow you can't achieve a lot of things. There are other ways to do it. There are parallel paths to going to college that can get you to the same places. It requires the same kind of hard work and study and dedication, because you've got to know something before you can achieve anything. I went to a junior college for two years before I went to the Otis Art Institute. Then after I got my BFA, I didn't go to graduate school. That didn't have any bearing on how much I was going to know really, because there's a library in just about every town. And if you can read, you can go to the library. You can read the same books that are going to be handed to students in graduate school to read. And then you talk to people. And you devote yourself diligently to the work at hand. And if you do that, if you're really concerned and careful about and dedicated to the work you do, well then you can still achieve the same heights that somebody who went and got the paper degrees can, and you can even exceed the levels of success that somebody who went to graduate school achieved. But it's all in how much you know and how good you are and what you can do. All of those things have been very important to me. I wanted always to be an example, to set an example for what somebody else like me could do. When I was a kid, you know, I saw something that excited me and I wanted to do it, and I found all of the right people who could help me get there. Some of them I found through hanging out at the library, every day looking at every single book on the shelves.

**ROWELL:** What kinds of books?

**MARSHALL:** At first I started out looking at every single art book that was in the library. I just walked down the stacks and picked up every book there. I never went to the card catalog to find anything. I just saw what was in there and looked at every single one of them. And that was what it took. I learned a lot very early by doing that. I learned stuff that I wouldn't have even known to ask somebody about. That's how it was for me. I hear a lot of people talking about the way people are tracked into certain positions, tracked into certain professions, tracked into certain blue collar kinds of skills and things like that. I guess you can be tracked into those kinds of positions if you ask somebody what they think you can do. But if you just decide for yourself what you want to do and just go do it, you don't have to ask anybody. And you can't be stopped.

Kerry James Marshall, a native of Birmingham, Alabama, is an associate professor at the University of Illinois (Chicago). He has exhibited his paintings in group and solo shows throughout the United States--e.g., in Seattle, Los Angeles, Little Rock, Pittsburgh, Miami, Fort Worth, New York, Chicago, San Francisco and numerous other cities. His paintings are also part of permanent collections in The Art Institute of Chicago, the Denver Museum of Art, The Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago), The Studio Museum of Harlem, the Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington, DC), and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

## The New York Times



# Kerry James Marshall's Paintings Show What It Means to Be Black in America

By HOLLAND COTTER OCT. 20, 2016

People say we're in the middle of a second civil rights movement, and we are. The only surprise is that the first one ever ended. The artist Kerry James Marshall was there for it. He was just a kid then, born in Birmingham, Ala., in 1955. But kids take in a lot.

He was in Birmingham in 1963, when white supremacists dynamited a Baptist church and killed four young girls. He was 9 and living in Los Angeles in 1965 when Watts went up in flames. He remembers all that, just as he also remembers growing up in those years in a loving family: mother, father, sister, brother. Home.

Artists take in a lot, too. Mr. Marshall has absorbed enough personal history, American history, African-American history and art history to become one of the great history painters of our time. That's the painter you'll see in "Kerry James Marshall: Mastry," the smashing 35-year career retrospective that opens on Tuesday at the Met Breuer.

The first thing you may notice about him as an artist is that he's an ace storyteller, so good that you realize how rare that is. Sometimes he spells out narrative scenes, even somewhat fantastical ones, straightforwardly as in the sublime 1997 painting "Souvenir I," in which a middle-aged matron arranges her



living room as a shrine to 1960s civil rights martyrs. What's fantastical is that the woman has glitter-encrusted wings, like an angel.

Just as often, stories are merely implied, and they can be perplexing. One of the earliest of the show's 72 paintings, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self," dates from 1980, two years after Mr. Marshall graduated from what was then called the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. It's a small image — he would later typically work at mural scale — of a bust-length, black-skinned male figure whose contours are barely readable against a slightly lighter black background. His only clear features are the whites of his eyes, and his broad, gap-toothed smile.

You may think, with a twinge of unease, of cartoons, or of old racist stereotypes, or of race as performance: blackamoors, Sambos, Madea. What Mr. Marshall was thinking of was Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel "Invisible Man," whose African-American hero knows that his color makes him unseeable as a person in white America: He's a black; that's it. Mr. Marshall complicates this idea by taking it in two directions: His "self-portrait" is simultaneously recessive and unmissable, with his eyes and his assertive, mock-cheerful, near-skeletal smile that shine like pin spots in the dark.

Black skin is a constant in Mr. Marshall's art. More than three decades ago, he resolved to devote himself to creating a new, disruptive art history, one that would insert — big-time — the absent black figure into the tradition of Western art, which was a tradition he loved and identified with.

And that tradition is everywhere in his work. He points directly to it in a mini-exhibition, "Kerry James Marshall Selects," that's embedded within the retrospective, and made up of historical items he's culled from the Met's holdings. They include a 15th-century Holbeinesque male portrait, a gray-tinted Ingres odalisque, abstract pictures by Ad Reinhardt and Gerhard Richter, and a Horace Pippin self-portrait as tiny, and every bit as precious, as the Met's famous Duccio "Madonna and Child."

It's a treat to see these things. And it's not hard to track down traces of the artists who made them in his work. Always in his paintings, he gives his painter-heroes their props.

And it's his art you're here for, and may well want to come back to see again. The show — which originated at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and is organized at the Met by Ian Alteveer, associate curator of modern and contemporary art, and Meredith Brown, a research assistant — verges on being disorientingly rich.

Chronologically, it starts on the Met Breuer's third floor with a few abstract collages and the 1980 "Self Portrait," then moves through the career in thematic increments. Early things are texturally dense and tactilely experimental. Mystically-themed pictures from 1992 are done on wood, leather and sheets of paper glued to canvas.

Imagery is similarly layered. The celestial-feeling 1992 painting "Voyager" — a memorial to lives lost on a 19th-century slave ship, and one of Mr. Marshall's first big history paintings — brings together anatomical prints, Haitian veve emblems, and showers of hand-stamped and painted roses. Some of these also turn up, not at all incongruously — part of the brilliance of Mr. Marshall's art is that it's incongruity-free — in scenes of domestic romance, like the 1992 "This Could Be Love," where a couple undresses for bed as the notes and lyrics of a pop song, Mary Wells's "Two Lovers," float over head.

In painting African-American daily life, Mr. Marshall monumentalizes and ennobles it. Ordinary is extraordinary. This is the dynamic in a 10-foot wide picture of terrific wit and gravity called "De Style." Five figures pose in a barbershop. Three have sensationally sculptural 'dos; the barber-artist responsible is haloed, like a saint.

The painting's title is multiply coded. It refers to the shop, Percy's House of Style, and to the princely chic of its clientele. It also points backward to the utopian Dutch art movement De Stijl, which, in the early 20th century, sought to aestheticize the everyday environment and produce universal harmony. Piet Mondrian was an adherent, and the barbershop's décor is based on his primary-colors palette.

In 2012, Mr. Marshall produced an indescribably fabulous pendant to "De Style" called "School of Beauty, School of Culture," set in a women's hair salon. The references are updated (there's a Chris Ofili poster on the wall), and the politics



sharpened (the dominant colors are the red, black and green of the Pan-African flag). It is not to be missed.

Such images represent a conscious effort on Mr. Marshall's part to rescue the image of black life from a default air of pessimism. But he does not avoid bitter realities. A painting called "The Lost Boys," done the same year as "De Style," is a stabbing memorial to the violent deaths of black children. Nine immense pictures installed together in a wide-open gallery on the fourth floor tell a tale of a utopia failed — and worse, betrayed. Five of these paintings, collectively called "The Garden Project," date from 1994-95 and are reunited here for the first time in two decades. Mr. Marshall has said that one of his motivating ambitions as an artist was to paint black life "in the grand style," and here he did, in a fusion of autobiography and politics.

Part of the story of black urban life in late-20th- and 21st-century America, and part of Mr. Marshall's story, is of life in low-income housing projects. Such projects were designed by the government in the 1930s as alternatives to city slums. But the gesture had no follow-up. Once built, economic support was scant and by the 1960s the projects had drastically deteriorated, becoming media emblems of poverty and crime.

Mr. Marshall briefly lived in a project when he was a child and has good memories of it. In "The Garden Project," those memories collide and fuse with social realities. Landscaped projects in Los Angeles and Chicago (where Mr. Marshall lives) look both idyllic and corrupted. They are painted with photorealist precision, spattered with daubs of pigment that suggest bullet holes.

We see children, among them the young Mr. Marshall with his sister and brother. They play, glance shyly toward us, seem innocent of fear. Adults are not so carefree. In a picture called "Many Mansions," three men dressed in formal clothes, like churchgoers or undertakers, appear to be either gardening or digging a grave. Bluebirds flutter about; Easter baskets sit on the grass. The distant project towers look blank, dead; the earth seems to bleed.

In the years since 1995, Mr. Marshall has painted many gardens, blighted and Edenic, ambiguously shaded. He has painted, with unambiguous seriousness, a

gallery's worth of revolutionaries. In the "Portrait of Nat Turner With the Head of His Master" (2011), the ax-wielding rebel is a kind of biblical hero, a black David turning his back on a dead Goliath whose severed head is one of the show's very few images of a white person.

And he has painted artists, fictional ones, male and female, with regal coiffures; immense, paint-caked palettes; and paint-by-numbers self-portraits on their easels. As the catalog points out, the paint-by-number craze arrived in the 1950s, around the time the civil rights movement started, which was around the time Mr. Marshall was born. It was a type of painting for anyone and everyone, universal in that way. And although the subjects were fixed, the colors were not; you could switch them around, personalize your look, the way Mr. Marshall taught himself painting, and enriched it, by sampling themes and styles of older masters.

One of his fictional artists seems to be basing her portrait colors on those of the stunning print wrap she's wearing, which is a painting in itself. Another has depicted himself dressed entirely in pink, though he's wearing drab green and tan. In all cases, the painting of the face has been left unfinished — in some, untouched, as if that would be the last decision to make. Is it because they don't know what the colors will be? Or because black is so complex?

You know there would be some interesting choices from this group. Together, they look like an artist-army: mature, sober, purposeful, full of ideas, ready to get great, which Mr. Marshall already is.



## Kerry James Marshall

### Kerry James Marshall: Mastry, Met Breuer, New York – review

This exultant show is both a homage and a riposte to the canon of western art



'School of Beauty, School of Culture' (2012), by Kerry James Marshall

NOVEMBER 9, 2016 by: **Ariella Budick**

“I am an invisible man,” Ralph Ellison’s narrator declares in the prologue to his great novel. “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. It is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass.”

The heroic effort to be seen pulsates through Kerry James Marshall’s life project. With fierce elegance and virtuosity powered by a sense of mission, he has claimed terrain from which African-Americans have long been shut out: the painted canvas. His sumptuous retrospective offers an alternative universe, where blacks dominate gallery walls, their poses, rituals and celebrations proudly on display. “If I didn’t do it, how else were they going to be seen?” he has said. *Mastry* (presumably

pronounced “mastery”), a gathering of Marshall’s defiantly festive paintings, stretches over two floors of the Met Breuer, and it’s an exultant show.

Born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955, Marshall was there when white terrorists bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in 1963, killing four little girls. (One was the daughter of his mother’s friend.) That same year, the family made its way to Los Angeles, and they arrived in Watts, two years before the neighbourhood erupted in violence. Marshall still remembers the Pacific sun sloping through the palm trees and also the smoky, frightening streets. The Los Angeles County Museum opened the same year as the riots, and Marshall frequented its corridors from the beginning. He noticed immediately that no one in the paintings looked like him. He had taken refuge in an ocean of whiteness.

Ellison’s narrator, trapped in invisibility, starts to “bump people back”, violently. Marshall finds a different way to demand respect: he inserts blacks into the narrative of art. He doesn’t want to throw out a canon that he reveres, but he does want to bump, discomfit and disrupt it. Marshall appropriates portraiture, landscape and history, fitting each genre out with new backdrops and a fresh set of actors. “De Style”, the gigantic painting from 1993 that greets us at the start of the show, depicts an everyday holy scene on a scale reminiscent of a Renaissance altarpiece. In a neighbourhood hair joint, a haloed barber — the neighbourhood’s artist-in-residence? — makes a gesture of benediction as he shaves a squiggly pattern on to a seated man’s head. A few other customers are just hanging out, their immense coiffures springing upward like sculptural flowers.





*'De Style' (1993), by Kerry James Marshall*

The title keys us into Marshall's aspirations, referring at once to the shop's name, Percy's House of Style, and to the Dutch modernist movement *De Stijl*, which advocated a universal visual language of simplified forms and primary colours. Marshall recycles Mondrian's red, yellow, blue and black palette and geometric patterning, but his composition, crammed with cultural artefacts and surface glitter, is much more complex.

He upped the ante in a 2012 sequel, "School of Beauty, School of Culture". Set in a busy salon, the multi-figured paean to black women is even more dazzlingly intricate and ambitious. Marshall summons a whole chorus of colleagues as witnesses to his achievement. The distorted death's-head from Holbein's "The Ambassadors" reappears in the foreground as a rubbery Disney blonde. Chris Ofili's "Afromuse", watching over the scene from a poster on the wall, is a genius loci — not just a woman of colour, but a woman *in* colour, blazing and proud. Marshall

casts himself as Velázquez presiding over the hall of mirrors; he's there only in reflection, his face hidden by a flash as he steals a snapshot of the scene.

Besides building monumental paintings around black protagonists, Marshall also claims his place as the peer of past masters. Wielding a vast catalogue of references, he challenges anyone to dislodge him from the great tradition. In “Kerry James Marshall Selects”, a small exhibition lodged within the retrospective, the artist acts as curator, picking out works from the Metropolitan Museum’s collection that resonate with his. Among his characteristically eclectic choices is a monochrome core of pieces — Ingres’ grisaille “Odalisque”, a sensual Seurat drawing, the Dürer engraving “Knight, Death and the Devil” — that experiment with gradations of velvety blacks.





*'A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self' (1980), by Kerry James Marshall*

For his own figures' skin, Marshall uses an almost industrial shade, as impervious and burnished as car enamel. "People ask me why figures have to be so black," he said in a 2013 interview. "First, the blackness is a rhetorical device. When we talk about ourselves as a people and as a culture we talk about black history, black culture, black music ... Somebody has to start representing that blackness in the

extreme and letting it be beautiful.”

Marshall reaches far beyond a demand for equal representation. He wants to redeem a pernicious stereotype of black life that permeates American culture, from Hollywood to politics. Black actors keep getting cast as drug dealers and thugs, while Donald Trump has warned of anarchic “inner cities”, but Marshall gives us black couples languorously sprawled in urban nature as if they had just leapt from one of Fragonard’s perfumed bowers. His beauty salons and barbershops are theatres, where patrons gather for uplift and cultural exchange.



*'Better Homes, Better Gardens' (1994), by Kerry James Marshall*

Marshall’s mood is not always so sanguine, though. The nine colossal pictures that make up “The Garden Project” (1994-95) recapitulate the dream and dismal failure of public housing. In these tainted pastoral scenes, families frolic before Modernist colossi, planting flowers and hiding Easter eggs, bathed in sunlight and ringed by bluebirds. We know how the story ends: with crime, decrepitude and the buildings’ physical destruction. And yet even in bitterness, Marshall recaptures that utopian promise, a fleeting moment streaked by unreasonable joy.

Until January 29, [metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org/) (<http://www.metmuseum.org/>)



# The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

## Kerry James Marshall, Boldly Repainting Art History

By RANDY KENNEDY SEPT. 9, 2016



The painter Kerry James Marshall's retrospective, "Mastry," opens at the Met Breuer next month. Here is his "De Style" from 1993. 2015 Museum Associates/LACMA; Licensed by Art Resource, NY

CHICAGO — Kerry James Marshall, whose highly anticipated [retrospective](#), "[Mastry](#)," opens Oct. 25 at the Met Breuer, is steeped in classical training more thoroughly than almost any painter of his generation. He's spent hundreds of hours in figure-drawing classes and anatomical studies, honing techniques developed over centuries by idols like Veronese and Rembrandt, to "get up alongside them on the wall," as he says.

But the other day in his studio in the Bronzeville district on this city's South Side, he took me upstairs to show off some painting implements certainly unavailable in Renaissance Venice or Baroque Amsterdam. Opening a plastic bin, he produced a handful of plastic noggins severed from bobblehead dolls — mostly of professional basketball players like James Harden and Sheryl Swoopes, along with the odd Michael Jackson or

Muhammad Ali.

“These have become really invaluable to me,” said Mr. Marshall, who turns 61 next month but glows with childlike intensity when he talks about how he does what he does. “Working from live models is too much trouble; it takes too much time. These things are actually incredibly accurate.” Turning a head appreciatively between his fingers, he added, “I can look at them from any angle, and they give me a basis of facial structure and head shape.”



Kerry James Marshall's "Portrait of the Artist & a Vacuum," 1981.  
Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University

The heads are a perfect illustration of the dual mission Mr. Marshall has been pursuing with a kind of holy fervor for almost 40 years now: building a sturdy bridge for figurative painting from the 15th century to ours, over treacherous spans of recent history that declared both figuration and painting to be finished — and at the same time trying to rewrite history itself.

The second part is, for Mr. Marshall, the most crucial and the task the most herculean. Too few black painters like himself have gained entry to the canon of Western art, leading to a stunning dearth of black faces and bodies on museum walls, an absence [only recently being rectified](#) in a serious way. Mr. Marshall has been trying to rectify it since the first time he picked up brush.

It's no accident that all of the plastic heads packed into the drawers in his studio depict black people: He has always painted only black figures, at leisure, in love, in extremis and in practically all the forms the genre offers (portraiture, history painting, allegory, fête champêtre, even seascape). “If I didn't do it, how else were they going to be seen?” he said. “That really was the simple way I thought about it. I had to do it.”





Kerry James Marshall in his Chicago studio. Whitten Sabbatini for The New York Times

Growing up in Birmingham, Ala., then in Los Angeles, the son of a hospital kitchen worker and a homemaker, he was absolutely gripped by his first exposure to art history books and museums, even though he almost never saw anyone who looked like him on the pages or in the galleries.

“That didn’t strike me as particularly insidious, because I really liked the stuff I was seeing,” he said. “In the Renaissance, artists were driven by the market the same way they are now, and they really weren’t supposed to be making pictures of me. That wasn’t their market.” When he began training to be a painter, he said, “It just seemed to me that, now, there’s space for a lot more stuff to be put in.”

The retrospective is going next to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. It debuted in April at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, where Mr. Marshall has lived since 1987 and become a kind of local hero, after years of laboring in not quite obscurity (he won a MacArthur Foundation grant in 1997) but mostly outside the art world spotlight. The Chicago show has drawn consistent crowds and critical acclaim, and it could hardly be more relevant, [in a city of deepening racial divisions](#) and violence, amid the rising chorus of the Black Lives Matter movement.



Kerry James Marshall's portrait of the actor Hezekiah Washington as Julian Carlton, who committed a mass murder at Frank Lloyd Wright's estate Taliesin in 1914. Kerry James Marshall

Mr. Marshall, a soft-spoken, professorial man with a salt-and-pepper beard and bifocals hanging around his neck, doesn't carry himself like a firebrand. But at the same time, he never lets you forget that his obsession with art is not simply about trying to succeed in the art world but about trying to change it, fundamentally. Or at least to poke holes in the dam that succeeding generations might turn into a flood.

"The revision of any kind of established model is always a political act," he said, especially if it's established itself "without ever having to accommodate any of the people who have been banging on the door to get in." (Madeleine Grynsztejn, the Chicago museum's director, has said: "He is painting for a future United States. The expanded history he is creating for us to see today will be the norm tomorrow.")

Mr. Marshall's plain-brick studio, on a low-slung residential block, looks as if it might be a small community center. It was built for him by a nearby church that needed the land where his previous studio sat. He and his wife, the actress Cheryl Lynn Bruce — they met in New York when he had a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem and she was performing — have lived most of their life together in Bronzeville, once Chicago's African-American mecca. (In the 1920s, Louis Armstrong lived about 10 blocks from where Mr. Marshall's studio is now.) When they arrived, decaying public housing and gang violence had made the neighborhood a tough place to live. And though it has improved dramatically, "there's still a little more gunfire than you might like," Mr. Marshall said, with the deadpan delivery of a true Chicagoan.





Kerry James Marshall in his Chicago studio. Whitten Sabbatini for The New York Times

He undoubtedly could afford to move. In May, a 1992 painting of his sold for \$2.1 million at Christie's, and prices for new work have been [edging up into seven figures](#). But Mr. Marshall likes where he lives, and he mostly still lives as if he doesn't trust the financial success coming his way; after our interview, he drove me back to my hotel in a beige Toyota minivan whose better days were well behind it.

Mr. Marshall has no assistant and answers all of his own emails and phone calls, making getting in touch with him a sometimes tricky business. He works alone in his studio, on a schedule that he says is not particularly rigid, but then he adds: "I get here first thing in the morning, and I leave at night, every day I'm here." It's a shoulder-to-the-wheel determination that friends say has defined him since he first began training seriously as a painter, at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles (now the Otis College of Art and Design), during years when Minimalism and Conceptualism made painting seem like a fairly fusty pursuit.

But he believed — and still does — that the gears of historical and institutional power in Western art resided primarily in painting. And that's where he wanted to compete. "The reality is that you have to fight under the existing rules, the ones that were there when you arrived on the scene," he said. "If it's a basketball game, you can't show up with a football just because you don't like the shape of the basketball."



Kerry James Marshall's "Untitled (Blot)" (2014). Rennie Collection, Vancouver, Canada

Ian Alteveer, an associate curator of modern and contemporary art at the Met, is organizing that museum's show with Helen Molesworth, chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and Dieter Roelstraete, a former senior curator at the Chicago museum. Referring to Mr. Marshall, Mr. Alteveer said: "He believes very strongly in speaking in the old master language. He sees it as a continuum, and he sees things like Conceptual art as aberrant, maybe, but certainly not as the way he was going to achieve what he wanted."

He added: "That's why it's so important to have this show come to the Met. There are 5,000-plus years of art history here, and that's the history he wants to be a part of and to paint to be a part of."

At Otis, Mr. Marshall studied under the African-American painter Charles White and years later became fascinated by the work of [Bill Traylor](#), the self-taught artist born into slavery in Alabama who spent the last years of his life (he died in 1949) making drawings sitting on a box on the sidewalks of Montgomery. In Traylor's work, Mr. Marshall said, he saw "not just that visionary thing that folk artists are supposed to do" but something deeper that resonated with works of his own around that time, like "[A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self](#)," a dark 1980 egg-tempera painting that depicts Mr. Marshall as a kind of old-timey, grinning racial trope. "I was searching for something that seemed to me like an authentic black aesthetic, one that had an equivalency with postwar blues," he said. "And there was a drawing by Traylor of a coiled snake that just knocked me out. I sensed something in it."





Toulouse-Lautrec's "Woman in the Garden of Monsieur Forest" is among the paintings from the Met's permanent collection that Kerry James Marshall has picked to hang among his own.  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Mr. Marshall is a deeply read student of history, art theory and popular culture, able to talk with as much ease about Roland Barthes as about the tangled history of black characters in Marvel Comics. By nature a realist, at times a gloomy one, he doesn't sound like someone who seeks, or expects, any kind of ultimate racial harmony, in art or life.

"I see life and the world simply as an arena for competition," he said. "That's just what people do, and there are always going to be winners and losers." The only way for black artists and black subjects to become common enough in museums that they no longer feel like political statements, he said, is for powerful, wealthy people — primarily black people — to begin tilting the playing field toward "some kind of parity." "People don't really want to hear me say this," he said, "but a black person who will give a million dollars to the Museum of Modern Art but won't give a million to the Studio Museum in Harlem is simply mistaken."

The Met Breuer show also includes his selection of works from the permanent collection, by artists as varied as Ingres, Horace Pippin, Ad Reinhardt and Gerhard Richter, to hang alongside his own. The mere presence of his work amid treasures from the Met will begin to change the terms. But to solidify that change, he said he felt he needed to become better, to push harder against the boundaries of painting itself.

"I remember the first time I went to the Uffizi, and you walk into a room and you see Cimabue and Giotto alongside those who came just before them, and you realize how powerfully the terms had just been changed — you really couldn't argue about it anymore," he said. "Of course, we all know it's extremely difficult to arrive at something like that at this point in history. But that's not going to keep me from trying."

# KERRY JAMES MARSHALL'S AMERICA

*An exhilarating retrospective at the Met Breuer is not an appeal for progress in race relations but a ratification of advances already made.*

**By Peter Schjeldahl**

*Marshall's "Bang" (1994): an embrace of painting's age-old narrative function.*





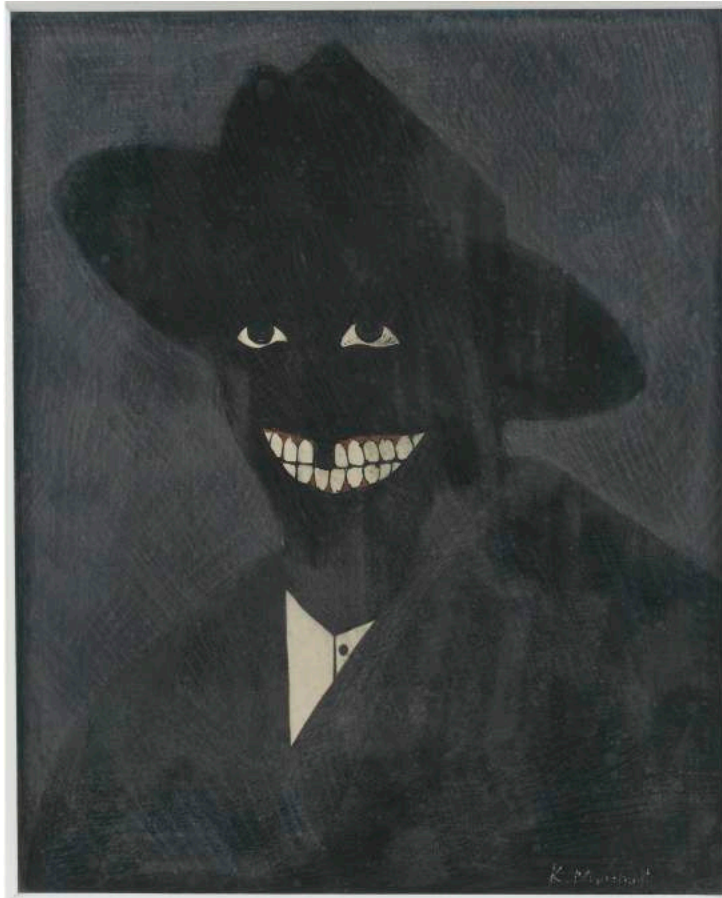
“Mastery,” an exhilarating Kerry James Marshall retrospective at the Met Breuer, is a big deal for three reasons: it marks the museum’s blessing of Marshall and, in turn, Marshall’s benediction of the museum, and it affirms a revival of grandly scaled, thematic figurative painting. Marshall, now sixty-one and based in Chicago, has achieved prominence as an artist of universal appeal—he won a MacArthur “genius” grant in 1997—with a particular focus. He has strictly depicted African-American life and experience since 1980, when he made “A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self.” Executed in the antique medium of egg tempera, the painting is in blacks and grays, save for the whites of the eyes, a shirt collar, and a gap-toothed grin. Small in size but jolting in impact, the portrait bears hints of ghastly blackface caricature, but turns them around into astute ironies of a self-aware, unconquerable character—not an “identity,” a term that is as reductive in art as it is in politics, and which Marshall bursts beyond. He doesn’t argue. He tells.

Most of Marshall’s imagery is celebratory, and often at mural scale. His keynote is a commitment to blackness both represented and literal, modelling flesh in pigments of acrylic carbon, ivory, and Mars Black. “School of Beauty, School of Culture” (2012) convenes eight women, two men, two toddlers, and the artist, who is seen in a mirror, his face obscured by a camera flash. The adults sport smart styles of dress, hair, and posture, in luscious colors pegged to a dominant coral and blue-green. Background details done in gold glitter pop forward from the wonderfully handled deep space. Floating free, and noticed only by the children, is a distorted image of Walt Disney’s blond Sleeping Beauty: an ideal that is implicitly, and decisively, shrugged off by the kids’ glamorous mothers and aunts.

Other of Marshall's subjects include lovers in intimate interiors or lyrical landscapes; artists at work on paint-by-numbers self-portraits; people relishing, or enduring, life in public housing and inhabiting utopian suburbs; and upper-middle-class matrons in living rooms filled with civil-rights-era memorabilia. There are also enlarged panels from Marshall's raucously Expressionist comic strip about a black superhero, "Rythm Mastr." A rare Caucasian figure in a show of some eighty works is that of a head severed by an axe-wielding Nat Turner, in a history painting redolent of baroque gore (all those postmortems of David and Goliath) and ambiguously pitched between menace and dread. But the show's cumulative, epic effect is neither political protest nor an appeal for progress in race relations. It's a ratification of advances already made.

Marshall's compliment to the Met is expressed by a show within the show, of works from the museum's collection that he particularly values. He selected paintings by four modern African-American artists—Horace Pippin, Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, and Charles Wilbert White (a W.P.A. muralist who was an inspirational teacher of Marshall's in college)—and three African sculptures: a Dan mask, a Senufo oracle figure, and a Bamana Boli (a featureless animal encrusted with "sacrificial" matter, including blood). But most of the works are by dead white men, from Veronese and Holbein through Ingres and Seurat to Balthus and de Kooning, with surprising nods to George Tooker, Paul Cadmus, and Andrew Wyeth. In each case, an intellectual spark leaps to some aspect of Marshall's art: eloquent figurative distortion, from Ingres and de Kooning; dark tonality, from Seurat and Ad Reinhardt; and theatrical violence, from nineteenth-century Japanese prints. Only one choice baffled me: a blushy Bonnard nude, which feels antithetical to Marshall's manner. (Is that the ironic point of its inclusion?)





*“A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self” (1980).*

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“Kerry James Marshall Selects,” as the sub-show is titled, amounts to a visual manifesto, with which Marshall pays homage to a personal pantheon of forebears even as he shoulders in among them. The gesture confirms him as the chief aesthetic conservative in the company of such other contemporary black artists as David Hammons, Kara Walker, and Fred Wilson, who are given to conceptual and pointedly social-critical strategies. Marshall’s untroubled embrace of painting’s age-old narrative and decorative functions projects a degree of confidence that is backed both by his passion for the medium and by the authenticity of his lived

New York, in 1985. There he encountered the influence of painting-averse post-minimalist and conceptual artists. In 2000, he recalled his renegade response, and what it led to, this way: “I gave up on the idea of making Art a long time ago, because I wanted to know how to make *paintings*; but once I came to know that, reconsidering the question of what Art is returned as a critical issue.” The reconsideration landed in an improbable place: lessons from the Old Masters applied to the modern American experience. At first, Marshall availed himself of stylistic ideas that had marked the rise of neo-expressionist painting in the early eighties, with coarse figurative images and paint built up in rough marks and patterns that recall the muscular temerity of Julian Schnabel, among others. From Leon Golub, a too little regarded master of violent themes, Marshall adopted the format of unstretched canvas fastened flat to a wall.

His growing ease with rendering space came to fruition in the mid-nineties, with vast paintings of housing projects, such as Nickerson Gardens, in Watts, which had been his family’s home for a time and which he recalls fondly. My favorite work in the show is the Fragonardesque “Untitled (Vignette)” (2012), in which a loving couple lounges in parkland made piquant by a pink ground, a dangling car-tire swing, and an undulating musical staff in silver glitter, with hearts for notes. Marshall’s formal command lets him get away with any extreme of sweetness or direness, exercising a painterly voice that spans octaves, from soprano trills to guttural roars.

There have been other significant African-American painters in recent years, including Robert Colescott, whose somewhat similar engagement with art history ran to fantasias of interracial romance, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose linear panache qualified him as



experience.

Marshall has said, “You can’t be born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955 and grow up in South Central near the Black Panthers headquarters, and not feel like you’ve got some kind of social responsibility. You can’t move to Watts in 1963 and not speak about it.” (The artist’s father, a postal worker, took Marshall and his mother and his two siblings to Watts for a year before settling in South Central.) Marshall’s childhood was marred by violence—friends and neighbors were stabbed or shot with awful frequency—and enriched by a budding enthusiasm for art. His first visit to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in 1965, stunned him. “I went from floor to floor looking at everything, in the same way that in the library I went down the stacks and looked at every art book, without discrimination,” he later wrote.

In 1968, when he was thirteen, a teacher’s nomination won him placement in a summer drawing course at the Otis Art Institute, a school dedicated to relatively traditional training. He set his heart on attending that college upon graduation, but it took him four more years to qualify for admission, two of them spent working odd jobs to save enough money to enter Los Angeles City College, and two acquiring sufficient academic credits there. His already active bent for African-American subjects was confirmed and amplified at Otis, where he took a course in collage with the prominent artist Betye Saar, and was galvanized by reading Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man,” which directly inspired his “Portrait of the Artist.” The painting, he has said, is, like Ellison’s novel, about “the simultaneity of presence and absence”—about being real but unseen.

A residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem brought Marshall to

the greatest of American neo-expressionists. But Marshall's "Mastry" has a breakthrough feel: the suggestion of a new normal, in art and in the national consciousness. ♦

*Peter Schjeldahl has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1998 and is the magazine's art critic.*

*This article appears in other versions of the November 7, 2016, issue, with the headline "The Better Life."*



Smith, Jennifer. "Kerry James Marshall Recolors Art History: A Met Breuer retrospective reveals an artist who has put the African-American experience at the center of his work for three-plus decades." *The Wall Street Journal*. 21 October 2016. Online.

## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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# Kerry James Marshall Recolors Art History

A Met Breuer retrospective reveals an artist who has put the African-American experience at the center of his work for three-plus decades



Kerry James Marshall, 'Untitled (Studio),' 2014, acrylic on PVC panels, 83-5/16 × 119-1/4 in. PHOTO: METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

By **JENNIFER SMITH**

Updated Oct. 21, 2016 9:49 p.m. ET

The Chicago artist Kerry James Marshall has put the African-American experience at the center of his work for 3-½ decades, from barbershop and

beauty-salon scenes to housing-project pastorals to portraits of rebellious slaves and imperial-gazed women.

Now Mr. Marshall's career-long project to address the longstanding absence of blackness in Western art and history comes to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, one of the most prominent temples of Western culture.

Next week "Kerry James Marshall: Mastry" opens at the Met Breuer, the museum's contemporary-art annex on Madison Avenue. The show, the largest museum retrospective of his art yet, was organized by the Met, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. It made its debut in Chicago earlier this year.

Occupying two floors, "Mastry" features nearly 80 works that Mr. Marshall created between 1980 and 2015. They include dozens of paintings that both reference the defining forms of Western art—landscapes, portraits, history paintings—and upend them.

For example, the 2009 canvas "Untitled" shows a black female artist in front of a paint-by-numbers painting. The image evokes a self-portrait by the 18th-century painter Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, but also nods to self-taught artists and even abstraction, in the blotches of paints on her palette.

A companion show of objects Mr. Marshall selected from the Met's collection features works ranging from the 16th century to the present, revealing artists and traditions that inform his own deep dialogue with art history.

Many of Mr. Marshall's own paintings are so large the figures they depict appear at human scale.

Uniting the works: subjects whose ink-toned skin isn't brown or mahogany, but "unmistakably black," Ian Alteveer, associate curator with the Met's modern and contemporary art department, said this week.

Mr. Marshall's work is "as much about the absence of black artists contributing to history, as it is about the absence of the image itself," the artist said in an interview Friday. "I am not saying, 'Why weren't we in here?' It's a declaration that my place matters too, my story matters too, my desires matter too."

Born in Birmingham, Ala., in 1955, Mr. Marshall moved to Los Angeles with his family in 1963. They lived for a year in Nickerson Gardens, a Watts housing



project whose townhomes and palm trees make a later appearance in his work.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art opened in 1965, the same year as the Watts uprising. Both left their mark on Mr. Marshall, now 61 years old, who said he first visited the museum when he was in fifth or sixth grade and said he was particularly inspired by a 1971 show on three black contemporary artists.

He earned a BFA from Otis Art Institute in 1978, and was an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1985. He later moved to Chicago, where he still lives and works.



PHOTO: MATTHEW FRIED, © MCA CHICAGO

**“A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self” (1980)**

Egg tempera on paper

This small painting is a turning point for Mr. Marshall after earlier forays into abstract collage. Influenced by Ralph Ellison’s novel “Invisible Man,” he created the first in a series of works examining the invisibility of black artists. He painted this with egg tempera, a medium used since classical times.

**“De Style” (1993)**

Acrylic and collage on

canvas

The inhabitants of this barbershop are posed as if in a group portrait by the 16th-century painter Hans Holbein. More than 8 feet tall, it is among the first paintings that Mr. Marshall felt achieved the kind of majesty and scale he sought. It was also the first to enter the collection of a major museum: the Los



PHOTO: MUSEUM ASSOCIATES / LACMA

Angeles County Museum of Art, the first museum the artist visited.

**“Watts 1963” (1995)**

Acrylic and collage on canvas

This idyllic scene shows Nickerson Gardens, the complex where Mr. Marshall lived when his family first moved to Los Angeles. Featuring bluebirds, a bright banner and flowers, it is one of five of his Garden Project pictures from the mid 1990s that challenge assumptions about housing projects.

**“Vignette” (2003)**

Acrylic on fiberglass

This work is one of a series of paintings based on “The Progress of Love” by the 18th-century painter Jean-Honoré

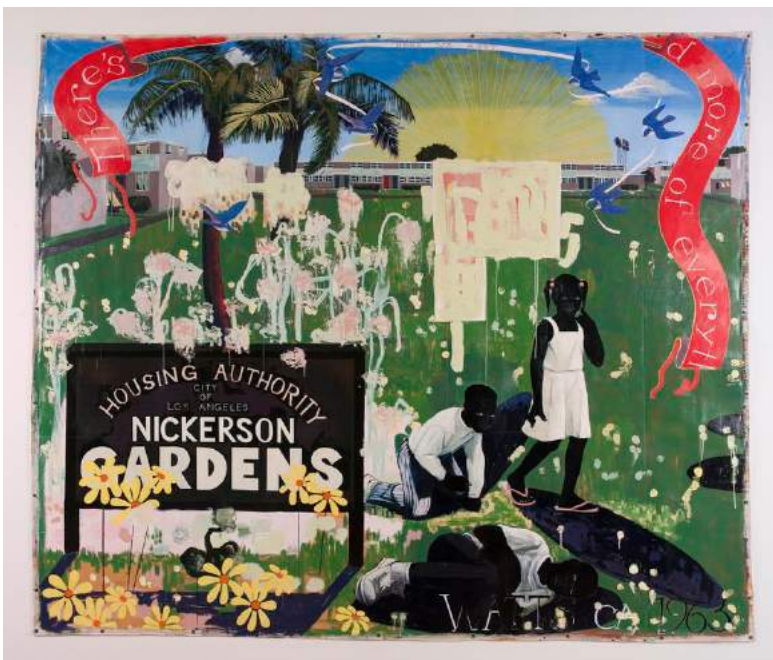


PHOTO: SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

Fragonard. A black couple frolic through an Eden-like landscape with butterflies and birds. Her hair is dreadlocks; his in an afro. A Pan-African pendant swings from his neck.

**“Portrait of Nat Turner with the Head of his Master” (2011)**

Acrylic on PVC panel





PHOTO: ADAM REICH



PHOTO: BRUCE WHITE

Mr. Marshall paints Nat Turner, the slave who led an 1831 rebellion in Virginia, with a grim gaze and bloodied axe. Behind him is a severed head that evokes historic depictions of David with the head of Goliath or Judith with the head of Holofernes that cast the victors as heroes.

Collier, Delinda. "Mastry: Kerry James Marshall at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago." *Art Africa*, June 2016, Issue 04, pp. 154-157, illustrated.

# ARTAFRICA

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THE NORTH AMERICAN ISSUE

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# Mastry

Kerry James Marshall at the  
Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

by Delinda Collier



Kerry James Marshall, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, 1980. Egg tempera on paper, 20.3 x 16.5 cm.  
Photograph: Matthew Fried. Courtesy of the artist and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.



01



02

01 Kerry James Marshall, *Still-life With Wedding Portrait*, 2015. Acrylic on PVC panel, 152.4 x 121.92 cm. Photograph: Lenny Gilmore. © MCA Chicago.

02 Kerry James Marshall, *The Land That Time Forgot*, 1992. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 246.38 x 190.5 cm.

Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio: Museum Purchase. All images courtesy of and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

'Mastry,' Kerry James Marshall's survey exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, feels like a full-circle moment for the city, putting into sharp focus the stakes of the representation of bodies of colour.

Chicago is experiencing a steady rise in gun violence that may be related to the institutional chaos in the wake of the October 2015 release of a video showing the police shooting Laquan Macdonald, an unarmed black teen. The video of Macdonald's murder was looped countless times on news stations and web platforms, an endless falling of a young, black male's body: the image drew protestors out onto the streets.

Around the same time that the scandalous news of the city's cover up of the video broke, the Art Institute of Chicago unveiled its new contemporary art galleries prominently featuring four white, male American artists; a single collection worth \$500 million that will remain on view for twenty-five years, as stipulated by the donors. If the gift has turned our focus to the identity of the artists, it is because the metrics of visibility are evidence of inequality that we resort to using in socially volatile moments. For Kerry James Marshall, the

'being seen' that drives his figurative painting insists – through a proliferation of counter-images – on not just the surviving, but also the *thinning* black body.

Marshall is often characterised as generous in his speaking, writing and engagement and 'Mastry' treats its audience with that same generosity. Jointly curated by Dieter Roelstraete, Helen Molesworth and Ian Alteveer, the exhibition is smart and unpretentious. The opening room contains Marshall's still unnerving 1980 work *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of his Former Self*, where Marshall set out what would become the terms of his intervention: to meet the power and authority of the Western canon with a canon of his own making. By the 1990s, these paintings were heroic, large and populated with monumental black figures – a black made by paint that is never diluted or mixed. His canon includes folk, kitsch, glitter, text, comics and music notation. It includes (heterosexual) sex and romance. 'Mastry' clearly argues for the success of Marshall's reprisal of historical painting – he retaliates with descriptions of everyday scenes in African American civic society: boy and girl scouts, BBQs, schools, beauty shops, and living rooms. In her curatorial essay, Helen Molesworth elaborates on this idea of reprisal, deftly





Kerry James Marshall, *School of Beauty, School of Culture*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 274 x 401 cm.

Collection of the Birmingham Museum of Art. Photograph: Sean Pathasema. Courtesy of the artist and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

describing the advantages and limits of anachronism-as-critique.

The essay and exhibition both demonstrate the tension between Marshall's identity as a painter or an artist who uses paint. I would tend toward the latter designation based on Marshall's insistence on a clear message, which includes macro anti-colonial statements such as in *The Land that Time Forgot* (1992): a darkened South African landscape with an arrow-struck Springbok, the Voortrekker Monument, gold ore and a superimposed outline of Jan van Riebeeck as an imposter figure. In a more recent work, *Still Life with Wedding Portrait* (2015), the black hands of gallery workers are shown installing a portrait of Harriet and John Tubman. While three of the four hands wear the gallery-grade white gloves, one hand wears a black leather glove (we read from the label) as homage to the salute of Tommie Smith and John Carlos during the 1968 Summer Olympics. 'Mastry' also

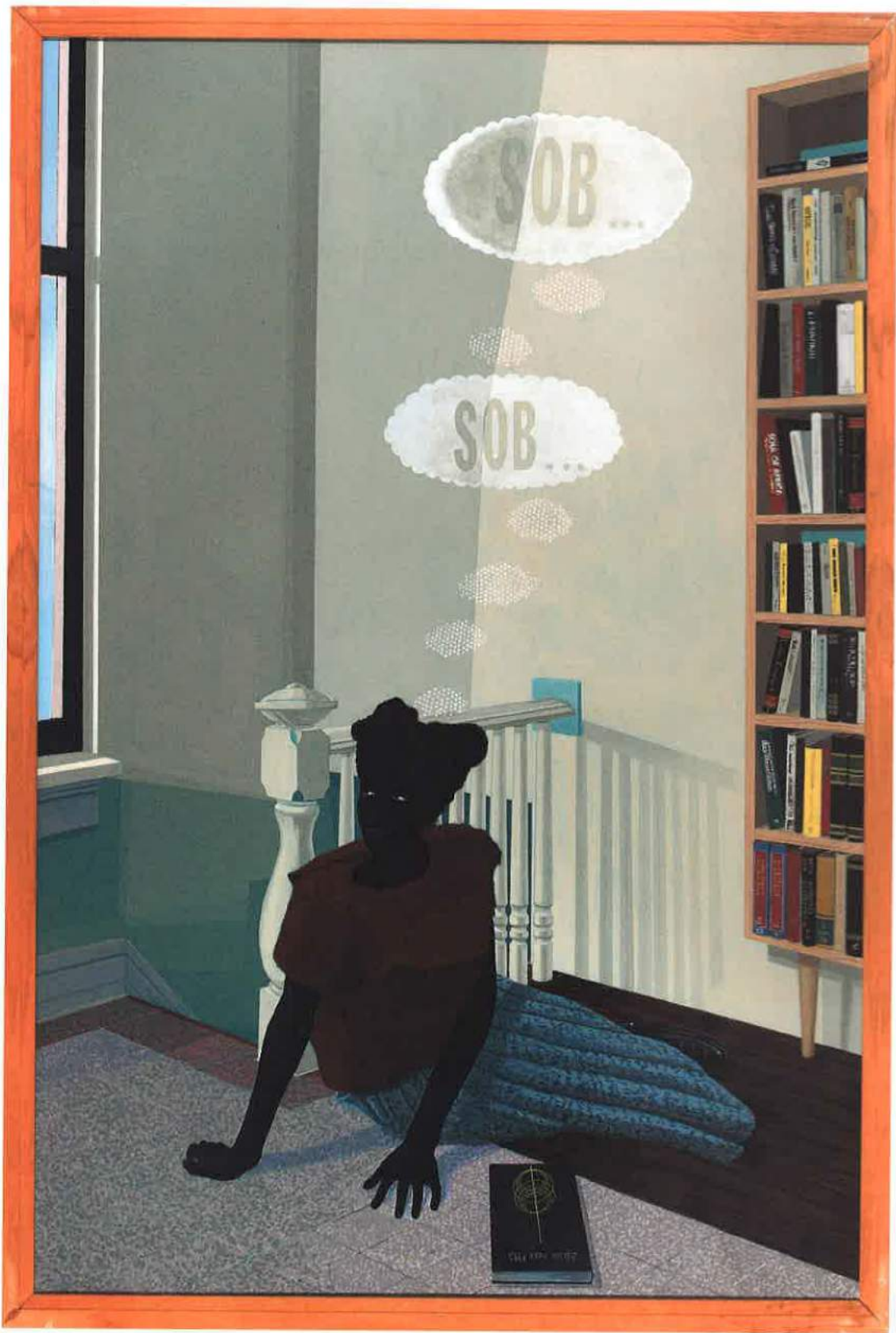
includes his light box comic strip works, but the installation component, such as in his 1998 exhibition 'Mementos,' is nearly absent, save for a corner where we are invited to sit with piles of magazine cutouts and other media objects from Marshall's own archive. A painting on an adjacent wall, *SOB, SOB* (2003), clarifies the message of the installation. In it, a young woman is seated next to her media source, a fictional book titled *Africa Since 1413*. The thought bubble above her describes a curse and/or cry.

Last November, Marshall participated in a focused conversation with W.J.T. Mitchell and Irena Haiduk on the image canon of museums and art history at the University of Chicago. In his opening remarks, Marshall reiterated that "image is everything." Haiduk responded that she works against this insurmountable regime of the image and instead embraces the iconoclasm found throughout art history.

Haiduk also pointed to the impossibility for most artists to achieve not only the visibility that Marshall now has, but also the luxury value of his work in its monumentality and painting medium. The conversation was both cross-cultural and multi-generational: Haiduk paying homage to an iconic artist who gave her something to work with and against. As I walked my students through 'Mastry,' discussing the historical import of his intervention, I was taken less by the abundance and scale of the images, but the integrity and devastating beauty of each one.

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*'Mastry' by Kerry James Marshall runs until 25 September 2016 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.*



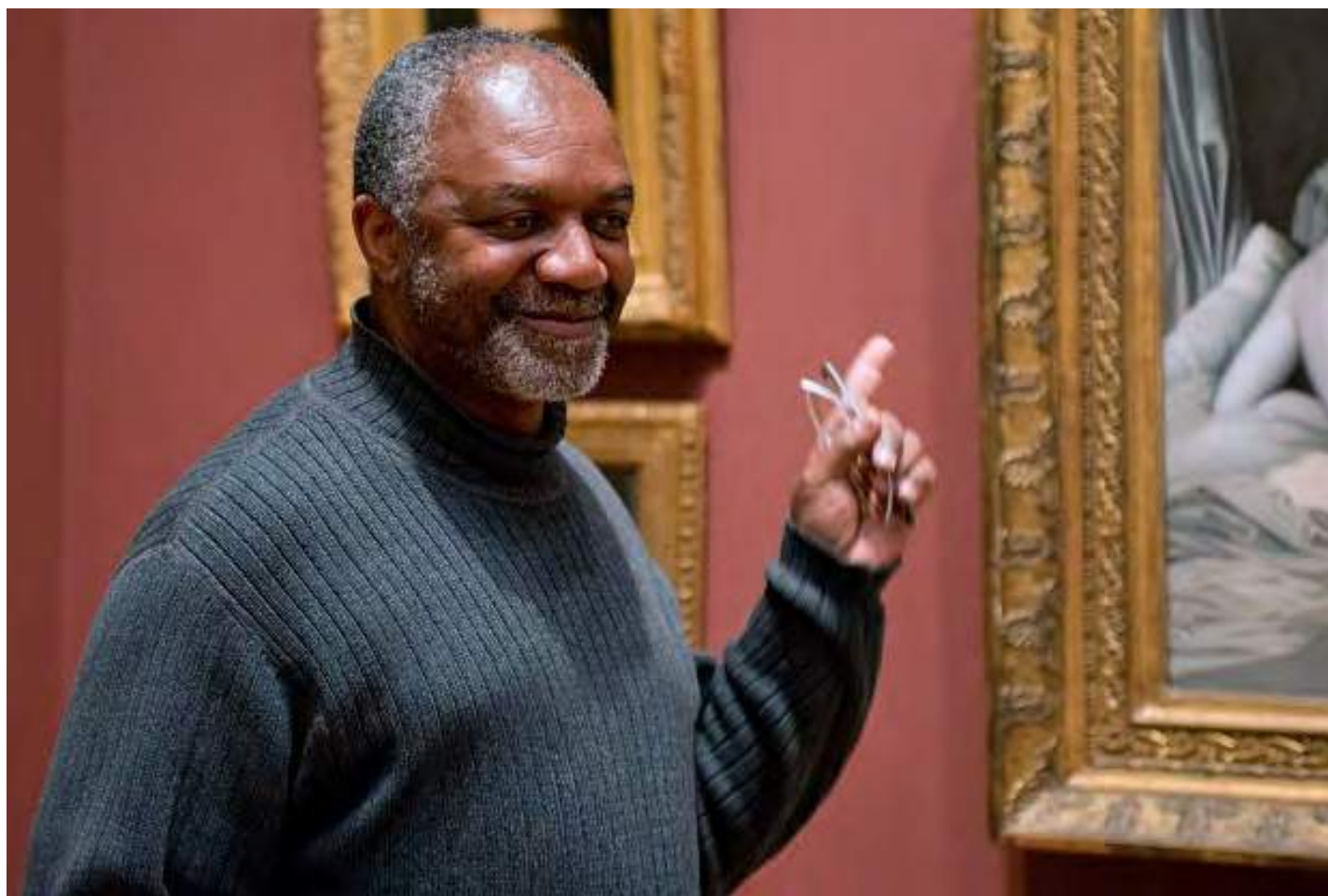
Kerry James Marshall, *SOB, SOB*, 2003, Acrylic on fiberglass, 274.3 x 182.9 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum. © 2003, Kerry James Marshall. Photograph: Gene Young, Courtesy of the artist and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.



## Kerry James Marshall makes his picks from the Met's collection

The artist said he felt like a kid in a candy store when selecting works from the encyclopaedic museum, including one of his favourite paintings, Ingres' *Odalisque in Grisaille*

by HELEN STOILAS | 20 October 2016



The Artist Project: Kerry James Marshall (Image: Metropolitan Museum of Art)

When the retrospective on the Chicago artist Kerry James Marshall comes to New York's Met Breuer on 25 October, it won't just be the exhibition that is travelling. The painter, who has spent his 36-year career making a prominent place for the black figure within art history, is also selecting objects from the museum's encyclopaedic collection to take a trip down the street from its home on Fifth Avenue to the Breuer building on Madison.

"There's about 40% of what you want that you're able to get," [Marshall told The Art Newspaper in an interview](#) ahead of the retrospective's opening at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in March. "Even though the Met Breuer is an extension of the Met, each department is highly protective of the things in their domain. And museums have contracts with donors that govern the way things can be used or moved or how long they can be sent out. There's all that stuff that you don't know about, that determines what's on the wall sometimes."



Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres and Workshop, *Odalisque in Grisaille*

Marshall walked through the museum a few times with the Met's curator Ian Alteveer, to make his selections. "It was like being in a candy store," the artist said. And although he might not have been able to secure all the treasures he wanted, he did get some high-profile masterworks for the show, including Ingres' *Odalisque in Grisaille*. "That I was shocked by," Marshall said, a self-described "fan of Ingres". He chose to highlight the work [for the Met's Artist Project video series](#) last year, calling it "ultra modern" and a work of conceptual art because it exists as a "pure image".

Other works selected by Marshall span mediums and time periods. Included are paintings by Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Aaron Douglas, Willem De Kooning and Gerhard Richter, drawings by Albrecht Dürer and Georges Seurat, photographs by Walker Evans and Roy DeCarava, a Senufo oracle figure and a Bamana bull-shaped *boli* from West Africa, and Japanese woodblock prints. The works will all be displayed together in one gallery on the third floor, but when first considering the installation, Marshall said he would have liked "to have clusters of things from the Met collection stationed at different places [in the exhibition] so there is a constant return to art history". The connections are still clear, if less incorporated.

• *Kerry James Marshall, Mastry and Kerry James Marshall Selects, Met Breuer, 25 October-29 January 2017*



# ARTNEWS

THE PAINTER OF MODERN LIFE: KERRY JAMES MARSHALL AIMS TO GET MORE IMAGES OF BLACK FIGURES INTO MUSEUMS

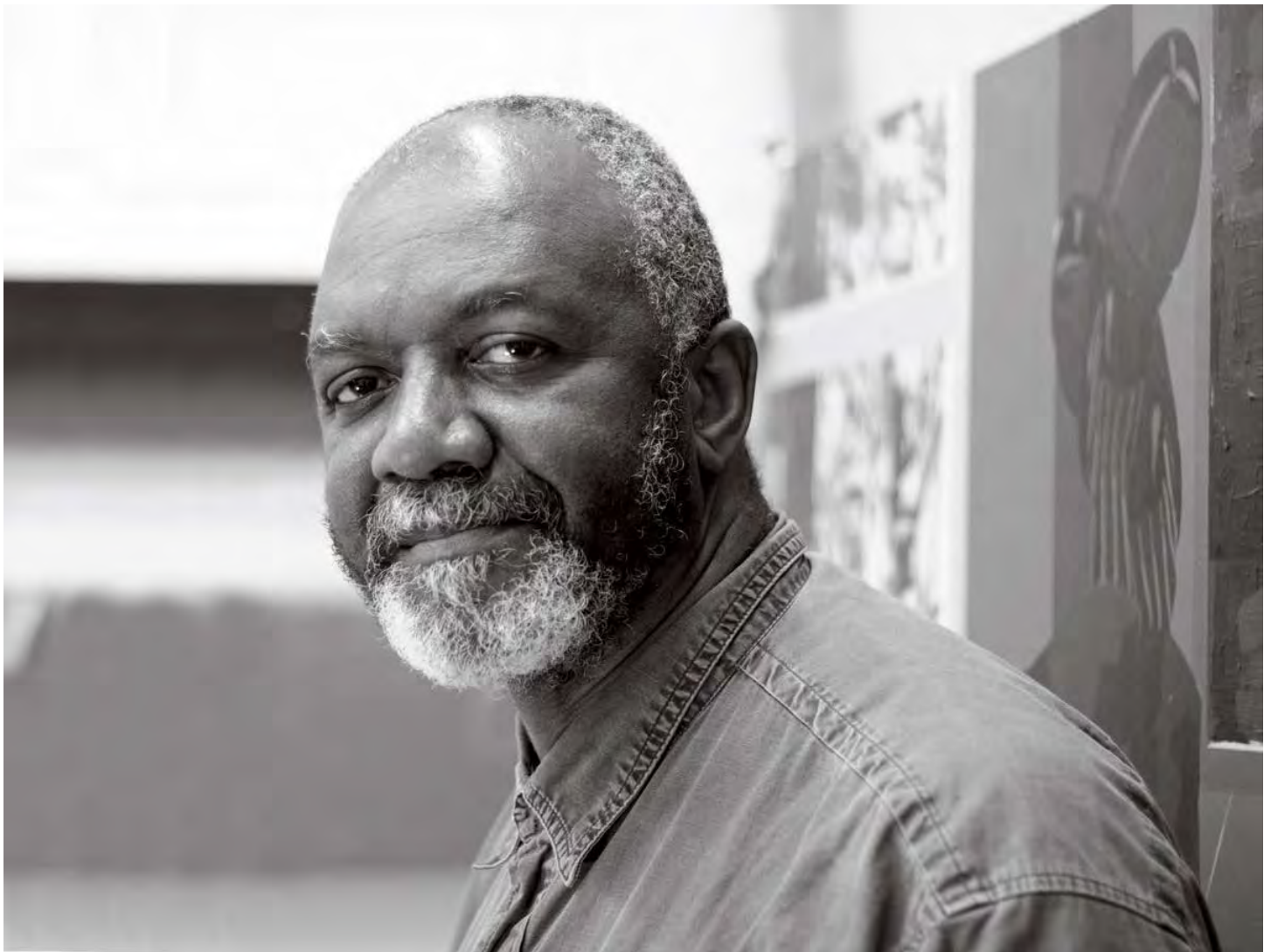
BY Sarah Douglas

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The artist will be the subject of major traveling retrospective this year

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March 2, 2016



Kerry James Marshall photographed in his Chicago studio on December 28, 2015.

©KATHERINE MCMAHON

In a talk he gave at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago five years ago, Kerry James Marshall displayed a photograph of his studio—a place, he told his audience, his wife calls

“the playhouse.” It’s “where I like to go,” he said, “and I like to go there every day, because there is nothing more satisfying, really, than solving the problem of: how do you get more work that has the black figure in it into museums around the world?”

Most artists want to make history. Marshall wants to change it. For the past quarter century, primarily with his paintings but also, as a recent exhibition title put it, “other stuff,” like photographs, videos, sculptures, and installations, he has been getting black figures onto museum walls. In his paintings, the figures are an extreme, coal black.

“For me,” he said in his MCA Chicago lecture, “the thing that has the greatest transformative capacity in the art world today, in terms of what people expect to see when they go to the art museum, is a painting that has a black figure in it, because 95 percent of all the other paintings you see are going to have white figures in them. The whole history of representation is built on the representation of white folks. Now, all of that stuff is *good*, so you have to figure out how to get good like that, and then get in there on the terms that are relevant for *now*.” Marshall has done this “from the ground up,” as Metropolitan Museum curator Ian Alteveer put it, working through historical styles and genres, including Rococo love scenes, large-scale history paintings, and Impressionist plein air fetes.

Along with two other curators—Helen Molesworth and Dieter Roelstraete—Alteveer is currently at work on the largest museum retrospective to date of Marshall’s paintings. It opens at the MCA Chicago in April then moves on to the Met in New York and the Museum of Contemporary Art in L.A. The exhibition is called “Mastry,” a play on the “Rhythm Mastr” series of comic strips Marshall has been working on for over a decade, and on his attainments as a painter. “If you spend enough time in Kerry’s studio you see how obsessed he is with mastering technique,” Roelstraete told me. “He can really nerd out for hours on end about a particular shape or brush or thickness of



paper. He is a technician of the highest order.”

For the show’s curation, Marshall, who is generally more involved in the planning of his exhibitions, was asked to take a backseat.

Molesworth, who is chief curator at MOCA and has become known for her work reassessing contemporary art’s canon, first contacted him about the idea of a painting survey around six years ago, on behalf of the MCA Chicago. He told her that he wanted to wait until he was 60. A few years later, Molesworth called back. If the exhibition was to happen in Marshall’s 60th year, she told him, they’d have to start planning it now. As Marshall described that call to me when I visited him in his Chicago studio, “She said, ‘Kerry, are you ready to submit?’ ”

Marshall turned 60 last October, a month before our meeting. He wears his years lightly, in the manner of someone who has remained intellectually curious. He taught for over a decade at the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois and has a relaxed, mildly professorial manner. In an afternoon’s conversation he referenced Andre Malraux, Roland Barthes, Benjamin Buchloh, and Cornel West. He chuckles a lot, sometimes out of a sense of wonder, sometimes irony.

The studio is a long, narrow, two-story structure with cinder-block walls on Chicago’s South Side; Marshall has lived in this part of the city for over 20 years, and the neighborhood’s everyday realities figure in his art. The painting happens downstairs. Upstairs is a desk and a



©KERRY JAMES MARSHALL/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

drafting table where he works on his “Rhythm Mastr” comics. There are books on shelves, in file containers along the stairway, piled in laundry baskets—and they reflect the range of his interests: *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, *Rebels against Slavery*, *The End of Blackness*, *Invisible Man*, *Theories of Modern Art*, *African Art*, *Against Race*, *A Rumor of Revolt*, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, *The Salt Eaters*, *Of Grammatology*, *Black Empire*, *A Commentary on Heidegger’s ‘Being and Time’*, *The Future of the Race*. There are monographs on Luc Tuymans, Bridget Riley, Roy Lichtenstein, Louise Nevelson; there are issues of *October*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Bookforum*.

Everywhere are the tools of his multifaceted trade. Stuffed into an alcove above the entrance are the plastic flowers on which he modeled the flowers in his romance-themed “Vignette” paintings. Arrayed on a ledge above the staircase are the objects he uses to meticulously design the cityscapes that appear in “Rhythm Mastr”: an electronic card game, fragments of sports trophies, a candlestick, children’s building blocks. There is a forest of brushes. An army of baby bottles serve as paint vessels. There is the sewing machine used to make outfits on which to base those in “Rhythm Mastr” and in Marshall’s recent paintings.

Marshall used to have friends and his wife model for him—not as portrait subjects, just for form. In recent years he’s eschewed models for mannequins and digitally formed sculpture heads. For him, “every single picture is a challenge to make because I try to make every one of them matter. And every one of them is *hard to do*. And I am not sure about any of them completely until I resolve the deficiencies I see cropping up in them.”





Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Blot)*, 2015.

©KERRY JAMES MARSHALL/COURTESY THE ARTIST, JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK, AND DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK AND LONDON

It can take Marshall anywhere from a few weeks to a decade to complete a painting. Consider the history of *Garden Party* (2003–13), a large painting evocative of Impressionist images of boating parties but set in Marshall's urban backyard. He initially completed the canvas in 2003. That year, it was in a solo exhibition that started at the MCA Chicago and traveled to museums in Baltimore, New York, and Birmingham, Alabama. Afterward, *Garden Party* returned to his studio, where he continued to work on it, moving, adding, and removing figures. In 2007, it was shown in the Documenta quinquennial, in Kassel, Germany, before coming back once again to Marshall's studio for a further reshuffling of its cast of characters. In 2013, Vancouver collector Bob Rennie, who had waited ten years to buy the painting, finally got to take it home.

In his studio, Marshall showed me a painting of a man lying on his back on a bed, his feet propped up against the wall. The painting was meant to be part of an exhibition that opened in October 2014 at David Zwirner gallery in London, but Marshall had decided it wasn't complete. He told me that just in the past week he'd figured out how to resolve it.

At times Marshall seems slightly beleaguered. On the one hand, there is his need to be left alone to work, which for him is to be in constant conversation with the history of art. On the other,

there's the imperative to participate, to be involved. One of the words most often applied to Marshall by those who know him is "generous." He's generous with interviews, generous with his time. He "is not one of those artists who keeps his thoughts to himself," the artist Rashid Johnson told me.

Marshall gives lectures. He writes about other artists' work. He has a lot to talk about because, unlike the vast majority of artists, he has a master plan. "There needs, at some point," he said in his MCA talk, "to be a critical mass of images in the museum that have [black figures in them], so that when you go there...[i]t's not something that is the exception to the rule, it's part of what you always expect to see. That's success to me."

In 2010, when he was preparing to write an essay about the painter Chris Ofili—it's included in the catalogue for Marshall's upcoming retrospective—Marshall stopped by the Art Institute of Chicago a few miles down Michigan Avenue from his studio to, as he put it in a lecture at Williams College in 2011, do "reconnaissance." "I counted all the representations of white people in paintings and all the representations of black people. At that time, I counted 300 and some odd white and 2 black. That ratio, that discrepancy, is problematic for me and other black folks like me. The Art Institute and other museums have gone through phases of audience development: how to bring more minorities in, to help the demographics. What they find is, when you put up shows that have to do with black folks, they come in. When you don't, they don't. And why should they?"





**M**arshall first visited an art museum in 1965. He was ten, and on a school field trip to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which had recently opened on Wilshire Boulevard. Two years earlier, his family had moved to Los Angeles from Birmingham, Alabama, first to the Nickerson Gardens housing project in Watts, then to a house in South Central. In Birmingham, he'd witnessed civil rights upheaval. In a few months, he would witness the Watts riots. At LACMA, he noticed that the few works the museum had by African American artists were far smaller than most of the works by white artists.

He was already thinking about becoming an artist himself. In Birmingham, his kindergarten teacher had inspired him with the pictures in her scrapbook—greeting cards, magazine clippings—and now, in L.A., his third-grade teacher was showing him how to paint flowers, and he'd been watching Jon Gnagy's *Learn to Draw* checking out library books on Rembrandt and on Chinese brush painting. LACMA's two huge paintings of saints by the Italian Renaissance artist Paolo Veronese wowed him. Looming above him in their frames, they reminded him of the heroes in the Marvel comic books he collected and made drawings from. In a downstairs gallery, where the museum kept its African art, he encountered a Senufo figure made of burlap, with sticks for arms and feathers sprouting from the top of its head. "For a long time," Marshall told an audience at the University of Chicago's Renaissance Society a few days before I visited his studio, "what I've been trying to do is marry this kind of history painting that is done by Veronese and the kind of power and mystery that resides in the Senufo figure."

In his studio, Marshall showed me a drawing he'd just started, the latest installment of his "Rhythm Mastr" comic strip. The strip follows several different narratives, some involving superheroes—one of them the spitting image of that Senufo figure in LACMA—who are African tribal figures come to life. He started the series in the late '90s, with an eye to creating viable black characters on the level of Captain America and Thor, and has been adding to it ever since. The panel he was working on when I visited will be included in his paintings retrospective, along with two others. In it, a female newscaster cocks her head, listening to her earpiece. "She's getting a report," Marshall told me. Her speech bubble will read, "Shots fired. At least one dead." The second panel, he said, will shift to a reporter on the scene. In the third, that reporter will talk to an eyewitness who says, "I saw the whole thing and it ain't *nothing* like they said."

These scenes have "something to do with the general climate now," Marshall said. "There is always this urgency, this breaking news—boom, something happened. But when they report it, they don't know anything." Accelerated news cycles aside, though, little has changed since Marshall's childhood. When the Watts riots broke out, Marshall told me, "the rumor that spread

through the neighborhood was that a man's mother had been beaten up by the police. That was the spark that started the whole thing, and it turned out not to be true."



Kerry James Marshall, *The Lost Boys*, 1993.

©KERRY JAMES MARSHALL/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

The first painting Marshall ever did of a black figure is small enough to be reproduced at its actual size in the retrospective's catalogue. *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self* is just 8 by 6½ inches, and is widely considered a watershed in his oeuvre. He completed it in 1980, two years after graduating from L.A.'s Otis Art Institute. At Otis, he had studied painting with the African American muralist Charles White, starting when Marshall sneaked into one of White's classes even before he'd enrolled. White became a mentor, but on the whole, Otis in the late '70s wasn't particularly encouraging to figurative painters. Art's tides had shifted in the direction of Conceptual art and abstraction; as far as Marshall was concerned, black people hadn't been represented in art history in the first place, so why should he feel inspired by



a “crisis of representation”? Marshall continues to feel strongly about remaining a figurative, as opposed to an abstract, painter. His new essay in the upcoming retrospective’s catalogue concludes, “It is my conviction that the most instrumental, insurgent painting for this moment must be of figures, and those figures must be black, unapologetically so.”

*Portrait of the Artist* was a reaction to reading Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*. Driven by the idea of a black man’s invisibility, Marshall painted a male figure that blends into a black ground and is detectable only by the whites of his eyes and his grin, a reference to an old racist visual cliché. The work was the beginning of Marshall’s engagement with the black figure, and with the Western art-historical canon, as well: he painted the piece in egg tempera, the medium most associated with the early Renaissance.

Marshall discovered what he has called the “strategy” of scale 13 years later. By then, he was living in Chicago. He’d left L.A. in 1984 for a residency at New York’s Studio Museum in Harlem. In New York, he had met the actress and playwright Cheryl Lynn Bruce, to whom he has been married for over 25 years, and the two moved to Chicago to be near her family. They initially lived apart, Marshall moving into a 6-by-9-foot room at the YMCA, where he painted standing on the bed. He took odd jobs, mostly art handling. He went down to South Carolina for a few months to serve as art director on Julie Dash’s film *Daughters of the Dust* about a Saint Helena Island family at the turn of the century. Back in Chicago, he and Lynn Bruce got an apartment together and, armed with money from an NEA fellowship, Marshall was able to paint full time. He got a proper studio, 350 square feet, and could finally make big paintings.

He didn’t just want to make big paintings, he wanted to make *history* paintings. 1993’s *De Style* clocking in at ten feet in length, shows five men in a South Side barbershop, two of them sporting improbably voluminous Afros. Marshall showed it at L.A.’s Koplín Gallery, and LACMA snapped it up. Marshall would later say of the painting that it “performed all of the ways that I knew the work needed to perform in order to make it eligible for that museum purchase.” With any other artist, one might chalk that up to 20/20 hindsight, or even a kind of cynicism; with Marshall, it was the confidence that has continued to fuel his progress.

*The Lost Boys*, completed the same year and at the same size, is, in Marshall’s words, a memorial to lost innocence that alludes ironically to the story of Peter Pan: Two boys are next to a tree with the word “life” written on its trunk. One stands, the other sits atop a toy car, the kind of dollar-per-ride contraption found outside grocery stores. In the foreground is a doll atop a scattering of calla lilies. Marshall made the painting after reading a story in the *Los Angeles Times* about a boy killed by police in his home because he was holding a toy gun that the officers mistook for a real one. In the upcoming retrospective, it is bound to evoke the 2014 police shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland.



Kerry James Marshall, *Better Homes Better Gardens*, 1994.

©KERRY JAMES MARSHALL/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

*De Style* and *The Lost Boys* may be breakthroughs, but it was Marshall's next series, "The Garden Project," that launched his career. Monumental works on unstretched canvas that incorporate collage elements, "The Garden Project" paintings depict figures against the backdrop of public housing developments, among them Stateway Gardens in Chicago and Marshall's own onetime home of Nickerson Gardens. When the Marshalls moved there in the early '60s, Nickerson Gardens was new. Marshall has described it as a "golden age" for housing projects; you could borrow toys from the community center. By the '90s, although they were still places where families lived and loved, projects across the country had fallen into crime-ridden disrepair. In a few years, many would be demolished. Marshall's series picked up on a basic irony: these dilapidated places were called "gardens." "The Garden Project" debuted in 1995 at Jack Shainman Gallery, and in 1997, works from it were picked for both the Whitney Biennial and Documenta; that same year, Marshall received a MacArthur "genius" grant.

In 1998, *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter wrote what has turned out to be a prescient take on Marshall's work. Reviewing his solo exhibition "Mementos" at the Brooklyn Museum, Cotter



noted that in his series of paintings of boy and girl scouts Marshall's "complex historical perspective is distilled. In these portraits, time-honored American values—community, leadership, duty—that were also the bedrock of the early civil rights movement, are reconfirmed and radically recast. The scout figures wear familiar uniforms, but with a difference: as militant citizens claiming a place in the mainstream but sustaining a revolution within. It's a difficult position to negotiate, but a powerful one, and it seems to form the foundation for much of this challenging artist's work."

Marshall went on to sustain a kind of revolution within painting. Subsequent series have included imaginary portraits of rebellious slaves like Nat Turner; nearly abstract paintings that respond to Barnett Newman's "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue" but change it to "Red Black and Green," the colors of the Pan-African flag; and the Fragonardesque "Vignettes," about which Marshall told me, "I'm not trying to subvert" that way of painting, but instead "adapting [it] to include things that it hasn't previously found necessary to include."

In the mid-2000s, he painted a series of painters painting, a genre that dates back to the Old Masters. One of them, a woman holding a palette, stares out from the cover of the retrospective's catalogue as though daring you to open it. Here, Marshall's black figures are, as he put it, at "the site at which image production takes place on the grand scale, which is rarely the way we think about or see black figures operating."

Marshall's paintings—even ones like *The Lost Boys* or his "souvenir" series, which mourns members of the civil rights movement—are never preachy or didactic. If you take his body of work in its entirety, he told me, "I think I'm trying to be a whole black person who makes art, which means that I can have—within me as an individual—all these different dimensions of my perceptions of the world and history. All that stuff is in me as a whole person, which means all of those things are available to me to put out there in one way or another. The work deals with a really broad range of concerns, from the personal to the political to the vulgar to the comic. That, to me, is what constitutes a total art practice."



Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Studio)*, 2014.

©KERRY JAMES MARSHALL/COURTESY THE ARTIST, JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK, AND DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK AND LONDON

In September 2014, Molesworth, Alteveer, and Roelstraete, the painting retrospective's curators, arrived in Chicago to look at a group of works about to leave Marshall's studio for the October Zwirner show in London. One of the largest depicted a scene in a painter's studio. In it, a woman, who may be either the artist or an assistant, adjusts the head of another, seated woman, the model. The painting in progress is in the foreground, next to a table—a mini still life—crowded with brushes, palettes, paper swatches, a skull, a book, a knife, a vase of daisies. In the background, a naked man stands in the shadows in front of some stretched canvases propped against a wall. Another man, his head and shoulders visible above the model's red backdrop, pulls a yellow shirt on, or perhaps off. Behind him, out a window, is the view of Marshall's South Side neighborhood.

Alteveer quickly caught the references to Velázquez, Vermeer, and Courbet. For him, *Untitled (Studio)*, 2014, was “a picture about painting.” The model's salmon-colored trousers brought to mind a piece of fabric held aloft by the bullfighter in Manet's *Mademoiselle V. . . in the Costume of an Espada* in the Met's collection. Alteveer had been looking to acquire a Marshall painting for the Met. He had been hoping for a work from the '90s, but very few “Garden



Project” works—or paintings related to them—are available. (Competition among private collectors and institutions alike for Marshall’s paintings has become fierce, even as their prices run into the high six figures. Rennie, the Vancouver collector, who is chair of the Tate’s North American Acquisitions Committee, told me the committee is now putting away \$250,000 a year to go toward the purchase of their first Marshall painting.) When Alteveer saw *Untitled (Studio)*, he knew immediately that this was the one.

The Zwirner show represented a subtle change in direction for Marshall. In addition to *Untitled (Studio)* were paintings of a couple amorously entangled on a blanket on the grass; a young woman, alone, dressing or undressing while holding her breasts and laughing into her bedroom mirror; two figures relaxing on a porch (Marshall’s, as it happens); a woman holding up a bath towel, a Vermeeresque pearl earring in one ear; a woman on a couch, eyes glued to the TV; a smiling couple seated in the booth of a club, the man displaying to the viewer, behind his girlfriend’s back, the ring with which he intends to propose. Marshall said he attempted “to give the subjects in the pictures their own independent psychology, so they are not standing in for a symbol of anything. They are not dignified. They are not heroic.”

A handful of large paintings, representations of Rorschach test–like inkblots that look at first blush like pure abstraction, were an even more dramatic shift for the three curators to reckon with. “I’m doing blots in part to confuse the idea of abstraction,” Marshall told me. “A blot is not an abstraction, really, because we know what it is. It’s a blot. And a blot is a particular kind of figure.” Marshall placed one at the entrance to the Zwirner show, which he called “Look See.” “I wanted to disrupt expectations immediately,” he explained. “I thought that was a dramatic way of introducing looking and seeing.”

People who know Marshall’s work well were surprised by the blots, which also appeared in the 2015 Venice Biennale, although the cannier ones among them also recognized an artist who was complicating his own story. Molesworth is content to not completely get the blots yet. “That, to me, is the sign of a great artist,” she said. “A great artist makes a picture at 60 that someone who has been following his work for 18 years doesn’t understand.”

Since the late ’90s, Molesworth has been making a case for Marshall’s work as a form of institutional critique, a way of taking on the encyclopedic museum through the door of the medium on which it is most dependent: painting. It therefore seems apt that the retrospective’s New York run in the fall will take place at the Met (the museum that represents the very “spine of the Western art history,” as Roelstraete put it) as the first monographic show of a living artist the museum will mount in the Met Breuer, the former Whitney Museum building.

Marshall has been working with Alteveer on an exhibition, curated by the artist from the Met’s

vast collection, that will run in conjunction with his show when it appears at the Met. At the time of this writing, among the objects Marshall plans to include are a Roy DeCarava photograph from 1950 of a smartly dressed black woman, a Horace Pippin self-portrait from 1944, a *boli* figure, a Dan mask, a work by Harlem Renaissance painter Aaron Douglas, and one of Tsukioka Yoshitoshi's ukiyo-e woodblock prints (precursors to modern-day comic books) of a blood-spattered warrior chief. There will be a Senufo figure almost identical to the one Marshall saw as a child at LACMA; it will share space with Old Master paintings not unlike LACMA's Veroneses.

**A**s I was on my way to Marshall's studio in late November, my taxi passed a smattering of protesters. Just days earlier, they'd clogged downtown, demanding reform and resignations among Chicago's leadership in response to the release of a dash-cam video showing black teenager Laquan McDonald being shot 16 times by a white police officer. While the protesters were still thick on the streets, Marshall had sent two just-completed paintings out the door to Art Basel Miami Beach. The first was a white-on-white blot headed for the booth of David Zwirner. The other, destined for Jack Shainman's booth, was of a black Chicago policeman leaning against his squad car, gazing past the viewer into the distance, an impassive expression on his face.



Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Policeman)*, 2015.

©KERRY JAMES MARSHALL/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

The Chicago-based art historian Darby English, who is a consultant to the Museum of Modern Art, was in Marshall's studio on the morning he finished the latter painting, and helped him load it onto the truck. English felt adamantly that it should live in public, and set to work ensuring that MoMA would have a reserve on the piece when it reached the fair. In the following days, MoMA finalized its acquisition of *Untitled (Policeman)*, 2015, English told me his impressions of the work. "The commonly accepted idea of the officer as a white man who antagonizes black men is complicated, is frustrated—that's one of the things that good art is supposed to do," he said. He sees "tremendous moral conflict" in the painting: "these guys have



to be black men *and* police officers right now.” At the same time, English continued, “in the process of doing something about this incredibly urgent and tragic issue, he still let himself be a painter. He had an observation to make, but he made it like a painter.”

*Sarah Douglas is editor-in-chief of ART NEWS*

# Old masters, new master — Kerry James Marshall at the MCA



The work of Chicago painter Kerry James Marshall, shown in his Bronzeville studio, is showcased in “MASTRY” at the Museum of Contemporary Art. (Zbigniew Bzdak / Chicago Tribune)



By **Lori Waxman**

JUNE 22, 2016, 4:07 PM

**T**o walk through the top floor of the Museum of Contemporary Art these days is to take a trip across an alternate universe, one where elite cultural institutions aren't filled to bursting with the products of white privilege and the images of white bodies and white ideas, from ancient Rome on up through the Renaissance and abstract impressionism.

What's at the [MCA](#) instead is "MASTRY," a retrospective by Kerry James Marshall, who was born in Birmingham, Ala., in 1955, a decade before the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Marshall might be the most ambitious painter alive today. What else to call an artist who began with a bold concept 3 1/2 decades ago — to put pictures of black people on the walls of the museum, where they rarely appear — and has achieved it a



hundredfold and kept on going? Who over the years has acquired skills in nearly every style, technique and motif practiced by painters from the time of the Renaissance to the present? Who can pull off a landscape as easily as a studio nude, monumental history painting as well as portraiture, genre scenes, all-over abstraction, monochromes, conceptual text pieces and comic books?

In virtuosic canvases like the 2012 "School of Beauty, School of Culture," a 13-foot-long tour de force set inside a salon, Marshall seems to do it all, with bravado: meticulously rendered folds in baby clothing, gorgeous color-field floorboards, sly reference to a 17th-century painting by Diego Velazquez, a forgery of R&B singer Lauryn Hill's signature, a convincing copy of Chris Ofili's Tate exhibition poster, even a distorted Snow White head afloat in the bottom center, legible only from the far left (it's a Renaissance trick).

What else to call Kerry James Marshall? Master, just like the title says.

That's a potent reversal for art history, with its legendary Old Masters, and American history, with its master-slave narratives. In Marshall's "Voyager," a haunting early canvas, teary blues and moody pinks memorialize a young black woman, adrift in the *Wanderer*, a ship that landed just south of Savannah, Ga., in 1858 carrying hundreds of enslaved West Africans. How often has a black slave been given the center of a 7 1/2-foot canvas to occupy with equal parts grace and despair? Not often enough.

Likewise, Marshall's intense portraits of Jemmy Cato and Nat Turner commemorate them as leaders of violent slave rebellions in 1739 and 1831. Costumes and poses drawn from art history endow the two men with the kind of royal authority and biblical heroism more familiar to portrayals of Sir Thomas More or David holding the decapitated head of Goliath. It's as if Hans Holbein, the German Renaissance painter who immortalized the court of Henry VIII, had been born a black American and taken his subjects from their underacknowledged history.

That "as if" is one of the most powerful charges of "MASTRY." Marshall depicts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as a black couple surrounded by trees bearing the fruit of white races. He updates Rembrandt's "Anatomy Lesson" so that the doctors, students and cadaver are all black. He proposes a version of Gustave Courbet's monumental allegory of the painter's studio, where the artist as well as every model, hanger-on and assistant is black.

(There are good insider jokes here, as there are in many of Marshall's paintings, if you know how to look. In the studio picture, the sole exception to black bodies is the artist's dog, comfy under a table piled with brushes and paint jars, and rendered in fabulously slapdash yellow. The other joke is that the artist is naked and the model clothed, in a reversal of Courbet's canvas and most other male artists' historically.)

Marshall redoes George Seurat's leisurely impressionist bathers with a picnicking black family, lounging in their tennis whites, the skyline of Chicago and its housing projects on the horizon. He even fabricates kitschy scenes, the kind more suited to a tourism poster, featuring black couples enjoying a perfect day at the seashore.

It's an "as if" but more importantly a "what if." What if notions of beauty weren't based entirely on white, Western European anatomy? What if biblical and mythical figures were presented with dark rather than light flesh? What if the heroes of black history were celebrated as grandly as others? What if the daily lives of black people were represented as ubiquitously as those of as whites? What if black were normal and white was other? What would that look like?

It might look something like the artwork in "MASTRY." Here landscape painting encompasses mixed views — half floral idyll, half spray-painted, bureaucratized hell — of housing projects in Los Angeles, where Marshall's family moved when he was 9, and Chicago, where he has lived since 1987. Nudes, male and female, provide surfaces to explore every shade of black imaginable — not brown, not cocoa, not beige, but dark, inky, rich, earthy, oceanic, celestial black. Pictures of children at play include memorial tribute to a boy killed by a policeman who mistook his toy gun for the real thing. Portraits of painters at work show black artists, including one with a vast Afro, his brush dipped in ebony paint, as if about to paint the viewer black. Others sit in front of paint-by-numbers self-portraits that plainly reveal art as the system of representation that it is.

How to make that system more representative? Marshall's genius is that he recognized art as a system from the first, and set out to fix it. Because genius is not born, it is made. More black artists ought to equal more black representation, be it figurative like Marshall's or something else entirely, like the materials-based practice of Rashid Johnson, the hard-edge abstraction of Jennie C. Jones or the futurism of Cauleen Smith.

Nearly three-quarters of the more than 260 people slain in Chicago this year were black men, women and children. No artist's oeuvre can fix that situation, not even Marshall's. Nor can attending his exhibition, despite how corrective it might feel to walk around a museum in downtown Chicago surrounded everywhere by blackness. But American culture has needed paintings like these for the past 400 years, ever since the first Dutch slaver brought 20 Africans ashore at the British colony of Jamestown, Va.

American museumgoers need to see them.

*"Kerry James Marshall: MASTRY" runs through Sept. 25 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 220 E. Chicago Ave., 312-280-2660, [www.mcachicago.org](http://www.mcachicago.org).*

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**Kerry James Marshall**

## Kerry James Marshall, Chicago's art star

As a major retrospective of his work opens in Chicago, the artist talks about his family, his influences — and why he finds his subjects close to home

APRIL 8, 2016 by: Julie L Belcove

On a blustery morning in March, Kerry James Marshall, in a bright-green, long-sleeved T-shirt, took the podium at the Met Breuer, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's new contemporary outpost in the former Whitney Museum in New York, to tell a gathering of art critics and writers getting a sneak peek how it felt finally to be a part of what he termed "the club". Upstairs, an untitled 2009 canvas from his *Painters* series was hanging prominently in the museum's inaugural group show. The work features an ebony-skinned female artist holding a palette and gazing assuredly at the viewer. Behind her is a paint-by-numbers self-portrait in which the figure has yet to be filled in. The artist's brush hovers over a large dab of white paint on the palette, which is curiously free of black pigment, leaving viewers in suspense as to how she will choose to represent herself. The painting seems to ask both "Who gets to create?" and "Who gets to be the subject of a painting?"

Beaming, Marshall was visibly moved by the moment. "[Artists] go to museums like the Met," he said. "But at a certain point, just coming to the museum to see what other people do in those spaces is unacceptable ... For me, it had always been my ambition to be in among the works that I came to the museum to look [at] ... I can't say enough how meaningful it is for me to finally get a chance to be *in* the Met as opposed to just coming *to* the Met ... I can finally say now that I have been in an exhibition with Leonardo da Vinci."

Marshall was ostensibly speaking for all artists wanting to belong but it was impossible not to pick up on the subtext that, as an African-American, his initiation was overdue. The next morning, over breakfast at a midtown Manhattan hotel, he wryly notes that "Museums for generations have done quite well without a lot of black images or black participation." For more than 35 years, he has used his brush to help rectify that imbalance, creating a body of work that reimagines the traditions of western art history — from genre and history paintings to nudes, portraits and landscapes — with black men and women. "I want them to find a place in a world that is not looking for them."

At 60, Marshall has become one of the most admired artists of his generation. Later this month, a major retrospective of his work will open at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago before travelling to the Met Breuer in the autumn and then to the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles next year. “I have been wanting to do this show since I met Kerry in 1993,” says Madeleine Grynsztejn, director of the MCA Chicago, adding that the exhibition is particularly pertinent in 2016. “When we are seeing the concluding chapter of a black presidency, the emergence of Black Lives Matter [the campaign protesting violence against blacks that began after the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012] and increasing attention brought to social inequality and social injustice, the work Kerry has done for 35 years has an additional relevant cast. It is a profound meditation on some of the most important issues we face.”

Marshall’s paintings incorporate the imagery of African-American experience, from slave ships and the freedom fighter Nat Turner to the everyday lives of contemporary blacks — on dates, at picnics, getting their hair done — often in his own troubled neighbourhood of Bronzeville on Chicago’s South Side. His signature palette of red, black and green mirrors the Pan-African flag. His compositions are complex, the humanity and emotion palpable.

They not only “course-correct” the canon, Grynsztejn says, but are also “drop-dead gorgeous.”

Marshall is an interesting blend of sincere gratitude — he remembers the name of every teacher who ever offered a modicum of encouragement — and well-earned confidence. “I belong anywhere I am,” he says. “Because I think I know a thing or two about what I’m doing, I don’t think there’s anyplace where the people I encounter will know more about it.”

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Marshall can pinpoint the exact moment he decided to become an artist. He was in kindergarten, at the Roman Catholic Holy Family school in Birmingham, Alabama. His teacher, the only black lay teacher among a sea of white nuns and priests, kept a scrapbook of pictures cut from Christmas cards and magazines such as the National Geographic. When a child was especially well-behaved, the reward was to page through the scrapbook. “The day I got to look at the scrapbook really was the day that changed my whole life,” Marshall says. “It seems inconceivable that it can be so clear, but I can remember at that time saying to myself, ‘I want to make pictures like these.’ I’ve never wanted to do anything else from that day. I didn’t know it was called an artist, but I knew I wanted to make pictures that could do for other people what those pictures were doing for me, which was to transport you to a place so unlike the world you were in.”

Though his family was not Catholic, the religion's rich visual culture, from stained-glass windows to the pageantry of the mass, mesmerised him. "You've got the priest in those robes, all the boys in that white thing [he means a surplice]," he says in awed tones, as if recalling a sumptuous meal. "You've got the person swinging the incense ball, the kid with the candle snuffer. The whole ceremony — it was magic." He became fixated on rosaries — not as religious symbols but as objects — and would pick up broken ones and reassemble them at home.

Marshall's family was working-class — his father was a dishwasher at the Veterans Administration Hospital — and aspired to the more middle-class life of his mother's sister, a nurse whose family lived across the street. In 1963, when he was eight, the Marshalls joined the Great Migration, the movement of millions of black Americans that took place between the first world war and 1970 from the predominantly rural south to the increasingly urban north and west. Marshall's father made the journey to Los Angeles first, finding work in the kitchen of a VA hospital, and an apartment in Nickerson Gardens, a public housing project on the edge of Watts in South Central LA.

In some ways, Los Angeles was markedly different. "The light seemed to hurt our eyes. Our eyes were burning," Marshall recalls. But it wasn't the sun — "It was smog." In other ways, their lives were surprisingly the same. Another of his mother's sisters and her family moved to LA at the same time, and yet another sister was already living there. The city was quickly becoming home to old friends and neighbours from Birmingham. "We moved from one neighbourhood in Birmingham that was all black, to Watts, which was all black. So it was the same kind of people."

In 1964, a year before riots erupted in Watts, the Marshalls rented a house further north in South Central. At the elementary school there, Marshall stayed on at the end of the day to help his teacher; she reciprocated by teaching him how to paint flowers. His biggest artistic influence, though, was Jon Gnagy, whose popular TV show *Learn to Draw* instructed viewers to focus on the shapes of objects, not the outlines. Marshall watched faithfully, pencil and paper at the ready — and learnt that making pictures "wasn't magic. It was knowledge. It wasn't even talent, really, as much as it was knowledge."

When he was about 10 years old, Marshall went on a school field trip to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Not only had he never been to a museum before, he'd never even heard of such a thing. "The term 'museum' had never entered my consciousness," he says. "Going into that building and seeing all those pictures, the sculpture, from all over the world, it was a revelation."





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Kerry James Marshall

His seventh-grade art teacher recommended him for a drawing class at the Otis Art Institute in LA. Once he learnt the African-American social realist painter Charles White was still teaching there — “I thought he was dead because he was in a history book” — Marshall had one goal: to attend Otis full time after high school. Because that required two years of college credits, he worked a series of blue-collar jobs, fitting in art classes when he could.

When he finally began at Otis in January 1977, aged 21, he was the only black undergraduate there.

By the late 1970s, the college was overrun with conceptual artists, and Marshall describes an “active antagonism” between them and the more skills-oriented painters and sculptors. Painting may have been “dead,” but Marshall was unwilling to surrender his lifelong ambition. “The way I looked at it was, I can always get somebody to fabricate something for me,” he says. “But if I want to make a painting and I don’t know how to do it, I can’t fake it. If I didn’t learn how to do that well, I would always be dissatisfied. I would feel like a failure.”

Yet another obstacle was that within painting circles, abstraction was dominant. Many black artists in particular were pro-abstraction, hoping the absence of the figure would put them on an equal footing with white artists. Marshall was fiercely determined to paint the figure — and more precisely, the black figure. “The answer to the lack of black figure representation in painting is not abandoning the figure and moving toward abstraction; it is more figure representation. That’s the antidote,” he explains. “The antidote is more of it, so that it becomes so common that it’s no longer exceptional to see black figures in pictures when you go to the museum.”

A breakthrough came when Marshall read Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, about a black man’s metaphorical invisibility in white America. Despite the book’s critical acclaim, Marshall wasn’t familiar with it but, as a science-fiction buff, he was a fan of HG Wells’s much earlier novella *The Invisible Man*, about a man becoming literally invisible. “Something clicked,” he says, when he contemplated the two types of invisibility. “That really launched the whole exploration, this dilemma of visibility, invisibility: presence and absence. The challenge became, how do you render this blackness that is both present and absent at the same time? I started out with that first figure as a silhouette, as a shadow.”

Marshall painted a series of powerful black-on-black paintings, beginning with “A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self”(1980), in which only the whites of his eyes, teeth and shirt and the red of his gums contrast with his jet-black skin. The challenge was to achieve definition and volume without lightening the pure black skin tone he desired. The solution was, initially, a restrained white line and then, the discovery of slightly different black paints, such as iron oxide black and carbon black. He eventually devised seven variations of black.

In 1985, Marshall landed a residency in New York at the Studio Museum in Harlem. He packed his possessions in a Volkswagen van and drove cross-country. The first person he met there was Cheryl Lynn Bruce, an actor whose day job was in public relations for the museum. They soon became romantically involved and, when his residency was over, instead of staying in New York as he had planned, he followed Bruce back to her hometown, Chicago. Before they married, Marshall rented a 6ft by 9ft room at the YMCA on the South Side. “I would stand on the bed and put a canvas on the wall,” he says. “I never stopped working, was the thing.”

On his first day in the city he found a job with a moving company by looking through the phone book and cold calling “places that did things I knew I could do”. The company’s headquarters was on the North Side of the city, and one day he happened upon a thrift shop selling books for five cents. “So I started buying tons of Harlequin romance novels, he says. He tore off the covers and used them as collage elements in paintings. With titles such as “Dark and Lovely” and “Stigma Stigmata”, Marshall’s treatments pointedly contrasted the books’ all-white cover girls with his black portraits.

He made the most of wherever he lived. For “The Face of Nat Turner Appeared in a Water Stain (Image Enhanced)” (1990), he painted on a wooden desk-top abandoned behind his apartment building. He also produced a group of paintings that earned him a \$20,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, which he used to rent a real studio. “That’s when the work went from what I could do in an apartment or the Y, up to those ceiling heights,” he says. “That studio had 12ft ceilings, so I did some 12ft-high paintings.

Everything changed after that, literally, because I could work freely at a size that I wanted to. The work assumed a level of complexity that I wanted.”

He soon painted “De Style” (1993), a sprawling barbershop scene of young people and their gravity-defying hairstyles. LACMA, the first museum he’d ever visited, promptly bought it — his first acquisition by a museum.

Chicago proved to be a place where Marshall could keep his head down and work. “There’s a gallery scene, there are great museums, but there’s not the kind of desperation or competitive feeling you get in New York,” he says. “Nobody really cared. You could do your stuff in Chicago, but nobody was really paying a whole lot of attention.” The city itself became a catalyst for Marshall’s art. His series of paintings, *Garden Project* (1994-95), came directly from his daily life in Bronzeville. He and Bruce had bought a house near Stateway Gardens and Wentworth Gardens, two notoriously violent, crime-ridden housing projects.

“There were always attempts to make them more desirable, safer places to live,” Marshall says. “[But] all of those attempts seemed to fail.”

He remembered his childhood home at Nickerson Gardens as “wonderful” and began to think about how the conditions at such projects had deteriorated to the point of making cruel mockeries of their names. “I wanted to recover some of that pastoral idea of the garden and demonstrate that even though there was all this despair in the projects, there were still people having a good time. I mean, no matter how violent the projects, you could go by and there would be a birthday party out on the lawn. People find a way to get some pleasure in their lives in spite of the environment they’re in. I wanted to show they’re not totally hopeless.”

Marshall painted five monumental images of the projects, with figures happily strolling, playing and gardening beside welcome signs and green lawns. There are blue skies and birds carrying a ribbon in their beaks proclaiming, “Bless Our Happy Home”. There are also boarded-up windows and unsettling statistics in small print — including the fact that one Chicago project was 93 per cent African-American.





# IN THIS HOUSE...

*Rythm Mastr, 1999-present © Kerry James Marshall*

In 1997, Marshall was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, nicknamed the “genius grant”, a generous six-figure sum. He has been represented by the Jack Shainman Gallery in New

York since 1993, and since 2014 by the David Zwirner Gallery in London. A new Marshall canvas can sell for \$1m, and there is a waiting list. Marshall could easily afford to move to a more affluent part of town, but he and Bruce have decided to stay put, and he has made Bronzeville central to his paintings. “Some of them are set in my yard, on my porch,” he says. “You’ve got to show people that you can make beautiful things where they are, as opposed to the common idea for people in impoverished neighbourhoods that if you get a few dollars, you get out of there as fast as you can. Then, the collapse of the neighbourhood becomes inevitable.”

As the worst of Chicago’s projects, including Stateway Gardens, were demolished in the early 21st century, Marshall turned his attention to the persistent attempts by black people to connect to their African heritage. Down the street from his studio was a house with a sign in front that proclaimed it to be an Ancient Egyptian museum. “For black people, the apex of historical black culture is Egypt,” says Marshall. So he offered them a new mythology in the form of his comic-book hero Rythm Mastr, who resides in the museum. Bronzeville provides the backdrop for the ongoing action.

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The common idea for people in impoverished neighbourhoods is that if you get a few dollars, you get out of there as fast as you can. Then, the collapse of the neighbourhood becomes inevitable

Kerry James Marshall

With Rythm Mastr, Marshall’s working process began to evolve. He had relied on photographs — his own and others’ — as source material. But he wasn’t satisfied with the first version of “Rythm Mastr” in 1999. Photos were just too limiting for the comics. Marshall, who had been production designer for the 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust* (the first US feature film to be directed by an African-American woman, Julie Dash), decided to approach the making of drawings like a movie set:

in place of live actors, he posed GI Joe and Barbie dolls. “I can see them from every angle, as opposed to a privileged angle of a photograph,” he explains. To make sure that their clothing was original, he bought a sewing machine and learned to sew. He also began building precisely scaled sets in his studio.

“I’m obsessed with everything that I’m doing being 100 per cent invented,” he says. “Most black people who make work, outside the music industry, get no credit for being inventors of anything.”

That fear of being denied has energised but not defined Marshall. He is “hyperaware” that the imbalance of wealth and power in America means cultural institutions have been founded almost exclusively by whites. It follows that collectors, curators and dealers are predominantly white. “The art world is a funny place,” he says. “You don’t really feel racism

*per se* at the art schools, but there is a way in which you are conditioned, as a part of a minority group that is always seeking equality, to try to appeal to the interests of the dominant authorities. That's almost automatic."

Marshall says he has learnt to be his own most important critic. "When I'm in the studio working, I'm only thinking, can I get it right? I never expected anybody to want to buy anything," he says, adding with a chuckle, "I still don't."

*'Kerry James Marshall: Mastry'* is at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, from April 23 to September 25; then travels to the Met Breuer, New York; and the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles; [mcachicago.org \(https://mcachicago.org/Home\)](https://mcachicago.org/Home)

*Photographs: Lyndon French*

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# Flash Art



1 / 2 Kerry James Marshall, "Past Times" (detail) (1997). Courtesy of Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority, McCormick Place Art Collection and MCA, Chicago. Photography by Nathan Keay.

## Kerry James Marshall MCA / Chicago

While [Kerry James Marshall](https://mcachicago.org/Exhibitions/2016/Kerry-James-Marshall) (<https://mcachicago.org/Exhibitions/2016/Kerry-James-Marshall>)'s imitations of Old Master painting techniques to portray idealizations of black people's lives are occasionally susceptible to the limitations of respectability politics, closer consideration proves these quotations of grandiose history painting and conventional portraiture to be not homage but *détournement*, subversions of the cultural schema by which excellence is determined and racism is perpetuated through exclusion and hurtful stereotypes.

*School of Beauty*, *School of Culture* (2012) is an alternative space to those traditions: an immense, opulent scene populated not with European royalty presiding over their courts, but a rich community of women occupying a hair salon. Many of Marshall's more recent paintings celebrate self-possessed women of color defining their own sexualities and refuting narrow conceptions of desirability. The boldly black Wonder Woman in *Black Star 2* (2012) has most recently starred on Lee Daniels's hit TV drama *Empire*, a story full of similarly empowered black women and moguls.

For Marshall, paint is a material with which to contest the ominous and oppressive conditions associated with pervasive darkness even today. *Invisible Man* (1986) shows a nude black figure, his coloring hardly distinguishable from the ground plane against which he is rendered, and a hovering black censor block that fails to fully cover his low-hanging genitalia. Amid black-on-black geometries, this interloper jabs at the racism attached to early reductive abstractions, such as Alphonse Allais's 1897 black square painting whose title translates to "Negroes Fighting in a Cellar at Night." *Black Painting* (2003–06) is literally at home in total blackness, wherein two figures hold one another in a darkened bedroom, a copy of Angela Davis's *If They Come in the Morning* lying nearby. Marshall does not simply reuse moves from painting's canon, but rather inhabits and elevates precisely what has been historically discounted.

by Matt Morris

# MOMUS

## “If You Are Black, You Really Are Coming from Behind”: Orders of Visibility in Kerry James Marshall’s “Mastry”

BY RAÉL JERO SALLEY ([HTTP://MOMUS.CA/AUTHOR/RAEL-JERO-SALLEY/](http://momus.ca/author/rael-jero-salley/)) • • JULY 20, 2016



Kerry James Marshall, "Souvenir I," 1997. © Kerry James Marshall. Photo: Joe Z

In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described the collective imagination of black people in America in terms of freedom dreams, and these dreams are the primary media through which radical black culture is today produced.

Indeed, it may only be in dreams that American black people have been able to tell their stories. Our audiences can admire such narratives in images, observe the grammar, syntax, and composition of black dynamics. But our stories have yet to be fully told: these are tales that no American is prepared to fully see or hear.

Kerry James Marshall(<http://www.davidzwirner.com/artists/kerry-james-marshall/>)'s career is as an American mythologist. His stories are as disquieting as they are pretty, and lack narrative closure. They comprise a mix of the Western visual tradition, black experience, and notions of community.

Born in Alabama and raised in Watts, Los Angeles, Marshall has long committed himself to artistic mastery, and his pictures and writings are unapologetically black. His visual forms make apparent the past and present conditions for blackness, including the fights for equality, in America and beyond. The work opposes marginalization, inside and outside of black communities, with a quiet, unveiled directness. Marshall is unrelenting in his critique of power, as demonstrated through a re-visioning of Americana.

Among black people, in 1963 as in 2016, there are deep misgivings about the institutions of the formal political realm. For Marshall, the artworld is no better: "As an African American, descended from a people enslaved to serve the interests and benefits of dominant 'whites', I am acutely aware of the weakness of my position within the wider world, and even more so in the institutional structure of the artworld," wrote Marshall. "If you are black, you really are coming from behind."

Marshall has recently opened a retrospective exhibition that contains highlights from nearly forty years of art making. *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry*(<https://mcachicago.org/Media/Exhibitions/Kerry-James-Marshall-Mastry>), now on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (April 23 – September 25,



2016), and traveling to [The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) (<http://www.metmuseum.org/>) (October 25, 2016 – January 29, 2017), then the [Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles](#) (<http://www.moca.org/>) (March 12 – July 2, 2017). The exhibition focuses on paintings made over the past 35 years, from Marshall's inaugural work, titled *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self* (1980), to his most recent explorations of American history, ways of seeing, and imagination. The show's three curators – Ian Alteveer (MET), [Helen Molesworth](#) (<http://momus.ca/helen-molesworth-upends-the-permanent-hang-at-moca-la/>) (LA MOCA), and Dieter Roelstraete (MCA Chicago) – assemble a compilation of art and writings for the exhibition of record on Marshall's work. At MCA Chicago, the show is enveloping, and there are moments of curatorial lyricism.

Blackness, art, and politics, together, form an American phenomenon so convoluted that it simultaneously demands and defies generality. There is no shortage of critical commentary on the links between these terms, but each insight seems to contradict the one that came before. For one thing, it is impossible to predicate the existence of a truly common experience of “blackness.” But what we *can* observe are specific and historically constituted *orders of visibility*.

In the modern world, artists and audiences inhabit political and cultural frameworks for being and seeing. This infrastructure of visibility continues to entrench roles in societies and communities. It is engrained in contours of political divides, and is perhaps most directly felt where blackness frames the memories and practices of everyday life. Invisibility is, of course, notable in Marshall's *Invisible Man* (1980), but the theme of appearance has recurred throughout his career over the years: *Black Artist: Studio View* (2002), *SOB*, *SOB* (2003), *Black Painting* (2012), *Small Pin-Up*, *Lens Flare* (2013), and *Untitled Sofa Girl* (2014).

Retrospectives show progression over time. Marshall's *Mastry* reveals how the artist's creative activity includes a belief in abstraction, an ethic of industry, and a vision of futurity. The show moves from entry-level works exploring the materiality of paint, as in *Invisible Man* (1986), to the alchemy of “water and stone” apparent in intermediate tableaus, such as the *Souvenir* series (1997). The middle works pose new challenges to painting practice, and later, masterful pieces demonstrate a shift from alchemical virtuosity to a certain meaningless magic, apparent in *School of Beauty*, *School of Culture* (2009) and *If they come in the morning* (2012). Unlike most retrospectives, which feel conclusive, *Mastry* assembles works that envision possibility.

An artist who has been a student of picture-making and art history for most of his life, Marshall initially trained with realist master [Charles White](http://www.charleswhite-imagesofdignity.org/bio.html) in an era in which the polemics of social realism and expressionist abstraction were still powerful in artistic discourse. Uncoupling from genre-specific tradition, Marshall makes space for a host of innovative approaches to painting. He is well known for depicting actual and imagined events from African-American history: complex and multilayered portrayals of youths, interiors, nudes, housing-estate gardens, and land- and seascapes. The work synthesizes different traditions and genres, and counters stereotypical representations of black people with different, empowering imagery. Engaging with issues of identity and individualism, he frequently depicts his figures in an opaque black that stylizes their appearance while also serving as a literal and rhetorical reference to the term "black," and its diametric opposition to the "white" mainstream. Beyond this, the compositions magnify the contradictions within the artworld's structures of visibility. Viewers are offered a highly personal perspective, including a critique of art-historical subjects. Marshall offers a way of seeing that is both transparent, recognizable, and darkly discrepant.

The creations in Marshall's *Mastry* open both historical events and more contemporary moments to reverie. Among these are largescale paintings featuring black figures, defiant assertions of black experience throughout art and popular culture. These bold, nominal representations might be interpreted as giving pride of place to tired, huddled masses that usually have a slim chance of being seen in pictures on museum walls. While this may be true, these paintings do something far more exceptional: they produce a historiography, a lens through which to peer at the art of art's history. The pictures even track historians as they develop visual discourse into disciplines, and show us the peculiar subject of blackness in America. Marshall critically examines the Western art-historical canon through its most canonical forms: the historical tableau, landscape, and portraiture. Each piece breathes the spirit of American rebellion: a feature of political liberty and part of an individual's right, civic duty, and democratic responsibility. Marshall's artworks riot against an allegedly natural order of things, an order of visibility (and invisibility) envisioned in colonial governance and maintained by modern visual culture.

A key theorist of the artistic history of blackness, Marshall explores the links between American art and racial politics in both image and text: "You have rightly understood the importance of historical awareness. This should not be

limited to art objects alone, however, but should include the social, political, and economic circumstances under which their makers have labored," Marshall wrote in *Young Artist To Be*, in 2006. He was making this observation at a time when a certain degree of optimism may have been justified. The rise of a black senator from Illinois to the world's stage came with predictions of revolutionary, radical change for black people in America.

Following his years of making rebellious, unconventional work without recognition or financial reward, and emerging as an artist in Los Angeles, Marshall took residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem before establishing his home in Chicago; over the decades he grew in renown from that city's South Side. In 2008, I think a certain kind of struggle had ended for the artist (not uncoincidentally coalescing with Obama's departure from Chicago to the White House), and Marshall must have hated to see it go. In the context of his career, the termination of obscurity and material struggle was signaled by the artist's own reluctant realization that he had achieved success in America, but that now he would have to go the distance. However, the question of Marshall's struggle as a black American is not solved because he gained notoriety as an artist. Nor is it allayed because he is a distinguished emeritus professor, or because he manages to make a living through the art market. James Baldwin once wrote that nothing is more desirable than to be released from an affliction, but nothing is more frightening than to be divested of a crutch. Divested of the affliction and crutch of material struggle, Marshall's toil was modulated to a more complex plane: the work of envisioning futures.

In 2008, Marshall was invited to mount a major retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. He responded with *One True Thing: Meditations on a Black Aesthetic* (<https://mcachicago.org/Exhibitions/2003/Kerry-James-Marshall-One-True-Thing-Meditations-On-Black-Aesthetics>). The exhibition was filled with new experimentation, and a range of media that demonstrated energy and eclecticism. Looking back now, it seems *One True Thing* announced an artistic endeavor that was getting richer and more complex. Over the past ten years, Marshall has produced increasingly innovative paintings that distinguish themselves from much of his earlier work and offer fresh analyses of contemporary society. *Mastry* culminates in the painter's unrelenting critique of visual power. This is especially pronounced in his work that refers to pop culture in the form of graphic novels, banners, and references to Pop art.

By revisiting traditional art-historical genres of painting, Marshall's recent works trace how culturally black practices of mixing metaphors, doubling media,



and blurring boundaries between individual and community have exploded into the contemporary moment. His persistent retrieval of an art-historical context points to an active legacy of the visual that was established before the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions, persisted through Black Freedom and Civil Rights Movements, and endured the triumphs and sorrows of Obama-led hope. With a visual theory intensely colored by politics and poetics, Marshall rewires history to recover images that could not otherwise appear.

This revisionist history is subtly evident in *If they come in the morning* (2012), the first of a series of three paintings from his 2012 exhibition *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green*. Organized using bands of color on either side of the canvas, the painting features a flat black on the left and an incident of green to the right, complementing the unabashed red hue that dominates the overall canvas. The oblate symmetry of this field of red produces an unusually direct perceptual experience of the chromatic span. At eighteen feet across, its breadth is too wide for the viewer to take in the full scene and observe its details simultaneously. The visual vocabulary is Abstract Expressionist color field painting, of course. But the shifting values across the canvas reveal the phrase “If they come in the morning,” legible in large block letters punctuating the field. The painting asserts its authority through the use of scale and color. It employs formal references that, art-historically, invoke abstract dreams of the absolute and the infinite. Marshall's response to such modernist orthodoxies is romantic, born under the black star of protests and boycotts. His work overturns what proponents of modern art – among them Charles White, Jacob Lawrence, Eldzier Cortor, Norman Lewis, Betye Saar, and Sam Gilliam – perceived as an unnatural order of things.

Marshall's *Mastry* offers a new look at how each specific picture opens to a range of cultural and historical references, new ways of seeing. Whatever the visual questions, they are critically oriented. He demonstrates that art-making and visual discourses are still encumbered by the elitism of the Royal Academy that set the terms in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These pictures re-imagine the lives and loves of black people as they inhabit a world that refuses the modern world's seemingly permanent state of racialized controversy and violence.

Blackness exceeds color. Blackness is a way of referring to what is unseen, excluded, and marginalized: the people, the places and ideas that determine the texture and boundaries of the dominant order, as well as its associated privileges and communities. Careful viewers may see both insatiable abstractions and concrete facts in Marshall's pictures. They may interpenetrate

art, history, and social imaginaries. Marshall revolutionizes the instruments of dream-building and opens new ways of approaching the abolition, colonization, and revolution that is our shared history.

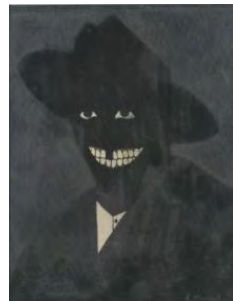
# Interview

ART

## KERRY JAMES MARSHALL'S MASTRY

By ANTWAUN SARGENT

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Kerry James Marshall moved to Los Angeles with his family from Birmingham, Alabama in the 1960s, swept up by the Great Migration, like many other African-American families living in the Jim Crow south. Once on the West Coast, Marshall studied art and began a practice that would soon morph from collage into figurative painting. Now 60 years old and based in Chicago, the painter continues to draw inspiration from 20th century modernists, such as Romare Bearden, and the Civil Rights Movement. Tomorrow, his retrospective "Kerry James Marshall: Mastry" opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago before traveling to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and MoCA L.A.

In 1980, after Marshall read Robert Vickery and Diane Cochrane's *New Techniques in Egg Tempera* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Marshall began working with tempera and created his first seminal work, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*. The painting depicts a black figure, dressed in a black suit and a black hat, against a flat black backdrop. The figure's shirt, eyes, and teeth, which form into a grinning gap-tooth smile, are visibly white, while the rest of the man, depending on vantage point, is rendered nearly invisible. Although this work reflects Ellison's writing as a black man in 1950s America ("I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me"), it simultaneously draws attention to widely accepted views of African-Americans and how African-Americans see themselves—two thematic references that resound throughout the artist's 35-year figurative engagement with art history and an illustration of the fact that, put simply, black lives matter.

"Kerry James Marshall: Mastry" chronicles the evolution of Marshall's portraiture, revealing why he has become one of the most important living artists of today. "I grew so closely and have committed to staying with the figure to demonstrate that there is a lot of room for exploration, that the field of representation, even in painting, is not completely exhausted yet," the artist explains. Each of his series and individual works touches on a specific aspect or struggle of contemporary black life: the "Garden Project" series comments on the notion of black community; *Self-Portrait of the Artist as a Super Model* addresses the concept of black beauty; and *BlackStar II* and *Watts* reflect black protests.

Prior to the opening in Chicago, we spoke to the artist over the phone while he was at his studio.

ANTWAUN SARGENT: "Mastry" begins with your 1980 painting, *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*. Because it represents a shift from your earlier collage works to the mainstay of your concerns, looking back, does it feel like a manifesto of sorts?

KERRY JAMES MARSHALL: You can describe it as a manifesto of sorts. I saw it as a pivotal turn, a work that really led me down the avenues that brought me to where I am. That picture was the vehicle that helped me clarify a lot of things and I began to understand that I wanted to do. It became an instrument I could use to build a lot of things, which meant I was free to use other devices that helped me more fully articulate what I thought of the image in the first place. It was a way of demonstrating that there was a broad range of possibilities and fairly unlimited utility for a black figure that didn't have to comprise its blackness in order to preserve a place in the field of representation.

SARGENT: *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self* is executed in egg tempera, which was a technique employed in Renaissance paintings before the preeminence of oil painting. Was using that technique about elevating your point?

MARSHALL: Yeah. If you look at the image, it treads on a kind of popular stereotypical image of the black figure, in both its flatness and slightly comic edge. To take that image as a starting point and to render it in a proto-classical medium, like egg tempera, and then use a repertoire of classical compositional devices to make the picture was a way of setting up an engagement with art history. The amount of analytical energy that went into constructing the figure shows, on some level, that there is almost a complete contradiction of what the figure looks like. So it was a way of trying to enforce an intellectual engagement with the picture, as opposed to the tendency to read images like that in the folk art manner.

Artwork operates on two different levels: On one level there's artwork as a mode of expressivity, and then there's the other side, where the image is a construction

that is meant to engage in a discursive field in order to perform a particular function. That's the kind of work I am trying to get that image to do; I want people to understand that this is a very calibrated image, where point by point, very little is left to chance.

SARGENT: You've said that *Invisible Man* had a great effect on your early painting. In what ways did Ellison's novel inform your understanding of 1980s politics?

MARSHALL: The condition of visibility as it relates to black people was crucial. Connected to that, I've always been interested in science fiction and horror films and was acutely aware of the political and social implications of Ralph Ellison's description of invisibility as it relates to black people, as opposed to the kind of retinal invisibility that H.G. Wells described in his novel *Invisible Man*. In Ellison's case, it's more psychological than it is phenomenal, and it's conditioned by anger, animosity, and lack of desire to engage with the black body. There was always simultaneity that had nothing to do with visuality. You can be there and not be there at the same time and be fully visible all the time. That's what really struck me about Ellison and that's what led me to start working with figures that were painted black—trying to find a way to embody that simultaneous presence and absence. What I preserved in the figures are those white eyes and white teeth, because that's still connected to the way in which blackness, in the extreme, has been stigmatized and the way it was often joked that you couldn't see black people in the dark until they had their eyes open or were smiling.

SARGENT: All the figures in your art are black, yet that blackness has been described as matte black, jet black, obsidian black, charcoal black, ebony black, and pitch black, among many others. How do you describe the color?

MARSHALL: There are a couple of ways that I approach it. When I started, I was aware of using the black as a rhetorical device. It's understanding that black people come in a wide range of colors, but you find instances in a lot of black literature in which the blackness is used as a metaphor. In some places you can find an extreme blackness used as a descriptive. I also take into account historical realities that some of this range in color is the legacy of white supremacy. The privileged position of whiteness doesn't allow for someone with one drop of Negro blood to be considered white, which allows whiteness to be a fairly pure category while blackness has to absorb an expansive reality of representation. Part of what I am dealing with, with this blackness, is asking the question, "Where are those black people, who are as dark as the description of a young black boy that Solomon Northup gives in *12 Years A Slave*?" He describes the young black 14-year-old boy as "blacker than any crow." You have to question if he is using that metaphorically or as a descriptive? You have to question, where are those black people? Part of the history of black people in the western hemisphere, in some ways, has been fleeing from this notion that they were black. So I can represent an ideal, and with that, you can demonstrate that there is nothing to be afraid of, nothing to run from, and that, in fact, a good deal of beauty that resides there.

SARGENT: Your use of the color black is also a conversation with 20th century abstraction. *Black Painting*, for example, is one way of exploring abstract notions of blackness through this ideal form.

MARSHALL: It's forcing the issue of perception by rendering an image that is just at the edge of perception, which in some way forces you to look more closely and for you to adjust your vision so you can see in the dark. Abstraction and representation are supposed to be going down two very different paths, one sociological and the other aesthetic. The way I see it is if you're going to deal with black representation, you also have to show that you can do two things at once. You can be completely invested in the image and also the idea of the aesthetic experience of the object.

SARGENT: Is that also your engagement with Renaissance painting in works like *Untitled (Studio)*, where you see Paul Cézanne's influence? Are you doing two things at once?

MARSHALL: Yeah, and sometimes I have three balls in the air at once. [laughs] I used to always say—and I think a lot of artists think of it this way—that when you see a black figure, the way the critical establishment operated, you can only

imagine that figure having a sociological value. They never say the ways in which their aesthetics were equally worthy of consideration.

That was the thing that always kept black artists outside of the discourse—not whether the work was relevant, but was it engaged in the modernist and avant-garde practices white artists were engaged in? I think the approach that I've taken, which is fairly instrumental and strategic, is to deploy the principles that the people who theorized the value of artwork said were important. After 1958, you couldn't come into the art world thinking you were going to be personally expressive. The permutation of what an artwork can be had been codified before I was even born, so my job is different; I came in making choices about how I deploy aesthetics and imagery strategically. It seems to me that's the only legitimate way of making work.

SARGENT: In 2014, you created your *Blot* paintings. What drove you to abstraction after all these years?

MARSHALL: I don't see those paintings as abstractions, especially because they are emblems of the inkblot. They aren't smashed together; they are constructed shape-by-shape, layer-by-layer, like any other picture. The appearance is the allusion of abstraction when in fact I am in control of every aspect of that symmetry. What I was trying to construct was relative symmetry, where it seems clear that the shapes have arrived through consideration.

SARGENT: The idea of a western encyclopedic museum comes up in your work, particularly in the way that museums have maintained race as a naturalized category, and you get at that in *Beauty Examined* (1993). What do you think a museum should be in the 21st century?

MARSHALL: I think the museum should be an arena in which ideals can hash it out, fight it out, tooth and nail, for attention. The moment you introduce difference into a museum, then the privileged space is contested, and under the most ideal circumstances what all artists want is the chance to be competitive. That's what I think the museum is supposed to be. Before people outside of the Western European tradition started asking to be in there, the people who were accumulating objects for the museum were perfectly satisfied with the narrative they were constructing. On some level, you can say that's what they were supposed to do, and if we continue to let them, on some level that's on us. No one has a right to occupy the privileged position all the time, so it should be contested. It should always be messy in there.

SARGENT: Your piece *Rythm Mastr* allows for narratives to be told in a different medium. What led you to comics?

MARSHALL: Like a lot of young people who wanted to be artists, comics were a gateway for me. Comics were a place where captivating images lit your imagination and showed you that you can create new kinds of people and worlds. Comics also led a lot of young people to science fiction. But just like in the art museum, and notions of beauty and pleasure, if the hero is always a white guy with a squared jaw or pretty woman with big breasts, then kids start thinking that's how it's supposed to be. Part of the problem was that black comic book artists were making super heroes with the same pattern as the white super heroes. When you read a lot of those comics, the black super heroes don't seem to have anything to do.

I just thought someone has to figure out how to break through that barrier and create a narrative for a black super hero story to unfold at the same scale as something like *Star Wars*. *Rythm Mastr* is about producing a narrative of a hero engaged in a struggle as complicated as those other stories. The catalyst for it was the beginning of the demolition of public housing in Chicago. When State Way Gardens and The Robert Taylor Homes were being torn down, it seemed like a perfect opportunity to use that as a backdrop for the development of a super hero narrative.

SARGENT: You've really placed black people and their experiences in the American museum. For example, in *De Style*, black figures are seen in the barbershop, a place that accurately reflects an important aspect of black culture.

MARSHALL: Since you mentioned the barbershop painting, there's a beauty shop companion called *School of Beauty*, *School of Culture* at the Birmingham Museum



of Art. I got an email that said a couple had a guerrilla wedding in front of that picture. They slipped into the museum with a preacher and had their wedding ceremony in front of it. It turns out that the woman is a beautician and the man is a barber, they had seen that picture, and they said it was the perfect place to get married.

SARGENT: The title of the show is "Mastry," so what have you mastered in the last 35 years?

MARSHALL: [*laughs*] Nothing. No, you know, it's a struggle from picture to picture to get it right. That's one of the reasons I still make paintings and use the figure; it's hard to do and hard to succeed. On some levels, because I am working with black figures and black pigment, it's even harder because I have to be more responsible for the image. I try to be really careful about the presence the figure projects.

*"KERRY JAMES MARSHALL: MASTRY" OPENS TOMORROW, APRIL 23, AT THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART CHICAGO.*

# 'Greatest living painter'? MCA shows life's work of Kerry James Marshall



Chicago artist Kerry James Marshall talks about his life and work in advance of a major retrospective at the MCA Chicago. "Kerry James Marshall: Mastry" opens April 23. (Zbigniew Bzdak/Chicago Tribune)



By **Steve Johnson** · Contact Reporter

APRIL 15, 2016, 9:20 AM

**F**or the forthcoming, 70-plus-painting retrospective of his work, the one that will open at the Museum of Contemporary Art and then travel to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and to the MCA Los Angeles, Kerry James Marshall had to put into the hands of the show's curators his life's work, an explicit and prescient statement, in paint, that black lives matter.

That was fine with the 60-year-old South Side artist, he said the other day in his Bronzeville studio, except for two or three paintings he asked them to also include.

What was harder to take is some of the text being used to describe the show, "Kerry James Marshall: Mastry," which opens in Chicago on April 23 and fills the museum's fourth floor with Marshall's vibrant,

grand canvases depicting his version of black American life, tableaus brimming, radically, with such ordinary pleasures as a couple's night out at a club, a pair of kids running through a wheat field.

"I saw it on the website for the MCA," Marshall said. "I wish they wouldn't use the language they use sometimes. I hate it when people say 'greatest living artist.' When people say stuff like that, oh, it makes my teeth clench. Because in a way, it's just talk. It doesn't really have much meaning. At least it doesn't really have much meaning to me. I always wish they would moderate that kind of stuff."

Around him was the evidence of his process, a studio overstuffed with objects and ideas. There was a lineup of paint brushes, of course, near a partially finished canvas. A machine for making silk screens, now covered by more recent interests. Not-at-all fragrant bouquets, the plastic flowers Marshall haunted thrift stores to collect as the fake flower industry switched over to fabric. Birdhouses. Small storefronts he built to help with perspective in his ongoing comic book, "Rythm Mastr." An image of a recent canvas that sold to the Museum of Modern Art, an African-American Chicago cop leaning against his squad car, thinking. Woodcut prints, and the woodcutting block, for an extraordinary depiction of a young black man, "a male figure that is simply happy with himself," in Marshall's words.

So how would you rewrite that exhibition sentence claiming Marshall as "one of America's greatest living artists," he was asked?

"I'd take a James Brown introduction," he said with a laugh. " 'Hardest working man in show business.' Literally it's like that. You come in here, and it's hard work. And it's like that day in and day out. That's what makes you keep coming. It's the challenge of trying to make a thing work. That's all it's about."

What Marshall has been trying to make work is nothing less than a lifelong project to correct art history. Studying art's seminal works as a student painter, in Los Angeles in the 1960s and '70s, he was struck by an absence.

"The museums were built around these old masterworks, but there were no black people in that pantheon of old masters," Marshall said. "That was a part of the whole motivation: 'OK, Let's figure out why that was the case, and then figure out how do you go about solving that.' To try to make work that could find its way into the museum and exist there on the same terms and at the same level as other works that were already there. But with the black figure as a kind of central subject."

"Mastry" shows that Marshall, as a painter, has hit his high target, has achieved some of the mastery he set his sights on. In addition to being shown in them, his works are collected by the major museums and widely praised.



Andrew Russeth, reviewing a 2014 Marshall gallery show in London for ArtNews, said: "Marshall may very well end up being remembered as our Hopper. That, at least, is my hope. Like the latter master, he conjures a wide and nuanced range of emotions from what at first appear to be relatively straightforward domestic scenes. ... Even as you are spying in on rooms you should not be, catching people at their most private moments, you get the feeling that you are also, at the same time, peering in on yourself."

Modern Painters, a year earlier, had high praise for a more broad-based Marshall museum exhibition in Europe: " 'Painting and other stuff' is so damn rich that it might be unpacked endlessly. ... Marshall is a vital artist for these supposedly post-racial days, and it's a joy to watch him jump through styles and mediums, his oeuvre shot through with humor and anger in equal part."

Seen en masse in "Mastry," Marshall's paintings challenge the viewer, yes, asking her to think about the way she processes African-American images, but they are also deeply pleasurable.

"His paintings — you know this standing in front of them — they are extraordinarily generous, visually generous," said Madeleine Grynsztejn, Pritzker director of the MCA Chicago. "There is a richness of color, a richness of composition. There's an excess of giving back to the viewer on aesthetic terms. But underneath, there has been a deeply intellectual enterprise."

That is why, she said, "I've wanted to do this show for 10 years. I knew this show had to happen. It was just a matter of when he was ready."

The delay, the show's curators state in the superb exhibition catalog, "gave Marshall time to bring his project of infiltrating the Western canon of art, and its handmaiden the museum, with images of black people to a nearly complete state that includes almost all of painting's major categories: portraiture, history painting, genre scenes, landscapes, fetes galantes, and abstraction."

While the curators Helen Molesworth, Dieter Roelstraete and Ian Alteveer represent each of the museums on "Mastry's" itinerary (the institutions co-organized the show), it's appropriate that the exhibition kicks off in Chicago.

"Kerry is a quiet hero of this city," Grynsztejn said. "This is a person who has made it his point to live on the South Side of Chicago, to be inspired by the South Side of Chicago, and to use it as a taking off point for topics and artworks that are relevant well beyond Chicago."

Grynsztejn met Marshall in the early 1990s, not long after they both had moved here, he (in late 1987) to be with his future wife, actress Cheryl Lynn Bruce, she to work as a junior curator at the Art Institute.

At a group show in a gallery, she first saw one of Marshall's works, the painting "They Know that I

Know." "I was completely riveted. I had not seen anything like it before," she said. "One of the ways I test my eye is whether I can wrestle this thing down, whether I can talk it away, in which case it's advertising, not art."

Marshall couldn't be pinned. She went to meet him at his studio, then selected his Garden Project paintings for the 1995 Art Institute exhibition "About Place: Recent Art of the Americas" that Marshall calls one of the most important in his career.

Those monumental canvases — on view together in "Mastry" for the first time in decades — take off from the fact that public housing projects were often given names like, in Chicago, Rockwell Gardens or Stateway Gardens. In LA, Marshall grew up in part in Nickerson Gardens. The paintings depict not poverty and despair but full lives being lived.

"People who walk through the Art Institute don't walk through Rockwell Gardens," Marshall told Tribune columnist Anne Keegan in 1995. "They have a picture in their mind created by the news media. The picture comes in conflict with what I've presented. Now you can reject my representation or you can find out there is a more complex reality than the one they have taken for granted."

While the rallying cry has been taken up recently across a wider swath of society, Marshall has been insisting, all along, on the importance of black lives. "Artists are predictors," Grynsztejn said. "The best artists are beacons, and we just simply had to catch up to him. His project is big. It's not just painting. He's anticipatory. He is painting for a future United States. The expanded history he is creating for us to see today will be the norm tomorrow. He demands of himself nothing less than that, than to make a lasting contribution to history with commanding paintings."

The artist's biography, and its geography, couldn't be more suited to engaging with issues of the place of African-Americans in America. He lives in contemporary Chicago, and he will talk about what it might mean that the city insists on an African-American police chief, but also that "there were a lot of black police officers standing on the scene when Laquan McDonald was shot down."

He was born in Birmingham, Ala., in 1955, lived there through 1963. In Los Angeles, he lived in the Watts neighborhood, scene of infamous rioting. "At the moment that it hit our block it seemed like a carnival," Marshall recalled. "We didn't have any idea what any of that was about. It was just a thing, and now things were on fire. But then the aftermath, when you had no more stores in your neighborhood, what was that about?"

The lesson Marshall took away, he said, was to assess before reacting and to research deeply to try to understand the why of things. And that led him to making art with purpose.

He worked diligently at still lifes: "I had gone into art school expressly with the idea of learning how to

paint. I was not prepared to abandon that pursuit just because it wasn't the popular thing to do at that time."

But the early canvases he showed were collages, mixed media, works very much of their era.

"It just seemed like the challenges were too few," he said. "Collage is a really forgiving medium. You can cut paper and splash paint, stick stuff together, You will eventually end up with something that's kind of nice. It's just like that. And abstraction is a kind of forgiving approach also. You're not stressed out a whole lot while you're doing it. Once I started to feel like it was easy to generate things that were acceptable, that became unacceptable. I could tell that I wasn't going to be able to live on that. There wasn't enough going on that would keep me going back to it."

"Mastry" starts with the small work of portraiture, on paper, that Marshall made as a break with his early efforts. Depicting a grinning African-American figure, in shadow, one tooth missing, "Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self" was inspired, in part, by Ralph Ellison's notions of black absence and presence in "Invisible Man."

But it draws on Marshall's study of classical painting to get the line of the missing tooth corresponding just so with the visible white triangle of the shirt. It is painted in egg tempera, like the early masters used. And it refers directly to negative stereotypes: "It was a way of ... rescuing the stereotypical image from its completely comic implications by treating it as if it was important," he said.

He knew the image was powerful as he was making it, and "that changed my approach to everything," he said. "I was going back to painting, but painting figures." From there follows what Grynshztejn called Marshall's "working diligently for 30 plus years on a body of work that now has the kind of relevance and beauty and poignancy" to resonate in a major retrospective.

For all the success he has achieved, though, the artist said he cannot sit back, cannot stop feeling like he needs to be worthy of a James Brown introduction.

"Maybe it's the case in most disciplines in the arts," he said. "You never feel like you are anywhere. Because it's just as hard to do the next painting as the last one you did. It doesn't get easier. And if you're going after something, it's always just beyond your reach. That perfect thing always eludes you. For me at least, every time I make a picture it's trying to get closer and closer to that perfect thing."



# **An Argument for Something Else**

**Dieter Roelstraete  
in Conversation  
with Kerry James  
Marshall**



**Dieter Roelstraete** — I'm interested to hear more about the intersection of your development as an artist with more broadly political developments. Growing up in Alabama in the 1950s, the 1960s certainly must have made an impact to begin with...

**Kerry James Marshall** — As a child, I was initially only minimally aware of what was going on around me. For instance, my family lived in an all-black neighbourhood of Birmingham, and I didn't really get to see many white people — they just didn't factor much in our lives, except at school. My mother worked for some white folks who lived far from where we lived, the Brittens or Brittins they were called. One time we rode with my father to pick up my mother from work, and their neighbourhood looked like a scene out of *The Wizard of Oz*: it's a black-and-white movie until Dorothy opens the door and then everything is suddenly Technicolor. I mean, the grass in this white neighbourhood was *so green*... You know, everything on TV was black and white as well — I'd never seen anything quite as bright as that green lawn.

Anyway, I began to understand how volatile the world was with the assassination of John F. Kennedy in November 1963. After that came the 1965 Watts Riots, the 1968 student uprisings, the murders of Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X and so on. It was just one thing after another! At my junior high school there were daily walkouts and rallies. One day I saw about twenty of my classmates bend the main flagpole down to the ground and tear off the American flag. Somebody was throwing garbage cans through the windows of the school buildings, and the principal's office was set on fire — and that's just junior high! The police charged into a sit-in at the administration building and ended up beating up fourteen-year-olds. I witnessed a group of fourteen-year-old girls beating up the vice-principal, Mr Naseef, in turn... It was just crazy! I didn't take part in any of that; I was just an observer. Now, much of what was happening was connected to the Black Student Union out of Berkeley; one of the demands being made was for black history to be taught as part of the school

curriculum. Ironically, my first 'Negro History' teacher was a Japanese man from Okinawa called Mr Kowano. He was a member of the Central Avenue chapter of the Black Panther Party who came to school wearing army boots and military fatigues. That Black Panther office on the corner of 41st and Central later became the scene of a massive shoot-out with the LA Police Department... We were obviously all thinking: what in the world is going on?

Look at this book — *Great Negroes Past and Present*. This is where I first learned about Charles White... I must have been in fifth grade or so. I hadn't seen this book since then, but I found this copy, all beaten up and held together with duct tape, in the drawer of a desk left behind in the first studio building I bought here in Chicago. That was so uncanny, since Charles White was born in Chicago. When I opened that drawer, I just couldn't believe my eyes.

When I was in seventh grade, Mr Romity picked me to take a summer drawing class for teens at the Otis Art Institute. One day the teacher, George De Groat, took us downstairs to a lecture room where he showed us pictures from a book titled *Images of Dignity: The Drawings of Charles White*. Afterwards, he told us that Charles White actually taught at Otis and that he even had a studio on the third floor, which we could visit. I was completely blown away when I first set foot inside that studio. I had never seen anything quite like it, a place where real art was made. There were finished paintings next to sketches, drawings at various stages of the process. Just seeing how things start out and how they end up — that was really important for me. Back in the drawing class I was copying his drawing of Frederick Douglass when one day Charles White himself walked into the room... From that day onwards I was determined to get my art education at Otis and nowhere else.

**DR** — So what were you painting at the time? How and when did you find your subject matter?

**KJM** — At first I was just trying to master different

techniques. I was painting still lifes, dolls, using oil pastels, watercolours... Those were the kinds of things I had put in my portfolio when I applied to get into Otis. Now with regard to subject matter — when I showed you that first painting, of the two men behind bars, painted in the style of early Charles White, that was the first oil painting I ever made. I painted that in 1971. That picture is an example of me trying to say something about injustice or such. But it was much too early for this to be considered meaningful work — I was still developing my skills. As a young artist going to the library and looking at all these different books... How do you figure out which path to follow, which approach to take? When I came across Egon Schiele's work, for instance, I'd try copying that for a little while. James Ensor, the German Expressionists, Gustav Klimt, Maxfield Parrish, Diego Rivera: same thing. I'm looking at all this stuff and trying to figure out how it's done, because I want to do something that's just as good. This is how you develop your own style, your own voice. And it really only started to fall in place around 1978, when I did a series of collages after having looked at Romare Bearden's work for some time. I was still at Otis, and just about to graduate. The advantage of collage is that you don't have to spend a lot of time drawing out your composition, and it is easy to work with narrative 'content' when you are working in that manner. Some of these collages included references to black cultural history, while others registered a kind of naive dissatisfaction with the way the world works... One of the first collages I made was titled *Thirty Pieces of Silver* and dealt with artists who 'sell out'. I did another collage around the same time about white folks moving out, *White Flight* — stuff like that. I also started to do some genealogical research on my family, going back to Birmingham to interview my grandmother and compile all these stories I had heard my mother and my aunt tell. From that history came a collage titled *Yellow Quarters*, the subject of which was my maternal grandfather's murder in a notorious place in Birmingham called Yellow Quarters... Under Charles White's influence, I always knew that I wanted to make work that was about

*something*: history, culture, politics, social issues... It was just a matter of mastering the skills to actually do it.

**DR** — You mentioned the German Expressionists, Ensor, Klimt, but also Hammons' body prints and so forth — clearly the human figure and the broader issue of figuration were always going to be there.

**KJM** — Indeed, early on I made a commitment to drawing figures, to mastering the art of figuration. This did not exclude the possibility of exploring abstraction and so forth, but it seemed essential to me to actually master representation before abandoning it. Furthermore, since the overwhelming majority of the bodies on display in art and advertising are white, producing images of black bodies was important to offset the impression that beauty is synonymous with whiteness. It is not hard to see how one's interest in being part of the Western art-historical tradition conditions you to *perpetuate* the models and values it privileges. It sounds crazy to me now, but it's simply because I hardly ever saw black people as the subject of art that I initially didn't know how to conceive of works that would have black people in them — especially in a narrative sense, except perhaps in the way Charles White would depict them, i.e. in a more emblematic manner, mostly as single figures in particular situations. I had never seen a grand, epic narrative painting with black figures in it, and that's the kind of painting that I became interested in making — pictures in the grand manner.

**DR** — So this must have been when you realised you were onto something new — that you had found a calling, so to speak.

**KJM** — Except that I had not yet found the appropriate narrative material. I knew *how* I wanted to paint, but not yet *what* I wanted to paint. You have to realize that there wasn't such a thing as 'Black Studies' until the 1970s. I didn't even know what, say, the African equivalent of Grimms' fairy tales was. Sure, we were taught the history



of slavery and so forth, but I did not know of any stories of black heroism for instance. I knew about Charles White's murals but never saw any of them in person — and the same was true of Hale Woodruff; I never saw any of his murals either. And I couldn't go see them in the museum because they weren't in any. That's pretty much how I felt back then: I am nowhere and I have no idea where to go to from where I am. Which is why in the meantime, at least, I just focused on techniques and processes, on mastering the craft, so that I'd be ready to proceed when the day came that I would finally know where to go.

**DR** — And that day eventually came, of course.

**KJM** — Yes, and reading Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* had a lot to do with it. It must have been sometime around 1978. I had been making these abstract collages for a little while and had been receiving some attention because of them, but it never completely satisfied me. I had been pushing around paint for some time as well, and had become fairly good at it but I felt like I had reached some kind of dead end. Until I read Ralph Ellison — his description, in the introduction to *Invisible Man*, of the condition of invisibility literally changed everything for me. What I was reading there, the notion of being and not-being, the simultaneity of presence and absence, was exactly what I had been trying to get at in my art work. That's when I decided to leave behind both the collages and the abstract work and made my first figurative painting, titled *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of his Former Self*. That was the first time I used a black silhouette against a nearly black background: simultaneous presence and absence, where you can alternately see and not see the figure in the painting. This was the first time I was able to put into practise everything I had learned so far by studying the art-historical record. So sometime around 1979, 1980, that was the moment of crystallisation for me. Not only did I finally grasp the dialectic of absence and presence but, just as importantly, I now also really understood how

to put into practise all the formal devices used by the classical painters. For the first time I was completely conscious of what I was doing, all the way through.

**DR** — And executed in egg tempera on top of that.

**KJM** — That was important, yes: using a technique and material taken from a period in art history to which the figure rendered with it was utterly foreign. Even though it was structured on a classical frame, I felt the picture to be completely modern.

**DR** — It's interesting you should say that because in a sense the art world appears to have been at a bit of a crossroads in the early 1980s. The conceptual art movement had clearly exhausted itself, painting was readying itself for a triumphant return to art's big stage, yet in the meantime the Pictures Generation artists were continuing conceptual art's critique of the image and spectacle. And here you are, leaving abstraction behind, and returning to figuration.

**KJM** — It's true that Los Angeles in particular seemed to be at the epicentre of what was then referred to as a 'crisis of representation'. If you think of what John Baldessari or Chris Burden were doing at the time... But that was all very far removed from what was happening in black artist communities. I was aware of this 'other' LA art world, but it didn't mean anything to me. Once again, you have to see this in the larger perspective of what was happening in the US as a whole at the time: the assassination of JFK, the Watts Riots, the murders of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the killing of Malcolm X, the police assaults on the Black Panthers... With everything that was going on in the streets at the time, how could a black person be concerned with an art for art's sake? The notion of a crisis of representation felt particularly alien to me as I was just then beginning to master the *means* of representation. I also had to ask myself *whose* representation are we talking about exactly when we observe this so-called crisis? Here's how this

notion played out for me: I go to a museum... look at all the art that's there... and all I experience is *absence*. Not only are black people largely absent from the history of representation that is on display there, we are also outside of the domain of mastery. *My* crisis was actually a crisis of *under-representation* — a very different crisis from the feeling of exhaustion that the Western European tradition seemed to suffer. Unlike you, for instance, I did not grow up in the shadow of the 'oppressive' perfection that, say, the Van Eyck brothers embody. Magnificent images of my 'type' were not everywhere in the museum. For me, *that* history of representation always felt distant, remote and unassailable; I was outside of it. It's hard to be anxiety-ridden about the state of art except when it relates to your marginalisation in it. If Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* was the first salvo, then Duchamp's ready-mades and conceptual art were the final barrage that annihilated the representational regime. Now, to me those moments do not really constitute an actual crisis of representation. It is true that they opened up the field for more different kinds of production to be read as art, but what remains is a vast trove of historical images that are still the foundation of artistic understanding. I wanted to see more pictures of black people in art, and more paintings of black people in particular. The atmosphere in the art school environment being what it was at the time, I quickly learned that I'd be on my own there. Again, that's very much what making that first painting, the *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of his Former Self*, was about. There I was, wanting to learn all these techniques, wanting to master the art of constructing pictures, and the first thing I hear is that I no longer need to know all those things because nobody is doing that kind of stuff anymore!

**DR** — What were some of the works that followed from the breakthrough you mentioned earlier?

**KJM** — I made *Two Invisible Men (Naked)* and *La Venus Negra* soon after. Then I started making pictures using gold paint, with hand gestures that clearly referenced medieval religious paintings. They were fairly simple

pictures with a single figure in the ground, and they were somehow related to an earlier statement that I had made to the effect that all great art was in essence religious art. I also started working on a much larger scale, in drawing in particular at first. Not all of those works have survived however.

**DR** — We are talking about the early 1980s now, the early days of the Reagan era — a very different time from that of the formative experience of your witnessing the rise of the civil rights movement. Did those changes filter through to your work in any way?

**KJM** — One thing I learned witnessing all those epochal changes, all the social upheaval all the way from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, is that you come to realize how little power you have as an individual to change things. No matter what you do, it just won't have any effect whatsoever. Also, if you look back at the history of the civil rights struggle, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, the Black Panthers... It really didn't matter what strategy you chose, militant or non-violent, you'd get killed anyway. Sure enough, many people acted as if the world would end if Reagan got elected. It didn't. I understood then that it didn't matter any longer who was president. That's when I stopped fretting about it.

**DR** — You mentioned that your earlier painterly work had a decidedly emblematic character, but sometime in the late 1980s, early 1990s, the narrative dimension in your practice clearly gathers strength. Could you talk a little bit about this transition? No doubt the shift to working on a larger scale must have played a part in this.

**KJM** — It is partly a matter of scale indeed. It wasn't until I got a larger studio space that I began working on the first big paintings, such as *Lost Boys* and *De Style*. Before that I worked in my room at the YMCA, then in our apartment in Hyde Park. My first studio was a 350 square feet office space closer to downtown Chicago, and that's where those two paintings were made — those

pictures were real breakthroughs. Everything that I had been practising since making my *Portrait* could now finally be executed on the scale I had been looking to work on for a long time. At this point it really became a matter of engineering, of building pictures and making sure all of their parts fitted together in the way I wanted them to. *Lost Boys* and *De Style* were the pictures I had always imagined myself being able to make. And sure enough, one of those paintings, *De Style*, was purchased by LACMA, the first museum to acquire a major work of mine. That was my boyhood dream come true: to see my own work in the very first museum I visited as a child.

I never really liked the idea of working in series, but the first cohesive body of paintings I made was the *Garden Projects*, when I was living near Stateway Gardens and Wentworth Gardens here in Chicago — public housing projects that had been built with utopian notions of beauty and good living in mind, but were unable to maintain the promise of their pastoral-sounding names. I very much had the tradition of the pastoral in mind (think of Giorgione's *Concert Champêtre* for instance) when I was making these pictures. People eating lunch and listening to music in a bucolic setting — only this time the setting is a public housing project for African-American families. The *Garden Projects* were followed by a group of elegiac works called *Mementos* and *Souvenirs*. These paintings were first shown at the Renaissance Society in Chicago in 1994 and functioned as some kind of requiem for the civil rights movement and the Black Liberation Struggle... In all these works, whether serially conceived or not, the overarching principle is still to move the black figure from the periphery to the centre and, secondly, to have these figures operate in a wide range of historical genres and stylistic modes culled from the history of painting. Those really are my two overarching conceptual motivations. I'm using African-American cultural and social history as a catalyst for what kind of pictures to make. What I'm trying to do in my work is address Absence with a capital A. This is also why the *Rythm Mastr* comics project exists, and why the work uses the language it does.

If you believe that the struggle of the civil rights movement essentially revolves around the acceptance of black people as equals, and that non-violent resistance alone won freedom for black people, you essentially gloss over the history of resistance that black people have been engaged in from the moment they got here centuries ago. I'm interested in showing that such a history of resistance has always existed, and that for this history in particular 'success' is not assimilation *per se*, it is *competition* — that is to say, the ability to compete head to head in every arena, and to achieve recognition as a capable people, not just as individuals. There exists a constant pressure to reject consciousness of blackness as difference; I use blackness to *amplify* difference as an oppositional force, both aesthetically and philosophically. Black consciousness means emphasising the historical particularities of being black in the world over notions of what it means to be American, or simply 'human', i.e. to be *assimilated*.

The goal is to try and break the pattern of weakness and dissipation that led to, and was exacerbated by, the Atlantic slave trade and imperial colonisation. That really is the underlying premise driving almost everything I do, and that's why I keep looking back at African and African-American history and culture to locate moments of resistance and rebellion. It is also why I have an eye on the present; I'm always looking for ways to propel a black presence, forcefully, into the future. Take the exhibition organized at the Secession in Vienna in 2012, 'Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green', a reference to Barnett Newman's series of paintings *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*, but also to the colours of Marcus Garvey's Pan-African flag — that's why the exhibition also includes portraits of the Stono Rebels, who led an early eighteenth-century slave rebellion, or people like David Walker, an outspoken abolitionist from the nineteenth century. I want people to know that resistance has existed from the very beginning. Rebellion wasn't something that started with the civil rights struggle; it started in the eighteenth century, and the goals of that struggle are yet to be realized.



**DR** — And one of those goals is to be able to compete — not be merely equal.

**KJM** — Absolutely. The goal is competitive parity in every arena. That is why the notion of *belatedness* that Jeff Wall wrote about so convincingly in his catalogue essay for my exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2010 is so relevant. When black people were first brought to the Western hemisphere from Africa and put to work as slaves, they were already competitively disadvantaged in lots of ways: they had no ocean-going ships, no explosive armaments, and no state economies that compelled adventure-seeking in search of wealth and resources. We were vulnerable on all those fronts. The dominant Western concept of art developed formally and philosophically, all the way from the fifth century BC to the nineteenth century AD, without any theoretical contributions from black scholars or practitioners. The development and perfection of realism in art, for instance, all the way from Jan van Eyck to the Photo-realists, wasn't in the least driven by African economies or African aesthetics. None of the important developments that gave rise to modernism were led by black people, despite the fact that approaches borrowed from 'primitive' and 'tribal' art inspired the radically transgressive gestures that defined much of modern art. Again, this is why for black people the crisis of representation is different from the crisis of representation experienced by whites. And the problem that African-American artists in particular were having is that by the 1950s people were saying that the game was essentially over while we were just getting started. We still don't get to decide what kinds of things will or will not be recognized as works of art, or what can or cannot enter the museum. All my life I've been expected to acknowledge the power and beauty of pictures made by white artists that have only white people in them; I think it's only reasonable to ask other people to do the same *vis-à-vis* paintings that have only black figures in them. That is part of the counter-archive that I'm seeking to establish in my work. In fact, I would have to qualify

even that notion, as my work is not an argument *against* anything; it is an argument *for* something else.

**DR** — I'd like to dwell on this notion of a counter-archive for a moment. Because if your work constitutes a critique of the dominant visual culture of the last five hundred years or so, it also does so by way of taking recourse to that culture's most paradigmatic art form, namely painting in the grand manner. Obviously there's a bit of a contradiction there.

**KJM** — Here's why I'm perfectly comfortable operating *within* the realm of painting with the goal of entering the museum as it is currently structured: if I don't do it, or if other people like me don't do it, we will be condemned to celebrate European beauty and Europe's artistic achievement in perpetuity.

**DR** — Thus perpetuating the self-same condition of invisibility...

**KJM** — And that's precisely why I stopped making abstract work — because white figures in pictures representative of ideal beauty and humanity are ubiquitous. The truth of this reality is almost everywhere taken for granted. And to me that's unacceptable. I have lots of young nieces and nephews — they should encounter a broader representation of human ideals than the post-imperial models I had to work against. I think it is safe to say that museums around the world are not going to get rid of their Titians, Goyas and Van der Weydens any time in the foreseeable future. Those pictures are going to stay right where they are, anchored in a narrative that begins in ancient Greece, Rome and medieval Italy, and is carried through all the way to Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol. The custodians of this history are happy to tell you that sometime in the late 1980s a space was opened up for all these different groups of people, all these other identities, to come in — but what does that mean? In all this, it really doesn't matter what we think of Velázquez, Matisse or Lucian Freud.

What *does* matter is that if no one is out there working to produce paintings with a racially different set of figures in them that are as interesting, as challenging and as *good* as those historical masterworks, non-white people will always be in trouble. So *that* is why I keep making pictures that aim to make their way into these museums. When one day the Prado will start collecting contemporary art, I want to be in a position to have one of my works considered. That matters.

**DR** – Could you talk a little more about your interest in the comic as a viable art form in its own right? I'm interested in the relationship of that particular form to the subject of our discussion.

**KJM** – The superhero-centred comic book is a very popular art form that has rarely featured black characters in the lead role – yet more invisibility. And of the few black characters that have appeared, none of them is the product of a black artistic imagination, and none has achieved the status of Superman, Batman, Spider-Man or the Fantastic Four. So that presents yet another challenge... Without a paradigmatic hero figure, and no heroic fantasies to speak of that can be transmitted over generations, black youth are as trapped as black adults are in an image world that privileges white persons as both heroic ideals and ideals of beauty. So I developed the *Rythm Mastr* comic project starting in 1999 because there was just too little out there featuring black people at the centre of it all. Although the project was originally conceived as a conceptual work about black absence in daily newspaper comics for the 1999 Carnegie International, the objective is to see its development through to a full-blown graphic novel, and ultimately an animated feature film.

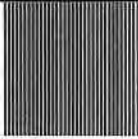
**DR** – It is worth noting that the comic strip has, historically at least, not only been overwhelmingly white, but also overwhelmingly male-dominated. It's not the first instance where your work intersects with questions of gender and masculinity as much as it does with questions of race.

**KJM** – Of course, we still have to contend with the fact that the shape of the world as we know it has been determined by and large by the prototypical white male adventurer. For black men, because my primary concern is with black culture, the picture becomes even more complicated because of what the dominant culture is willing to tolerate as far as demonstrations of a hyped-up masculinity are concerned. There are certain acceptable arenas in which black men can exercise the dominating tendencies of their masculinity, like athletics and entertainment. But intellectual and material invention, especially in areas such as weaponry and advanced technology, remain effectively closed off to black competition worldwide. Even the essentially soft-power domain of innovation in the visual arts has largely eluded our ambition.

**DR** – And of course as soon as some headway is made towards cracking the art world's glass ceiling, as soon as you're able to take a place at the table where it seems art history is written, you're told that art is dead and that art history is over...

**KJM** – Exactly right. Yet even if we accept that the game is over, we are somehow compelled to push on, because there are still plenty of useful moves to be made, even in endless endgames. And this is where the demographic changes in much of the Western world come into play: those peoples who were left outside while the canon was taking shape are now allowed inside to look at what the canon wrought, and of course they find that they are completely under-represented in it, and that the game is pretty much over – history has been written without them. But it is important that they continue to challenge the dominance and perceived naturalness of that canon regardless.

**DR** – We have to always be reminded of the particular social, economic and political conditions that determined how art was produced and how art history was written.



**KJM — Exactly — because it is in no way evident from the art you are looking at.**

This is an excerpt from an interview first published in Nav Haq (ed.), *Kerry James Marshall: Painting and Other Stuff* (Antwerp: Ludion 2014)



May 5, 2015 4:10 p.m.

## First Look! Kerry James Marshall Shows the High Line's Future Gentrification

By Kyle Chayka



Photo: Rendering of Kerry James Marshall, *Above the Line*, 2015. A High Line Commission. Courtesy of Friends of the High Line.

Can the High Line get away with critiquing the High Line (or at least the gentrification it put into hyperdrive) on the High Line itself? In the six years since the first phase of the abandoned industrial railroad reopened as a tourist promenade, empty lots have become multi-million-dollar condos seemingly overnight. The park has also spawned more and more of its own kind, sprouting minimalist urban platforms like those outside the new Whitney. The High Line's curator and director of art, Cecilia Alemani, can barely keep up.

“We used to have a **big billboard** ([http://art.thehighline.org/listing/?cat\\_word=billboard](http://art.thehighline.org/listing/?cat_word=billboard)) that we used for four years — we can't use it anymore,” said Alemani, who has made a habit of installing works by the likes of Ed Ruscha, Rashid Johnson, and El Anatsui within and in view of the park, over the phone (she's in Venice, naturally). “The city changes so radically around the High Line that with the art program, we need to adjust. There's a new rooftop, but the wall that you always loved has been demolished.”

The city's churn makes Alemani's upcoming project — a mural by artist Kerry James Marshall that will replace a **previous piece by Ruscha** (<http://art.thehighline.org/project/honey-i->

twisted-through-more-damn-traffic-today/) on a wall near West 22nd Street next month, which she is premiering on SEEN — feel particularly apropos. The piece, which will be hand-painted by the Brooklyn mural company Colossal Media (they make those *faux*-artisanal Vans and Jim Beam ads all over the place), depicts a semi-dystopian urban future in which even water towers have been transformed into glassed-in condos overlooking the city. In other words, everything looks like the very Chelsea residential towers that are rising up so quickly behind the High Line.

Titled *Above the Line*, the piece is Marshall's first public commission in New York City, and it stems from the artist's series of cartoons called "Dailies." "They feature black superheroes, who are overlooked in contemporary mainstream culture," Alemani says.

As the glut of unavoidable Marvel superhero blockbusters show, the demographic is largely white. Marshall draws from African-American culture to create new heroes in his "Rhythm Mastr" series, and looks to African sculpture to inspire superheroic powers.

Marshall's mural encourages different readings, depending on who sees it. The piece makes a previously hidden demographic publicly visible in a visual language — comic drawing — that's universally recognizable. But it also functions as "a criticism of what's happening in the cities, something that local community will appreciate much more," according to Alemani. It's a satire of gentrification in its native habitat.

Apart from the flying cars zipping around the glassy condos, the work is recognizable even as it is dystopian. The gentrification visible around *Above the Line* presages a future in which every part of the city looks like the High Line, stocked with glassy façades and inaccessible views. It's an eerily imminent fate, or maybe one already past, in which the city is more striated than ever. Can we escape it?

"This is very much a vision of a futuristic imaginary city, maybe New York City, I don't know!" Alemani says of Marshall's work. "We hope that is not what's going to happen next to the High Line, but it's almost there." If we are indeed almost there, almost reaching Marshall's vision of a High Line-ized cityscape, it would only make sense for a former freight railway, not so long ago a rusty, romantic artifact abandoned to the elements, to eventually become a runway for flying cars.

# ArtReview

September 2014

Kerry James Marshall *Painting and Other Stuff*

*Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona 11 June – 26 October*

*Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid 13 June – 26 October*

Billed as the most important exhibition in Europe of work by one of the preeminent American artists of his generation, this showing of recent work by Kerry James Marshall is the most ambitious offering from Barcelona's Tàpies Foundation since *la crisis* began back in 2008. In fact it's so ambitious that Marshall's earlier work overflows to the Reina Sofía in Madrid.

Marshall turns out to be a cool smooth-talker, born in Birmingham, Alabama, and long resident in Chicago following a childhood in LA that took in the Black Panthers and the Watts Riots: a background that continues to inform his work. In conversation prior to the opening, he risks stating the obvious: that art's history is both long and multicultural, while the art market is predominantly white and male (to which he could have added 'American').

At the outset of his career, already feeling marginalised, Marshall began interrogating the Western canon from within. Rejecting African-American abstraction that kowtowed to the mainstream, he began representing 'real' issues reflected in the media (he isn't specific, but the Kennedys and Martin Luther King are recurring themes) or on the streets, leading to a solitary stand for figuration that kicks sociopolitical ass. It's a persuasive argument, except Marshall is seemingly in denial of the elephant in the room.

Marshall (born 1955) came of age in an era when even postpainterly abstraction was long

passé; an era when the mainstream gravitated towards a neoexpressionist, postmodern figuration that was soon to be called the Transavantgarde or New Spirit. As a figurative painter in his mid-twenties, Marshall could hardly have been unaware of fellow travellers like David Salle and Julian Schnabel, or the overtly political figuration of Leon Golub and Nancy Spero. To deny them is not only disingenuous, it is to risk appearing both compromised and slyly derivative. Much as depicting African Americans partying-just-like-white-folks (*Garden Party*, 2003) is hardly radical when every second cop film since *Shaft* (1971) presents the same scenario.

A parody of Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* (1966–70) (*Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green*, 2011–12) imposes figurative elements while adopting the colours of the black nationalist flag, though the stylistic shifts in these three disparate canvases clash with the vision of Bill Cosby's homely middle-class America portrayed elsewhere. *Black Star* (2011), a topless woman bursting through a minimalist 'Frank Stella', further subverts the modernist canon while – read the fine print – referencing the return-to-Africa ideology of the 1920s Black Star Line shipping company, served with a sideswipe at racial and gender stereotyping.

Other paintings portray more succinctly the everyday lives of African Americans: Boy Scouts;

main street; the barber's shop; house hunting; dancing; loving. The figures are impossibly black – simultaneously present and redacted – in a point well made if overplayed. More than art history, Marshall's multiple styles derive from the directness of naive painting and cartoons, agitprop murals and American billboards, or political and religious marching banners: boldly realised and confrontational – all rictus smiles and whites of the eyes.

Among his precedents, Marshall cites the rough-hewn performances of the great blues players, but rarely matches the economy imposed by the limitations of three chords and the pentatonic scale. By comparison, Marshall's augmentations are overworked cover versions, where everything gets thrown in, including the eponymous 'other stuff'. Videos, photos and magazine cuttings are the sort of *de rigueur* archival material expected these days: fast food for the MTV generation. Foremost a painter, Marshall has, I sense, sold out to the white male American dealer at the crossroads in return for a chance to tread the boards and strut his stuff.

Marshall has his moments. *Nude (Spotlight)* (2009) is an especially successful work, with a restrained suggestion of the Pop of Patrick Caulfield or Valerio Adami, but his painting is often too upfront, the political subtext too leaden to counterbalance what little finesse there is in the art. *Keith Patrick*



*Mementos*, 1998.

Courtesy Rennie Collection, Vancouver





KERRY JAMES MARSHALL, GARDEN PARTY, 2003, PAINTING, ACRYLIC, PAPER, CANVAS, 304.8 X 304.8 CM, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NY, AND KOPLIN DEL RIO, CA

# **KERRY JAMES MARSHALL**

## **– CHALLENGING ROCOCO AND IMPRESSIONIST IMAGE STRATEGIES**

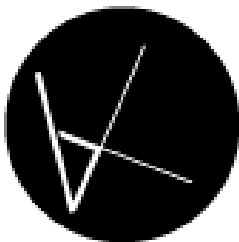
A Contribution by Philippe Pirotte

1

### **PHILIPPE PIROTTE**

\*1972 in Antwerp, lives and works in Frankfurt am Main.

Philippe Pirotte is a Belgian art historian, critic, and curator of numerous international exhibitions. He studied Art History at Ghent University. In 1999 he co-founded the art center objectif\_exhibitions in Antwerp. From 2005 to 2011, he was Director of Kunsthalle Bern. Since 2004, Pirotte has held the position of Senior Advisor of the Rijksakademie for Visual Arts in Amsterdam. In July 2012, he became Adjunct Senior Curator at the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Next to that he is currently advising program director for the Sifang Art Museum in Nanjing. Pirotte will take up position as new director of the Städelschule Academy of Fine Arts in Frankfurt am Main in April 2014.



**BIELEFELDER KUNSTVEREIN**

»By adopting characteristics of specific periods and styles, I would like for my paintings to call attention to the absence of works by Black artists in those moments where none is represented.«<sup>1</sup> (Kerry James Marshall)

Kerry James Marshall is known for large-scale paintings, sculptures, and other objects that take up African-American life and history as their subject matter. His work often deals with the effects of the Civil Rights movement on domestic life, as well as working with elements of popular culture. But Kerry James Marshall's main artistic project is a much more bold and ambitious one and has museums in mind from the outset. His work springs from his indignation at the black body's lack of presence in western art history and art collections, and at the absence of any history and aesthetic ideas from the point of view of Africans and Afro-Americans. The impossibility to encounter their own history, their physical presence in representations of that history, markers or symbols of their identity in those museums, made him set out to fill that gap, to correct western art history, single handedly, by creating particular paintings to testify to Afro-American history, life, and aesthetics.

Right from the beginning of his career, he has been working to this purpose, expecting that his works would end up in those museums, or - in case they



KERRY JAMES MARSHALL, VIGNETTE #2.25, 2008, PAINTING, ACRYLIC ON POLYVINYL, 186 X 155 CM, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO



KERRY JAMES MARSHALL, VIGNETTE #2, 2005, PAINTING, ACRYLIC ON PLEXIGLASS, 186 X 155 CM, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

would not - creating an œuvre as an alternative, »museum-like« history of painting. His work is essentially revisionist, with many genres or historical moments figuring in it and, by doing so, unsettling the canon. When asked whether his oeuvre would contain references to the western art historical canon, the artist replied that he saw that history of art much rather as a shopping catalogue, just like other visual regimes from which he could choose, whether to use elements out of Classicism, Baroque, Rococo, Impressionism, or Modernist movements like Cubism, Action Painting, Post-Painterly Abstraction, etc. But Marshall's undertaking involves more than just appropriating stylistic strategies as borrowed vernaculars.

For example, in his series, »Vignette« (2005), he addresses the (western) notion of the idyll, but he politicises its tranquil pictorial rendition in, for instance, 17<sup>th</sup> Century French landscape painting - where the idyll unfolds in terms of figures in relationship with a landscape. Looking to the classicist Poussin, but also to Fragonard and Boucher, Kerry James Marshall's paintings in grisaille don't reaffirm the promises of the Rococo's indulgent pleasures, but question the absence of the black figure's imagery in a fairly well-received genre that embodied the popular imaginary of the nascent bourgeois class in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe, one which notably benefited from the colonization of Africa.

Marshall's »Vignettes« evoke nostalgic sentiments, but for times that never existed, because they refer to the Rococo period, where pleasure and excess reigned. In order »not to give in to all the promises of this decadent genre«<sup>2</sup>, he uses the soberness of grisaille, another historical painting technique - usually in shades of grey or near-monochrome in large decorative schemes in imitation of sculpture, - for his presentation of Afro-Americans in romantic scenes suggesting ideals of



KERRY JAMES MARSHALL, VIGNETTE  
#2.50, 2008, PAINTING, ACRYLIC ON  
POLYVINYL, 186 X 155 CM, COURTESY OF  
THE ARTIST AND ART INSTITUTE OF  
CHICAGO



KERRY JAMES MARSHALL, VIGNETTE  
#2.75, 2008, PAINTING, ACRYLIC ON  
POLYVINYL, 186 X 155 CM, COURTESY OF  
THE ARTIST AND ART INSTITUTE OF  
CHICAGO

a better future. He adapts the themes of the idyllic encounter and moves the romantic imagery in an urban or suburban environment. The notion of the idyllic, as suggested in the etymology of the word (from the Greek »eidolon«, meaning »small picture«, diminutive of the Greek »eidos«, »form, picture«), underlines the concept that its essence resides in images, simultaneously reminding us of the very impossibility of the idyll's existence outside of them. In Western consciousness, the idea of the idyll developed along completely different lines from, for example, the notion of utopia, which is invariably laden with political significance. Kerry James Marshall infuses the idyll with its allegorical but nonetheless »unreachable« alternative and, by doing so, causes it to slide between the two ideas, consciously reflecting the fact that »the unviability of the idyll's existence outside the image becomes an instinctive component of a broader thought process about inclusion and exclusion«.<sup>3</sup>

Marshall's stylistic parody goes further in his painting »Garden Party« (2003), in which he tackles Impressionism - the most popular painting style with mass-appeal. Impressionism is another genre epitomizing the western notion of the idyllic; it may well be encountered in the big museums, but it (almost) never represents people of colour. »Garden Party« portrays a group of coloured people at a party in an American suburban garden, and in it the painter is wondering if they too could lead a life of romantic, pastoral bliss, just as their colonial and slave masters seem to have enjoyed, at least in their representations. In order to confuse his public, Marshall reworked the painting with a pastiche »Impressionist«, sometimes even »Divisionist« (George Seurat's »Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la Grande Jatte«, 1884-86, is part of the collection of the Art Institute in





KERRY JAMES MARSHALL, VIGNETTE #3,  
2005, PAINTING, ACRYLIC ON  
PLEXIGLAS, 186 X 155 CM, COURTESY OF  
THE ARTIST AND ART INSTITUTE OF  
CHICAGO

Chicago, the city where Marshall lives) brushstroke, so that we would immediately identify the genre only to start doubting that identity on looking again. This subtle perversion of pervading and received imagery regimes in western art history, but also in popular culture, seems the only possibility for Marshall, who refutes more aggressive acts in art, exactly because he thinks westerners have been internalizing the false truth that ideas of beauty, progression and modernity cannot be connected with the black subject. That's probably why he has always wanted to be »a history painter on a grand scale like Giotto and Géricault... but the moment when that kind of painting was really possible seems so distant, especially after Pollock and Polke. Nevertheless, I persist, trying to construct meaningful pictures that solicit identification with, and reflection on Black existential realities... «.<sup>4</sup>

(Kerry James Marshall in a letter to Arthur Jafa, written in the Summer of 1994; Documenta X).

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> [www.ensembles.mhka.be/items/8099?  
lang=en](http://www.ensembles.mhka.be/items/8099?lang=en) [20.01.2014]

<sup>2</sup> [www.ensembles.mhka.be/items/8099?  
lang=en](http://www.ensembles.mhka.be/items/8099?lang=en) [20.01.2014]

<sup>3</sup> Philippe Pirotte and Gerrit Vermeiren, »Idyl as to answer that picture«, in: Idyl, Middelheim Museum & objectif\_exhibitions, 2005, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Kerry James Marshall in a letter to Arthur Jafa, written in the Summer of 1994; Documenta X.

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SPECIAL ISSUE: 30 YEARS

## Painting Black Presence: Kerry James Marshall

Museo Art Reina Sofia, Madrid and Fundacio Antoni Tapies, Barcelona June 13 to October 26, 2014  
August 7, 2014  
BY [Jill Glessing](#)



How do you paint absence? This is the formal and conceptual problem that US artist Kerry James Marshall set for himself early on—“to call attention to the absence of black presence” in visual art. Entwined with this was another aim: getting authentic representations of black culture accepted into an exclusively white visual-art tradition such as Western painting.

Marshall grew up in the late 1950s and 60s in Birmingham, Alabama, and South Central Los Angeles, California, hotspots of the civil rights movement. While demonstrators in these places were being shot with water cannons and bullets, Marshall absorbed their political consciousness as a child, and later worked to develop tools for another sort of power—that of visual representation.

In the 1960s as well, some contemporary white artists engaged in a “crisis of representation” were rejecting the established art system. Yet for many black artists just entering the game, the term “crisis of representation” meant something quite different: changing the fact that they quite simply did not see themselves and their cultures sufficiently represented in the arts. One result was the Black Arts Movement, an aesthetic arm of the Black Power movement, which ran from roughly 1965 to 1975.

Marshall, who studied at the Otis College of Art in the mid 1970s, was informed by the Black Arts Movement and thought that the real crisis at hand was the “the lack in the image bank” of black subjects. Rather than abandoning the museum, he wanted to bring black artists in.

“I keep making pictures that aim to make their way into these museums,” Marshall has said. “When one day the Prado will start collecting contemporary art, I want to be in a position to have one of my works considered.”

Marshall hasn’t seen his work in the Prado yet, but he’s close. His mid-career retrospective “Kerry James Marshall: painting and other stuff” is installed nearby in Madrid’s Museo Reina Sofia, as well as at Barcelona’s Fundació Antoni Tàpies. Already celebrated for his painting, it is the “other stuff” of the exhibition title—collage, video, photography, installation, and comic-book graphics—that the curators thought to elevate here.

Unifying all of Marshall’s chosen art forms is his process of “amalgamation” of multiple languages drawn from a shopping catalogue of styles—from high to low art, from across time and place, including European, Japanese, American, and African-aboriginal and -diasporic arts and cultures. Among his subjects are the reverberations of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the neglected history of black resistance, the everyday reality of African Americans (beyond the tropes of exotics or victims), and their potential for a better life.

Marshall’s mix of media is shared between the two museums, though most of the paintings are found in the larger Reina Sofia venue. Many of the artist’s forays beyond painting are successful, but Marshall has spent most of his career with paint, and that is what shines brightest.

The paintings are generally either large, narrative tableaux in the style of “grand manner” history paintings or smaller portraits of varied dimensions. His canvases are sometimes layered with paper before painting, giving them the glossy appearance of early Renaissance wood panels. Imagery such as book covers are collaged into selected canvases, along with stencilled impressions of roses.

Marshall’s signature stylistic innovation has been his emphatically black bodies. While struggling with the problem of how to represent black figures within narrative painting, a genre that offered few to no such models, he recognized Ralph Ellison’s description of invisibility from *Invisible Man*—the condition of, as Marshall has put it, “being and not being, the simultaneity of presence and absence.” *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of his Former Self* (1980) shows a black silhouetted figure with white grinning teeth, eyes and shirt collar—a kind of blackface caricature—with the pale elements popping out against a nearly black background.

Renaissance painters developed realist techniques, such as chiaroscuro to suggest volume, for their mostly white subjects. Marshall renews that incomplete project to include bodies largely excluded from those historical pictures, and has developed varied techniques for painting black skin. Sometimes, light reflects off his black faces as stylized stars; elsewhere, light is absorbed seductively as deep, purpley tones.



Both of these techniques are seen in *Black Star* (2011), along with themes of resistance and freedom. A very black, very real woman breaks through the abstract surface of a Frank Stella–inspired, star-shaped design that also evokes the early-20th-century Black Star Line that offered newly liberated African-Americans passage back to Africa.

Marshall’s purpose is partly rhetorical, as he makes the early activists’ slogan “Black is Beautiful” even more emphatic and concrete. But he is also deeply committed to a craft traditionally tasked with beauty. Indeed, his rich palette of greens, reds, and pinks set off against black, velvety figures is both celebratory and strikingly beautiful.

Another Marshall feature is his mixing of perspectival systems, so that realism, flattened space, stylized pattern, and symbolic elements share one pictorial space. In *Slow Dance* (1992—93) a man and woman, deeply black other than the whites of the woman’s eyes and her fingernails, stand in statuesque embrace in a living room that shares the wonky perspective of Van Gogh’s bedroom and the flattened space and expressionist colour of Matisse’s red studio. On a table coated with Haitian Vévé markings stands a bottle and an Ebony magazine that, like Cezanne’s still-life fruits, stay miraculously put despite their perspectival instability. As in early medieval, or even Egyptian, images, a textual register is added into the visual—a banner of musical score and the words “BABY I’M FOR RE-AL” float lyrically above the couple. Primitive masks watch over them protectively, and pink and red stencilled roses on the wall promise hope.

Some of the painted portraits recall at once Byzantine icons, Flemish portraits, Pop art screenprints and primitive sculpture. *Lost Boy: AKA Black Johnny* (1995) commemorates the many inner-city African-American children who lost their lives in gang wars or were incarcerated through police profiling. Around the intensely black face, a halo, golden rays and delicately patterned stencils of pink and white suggest sacrificial loss. The features are stylized, as with carved wooden masks, yet appear realistic. A Jackson Pollock drip of white paint falls just above the saint’s sad eye.

Marshall has extended his experiments with dark tonalities beyond painting into photography with his recent UV light portraits. In *Untitled (Cheryl)* (2012), a seductive darkness envelops his reclining subject in soft, understated tones.

In a contrasting mode, Marshall’s inkjet collage of found photographic imagery titled *Heirlooms and Accessories* (2002) examines a shameful, not so distant past. Against the faintly visible scene of a crowd at a 1930s Indiana lynching, the faces of three white women looking directly at the camera are isolated and framed by medallions on chains. Avoiding a simple reiteration of a shocking historical image, Marshall considers the power structure that subtends it—that is, how power and wealth were acquired by the chaining of Africans, and also how power and wealth have been passed down through generations of privileged whites.

Marshall has been applying an increasingly complex repertoire of styles, media and conceptual materials to his powerful interventions in the politics of aesthetics. Let us hope that at least some of those explorations continue to be carried out with paint.

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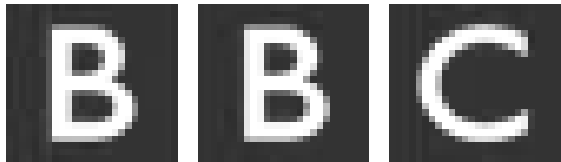
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STATE OF THE ART 23 October 2014

## Kerry James Marshall: Challenging racism in art history



Alastair Sooke



Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Beach Towel)*, 2014 (All rights reserved/Courtesy David Zwirner, London)

For centuries black people appeared in art as slaves or exotic novelties – and the painter Kerry James Marshall wants to challenge these racist ideas. He talks to Alastair Sooke.

“When I go to the movies, I’m expected to identify with all of the characters, and most of them are white,” says the African-American artist Kerry James Marshall, sitting on the top floor of David Zwirner’s immaculate gallery in a Mayfair townhouse in London, where his new exhibition of paintings [Look See](#) has just opened. “But when you put a black character in there, somehow the white audience isn’t expected to identify with them. That’s a problem.”

He smiles, before continuing: “If you walk into any magazine store, I guarantee that nine out of 10 covers will feature white, blonde, blue-eyed, slim women because that’s still the ideal of beauty. When a black or Asian figure shows up in a fashion magazine, she’s the exception, not the rule. So what does that mean when we talk about equality? To me, equality means that I would be as likely to see black figures as anybody else.”





Kerry James Marshall in 2014 (Felix Clay. All rights reserved/Courtesy David Zwirner, London)

Now 59, Marshall may have little sway in the world of moviemaking or the fashion industry, but he is doing his damndest to ensure equality for black people in contemporary art. It is more than three decades since he painted *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self* (1980), a caustic, subversive work in which the whites of a schematic black man's eyes, as well as his bright teeth and shirt, float against a dark background. "That grin referred to a joke people used to tell about black people," he says. "That they are so dark you couldn't see them at night unless they were smiling."

Since then, he has earned acclaim for placing black figures centre-stage within his complex, beautiful paintings – and his new exhibition continues this campaign. From the victorious beauty queen and the happy couple enjoying cocktails in a nightclub, to the models in an artist's studio and the woman holding up a pink towel against her chest, every figure in the show is black.



Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Studio)*, 2014 (All rights reserved/Courtesy David Zwirner, London)

Not only that, but their skin tone is strikingly uniform: ebony-dark, with an attractive, satiny sheen. “The blackness of my figures is supposed to be unequivocal, absolute and unmediated,” Marshall explains. “They are a response to the tendency in the culture to privilege lightness. The lighter the skin, the more acceptable you are. The darker the skin, the more marginalised you become. I want to demonstrate that you can produce beauty in the context of a figure that has that kind of velvety blackness. It can be done.”

On the margins

It feels sad to write this in 2014, but seeing black people represented in paintings in this fashion remains unusual. In part this is the legacy of the way that they were traditionally presented within art history.

Western artists often cast a black figure as one of the magi when painting the stock scene of the Adoration of the Kings ([Jan Gossaert's Renaissance altarpiece](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-gossaert-the-adoration-of-the-kings) (<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-gossaert-the-adoration-of-the-kings>) on this theme in the National Gallery in London is a good example). Other than that, though, black people usually appear in Western art as peripheral servants: the Moorish page to the left of [Van Dyck's 1634 portrait of Princess Henrietta of Lorraine](http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/princess-henrietta-of-lorraine-16111660-attended-by-a-pag191703) (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/princess-henrietta-of-lorraine-16111660-attended-by-a-pag191703>) or the woman bearing flowers in the background of Manet's famous nude Olympia (1863) are both typical of this trend. “Those are the two primary forms of representation,” says Marshall, “although you might also see images of black people in the process of being conquered.”



Édouard Manet, Olympia, 1863

Marshall, who was born in Birmingham, Alabama and grew up in the South Central area of Los Angeles, first became aware of the invisibility of black people within what he calls “the visual field” not by visiting museums but by reading comic books. “There were no black superheroes,” he recalls. “When they did introduce the Black Panther in Fantastic Four [in 1966], I became acutely aware that the black superhero was a strange phenomenon – an exception to the rule. Then I started noticing the same thing everywhere else. Black figures were never the central subjects in art-history books.”

There is no rancour in Marshall's voice when he says this: rather, it is obvious that he loves art history and hopes to emulate the Old Masters, not raze them to the ground. But he does lament the fact that black artists still have to negotiate a predominantly white art world.

Figuring it out

Of course, in recent decades, many black artists have enjoyed enormous success, from Jean-Michel Basquiat in the '80s to Kara Walker, Yinka Shonibare, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Steve McQueen today. But Marshall believes that there is still much work to be done.

“For black people,” he says, “everything we do has to be ratified and endorsed by a power structure that is white. And that reinforces a kind of racial hierarchy where whiteness is the privileged position to be in, and ethnicity is problematic. But if you are always standing on the sideline as witness to other people achieving great things, then ultimately that has a damaging psychological effect because it undermines your sense of self-worth.”



Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Pink Towel)*, 2014 (All rights reserved/Courtesy David Zwirner, London)

This is why Marshall is so keen to thrust black figures into the limelight in his art. "The reason why I do figurative work is because I think the presence of those figures is really important," he says. "What is of value in the work I have done is that I am bringing with me an image that a lot of other people are afraid to bring into the mainstream. Eventually, I want the presence of black figures in the art-history books to be commonplace." Slowly but surely, he is rewriting art history, one picture at a time.

Alastair Sooke is art critic of *The Daily Telegraph*

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Sep 2, 2014



*Untitled (Club scene)* (2013), Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist, the Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Koplín Del Río, California.

## Review: 'Kerry James Marshall: Painting and Other Stuff' at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies

RYE DAG HOLMBOE

Retrospectively, what is perhaps most striking about Kerry James Marshall's exhibition at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies is the range of media used. Paintings, films, animations, sculptures, photographs and installations have been brought together in a stimulating and thought-provoking show which, somewhat against the odds, manages to cohere.

The exhibition opens with a painted portrait titled *Believed to be a Portrait of David Walker (circa 1830)* (2009). The work depicts David Walker, an African-American abolitionist famous for the pamphlet 'Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World' (1829), which urged slaves to revolt and fight for their freedom.

Employing a format typically used in the 19th century to depict white bourgeois men, *Believed to be a Portrait of David Walker (circa 1830)* functions as a kind of imaginary commemoration, an attempt to fill what Marshall has described as the 'lack in the image bank'. At the same time, the way in which the figure has been painted – the face a shiny bluish-black, the background indigo, the figure's jacket a dusty blue – has an abstracting effect that works to undo the painting's referential function. The histories of paint and colour are as much the subject of Marshall's work as David Walker is.



*Believed to be a Portrait of David Walker (circa 1830) (2009), Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the Deighton Collection, London*



Scattered across the floor of the exhibition's main room are comically oversized stamps and ink pads, as well as posters whose slogans are drawn from the civil rights movement: 'BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL', 'BLACK POWER', 'BURN BABY BURN', and so on. (The oversized stamps seem to have been used to produce these images). There is a subdued but carnivalesque quality to these posters, one that is also encountered in other works like *Black Star* (2011) and *The Art of Hanging Pictures* (2002).

The first work is a painting of a black woman bursting out of a painted star, a comment perhaps on gender stereotypes. The second work comprises variously sized photographs that have been hung in a haphazard manner. These depict, for example, a series of churches, a fenced sports field, a kitsch pink plastic swan or a worried-looking African-American mother. The work might be understood to emphasise the imbalanced nature of black experience, while at the same time offering a humorous commentary on the supposed neutrality of picture hanging.

The second part of 'Painting and Other Stuff' comprises a more specific examination of black visual culture. After a series of cartoons in which figures in a museum discuss the

imposition of Western European models of culture, the viewer is met with a short film of an African-American woman examining items in her home. In each scene African folk art and voodoo enter into an uneasy dialogue with Christian religious icons. Similar issues are addressed in *Gleaning: An Image Reclamation Project*



*Black Star* (2011), Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of Marilyn and Larry Fields, Chicago.

(2003). The work comprises an ever-expanding image bank of clippings from popular magazines and art history books. These explore the commodification of 'blackness', the cultural stereotypes that define the African-American subject, as well as the problematic quality (and general absence) of representations of black subjects in the art-historical canon.

It would be difficult to do justice to the many works in the show, both because of their differences and because of their complexity. Whether they address the history of slavery, race politics, black power or social emancipation, Marshall's works do not lend themselves to simple interpretations. What they offer are ambiguous, often conflicting views on the historical position of the African-American subject, all the while exploring and critiquing the ideological underpinnings of visual culture and the history of art.

'Kerry James Marshall: Painting and Other Stuff' is at the [Fundació Antoni Tàpies](#), Barcelona, until 26 October.



## The year's best art

This year, the art world dished up some of the most intricate and interesting shows we've seen yet – here are some of our favourites

Arts+Culture Best of 2014

December 17, 2014

Text **Francesca Gavin**

KERRY JAMES MARSHALL AT M HKA ANTWERP (<http://www.muhka.be/>)

Kerry James Marshall is increasingly getting the international attention he deserves. This big retrospective in Antwerp included some of his older collage work, comic strip pieces and history paintings. But the highlight were three huge canvases in largely red, green and black – which demonstrated how he simply keeps getting better in his redefinition of the representation of Blackness.



Kerry James Marshall's retrospective exhibition at M HKA, Antwerp (4 October – 2 February) included his older collage work, comic strip pieces and history paintings  
Courtesy of Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen

# What You See

Visibility, identity and black people on Mars —  
Kerry James Marshall in conversation with  
*Ellen Mara De Wachter*

*Small Pin-Up (Lens Flare)*, 2013,  
acrylic on PVC, 76 × 61 cm





Kerry James Marshall, born in 1955 in Birmingham, Alabama, was brought up in Los Angeles before moving to Chicago, where he now lives and works. His practice – which includes painting, photography and video – engages with African-American histories, from the slave trade to the Black Nationalist movement, as well as with more intimate stories of specific individuals. Commemoration is a recurring theme, with a key series of paintings dedicated to ‘Lost Boys’: young men killed or abandoned by various social systems. His oeuvre addresses the dearth of representations of the black body in art history and mainstream culture, and aims to redress this ‘lack in the image bank’. Marshall’s works develop a nuanced system in which each of the many different blacks he uses gains its own visual definition and meaning. Ellen Mara De Wachter spoke to Marshall on the occasion of his current retrospective, *‘Painting and Other Stuff’*, at M HKA, Antwerp, the largest presentation of his work to date.

#### ELLEN MARA DE WACHTER

*I was particularly struck by your collages: Yellow Quarters (1979), which depicts a man lying on the ground with a house on the horizon, and the two Untitled (Nude) works from 1982 of naked black females. The way you’ve torn the paper is very painterly. Did you decide to show these works now because you just recently came to a new understanding about collage, or because ‘Painting and Other Stuff’ is such a comprehensive exhibition?*

#### KERRY JAMES MARSHALL

It certainly is a big show! It attempts to outline the pathway of my production. The early drawings, like *Skull Drawing* (1970–71), and the early paintings and collages are all really foundational works that got me to the place where I am today.

It’s not as apparent in a lot of the early work, but I already had kind of a collage sensibility. When I started making collages – and they were so small at first – people used to say: ‘Oh, these would be great as studies for a big painting.’ But I really wasn’t interested in that because the collage is its own thing. Part of the challenge that I set for myself was to make paintings that were collage-like but didn’t start from collages. Some of that remains in a number of the works here. There’s a period in which I was making paintings that really look like they were constructed from fragments of things.

**EMDW** *Even something like your recent three colours trilogy – Red (If They Come in the Morning) (2011), Black and Green (both 2012) – has that collage sensibility, because I can’t read it all at once, I have to skim across and go in, out, back, forth. In Untitled (Nude), it’s like the torn paper is all kinds of different blacks but none of them seems to be taken from photos of flesh, just from backgrounds. To create the figure you’ve used what is probably a night sky or an airport or an advertisement for a drink.*

**KJM** But then you find out that those blacks have colour in them, too. Some of them are blue, some are green, some are red or brown; all of that colour in those blacks became really important to me while I was making collages.

**EMDW** *In your painting Believed to be a Portrait of David Walker (Circa 1830) (2009), I can read all those different blacks and see the intimate, painterly knowledge you need to have of the pigments you’re mixing in order to create them.*

**KJM** Which is hard to do. When I started painting these black figures against black backgrounds in 1980, I was trying to figure out how to create this distinction between the image and the ground, but still preserve the essential blackness of the whole thing. Which is almost like the way Ad Reinhardt’s paintings work; there’s a lot of difference in them but when you first encounter one of his black paintings, it just seems to be a solid black, flat surface.

**EMDW** *What about the factual sources in your paintings? Of the works that comprise the aforementioned triptych – one of which is predominantly red, one black and one green, comprising the colours of the Pan-African flag – I believe you said that Black depicts the side of a school in Chicago.*

**KJM** Malcolm X College in Chicago flies three flags in front of the school: the American flag, the City of Chicago flag and the Black Nationalist flag – the red, black and green. It’s that space in which those flags are flying.

**EMDW** *Are the things that are happening in black culture in the US right now inspiring your current work? I’m thinking of Jay Z’s ‘Picasso Baby’ video or Kanye West’s performance at Art Basel (both 2013)?*

**KJM** That doesn’t interest me because it’s just entertainment.

**EMDW** *But with the Jay Z video, one could say he involved so many interesting artists – Fred Wilson, Lorna Simpson and Rashid Johnson, for example – that perhaps it was more than entertainment and a way of giving greater visibility to black*

*‘Figuration is more important than abstraction, because we live in a world in which the quantity of images you see really does matter.’*

*artists? And whether that’s simply a power play or whether it also has an impact on the visibility of black culture in a fine art context, might be an issue. Do you see any benefit in this kind of art-world participation in mainstream culture or is it just a strategy?*

**KJM** My first response is that it’s a publicity stunt because it’s not clear what the benefit of it would be. On the one hand, Jay Z is making a lot of money. He’s buying Picassos, right? That’s what rich people do. And he just happens to have recently come into some kind of consciousness that he can participate in the art world as well, so what he buys gets some attention because Jay Z bought it. To the degree that it encourages other wealthy black people to buy work by African-American artists, that has some value because the art world depends on markets, just like anything else.

In order for African-American artists to achieve any kind of independence – the ability to do what they want to do as opposed to what they think they need to do to be viable in the marketplace – you really do need a large enough group of black folks who are willing to pay for things that mainstream collectors won’t pay for. When you achieve an independent economic foundation like that, then you can do anything. So if that’s the outcome of this kind of thing then that’s all good because it fuels and funds a thing called an avant-garde.

**EMDW** *It’s about collectivity, isn’t it? It always has to be.*

**KJM** Right. In order to go against the grain you have to have a solid support structure. At the moment, that doesn’t exist for black artists because most of their work is not bought by black people. That’s just the reality. Even where there are black people who have a lot of money, you don’t have a lot of them with the knowledge or real interest in being part of what you call the contemporary art world, because that didn’t emerge from their culture. You’re talking about trying to build a culture of consumption in a particular art world that doesn’t really exist.

But that’s also a consequence of the fact that the black population in the US is capital-poor, in the real economic sense. So we don’t drive any of the markets, especially of individual artists. In some cases, you could argue we don’t even drive the markets in the music industry, where black people are more present and have been for generations. All of those hip-hop artists who have been successful are only successful on some levels because white kids spend money on those CDs and go to those concerts; it’s not because there are whole lots of black folks going to those concerts, because they just don’t have the money to support that.

**EMDW** *You have made several works that deal with young black men, and the killings, disenfranchisement and injustices they suffer. Your ‘Lost Boys’ series features portraits of black boys who you’ve described as ‘lost in the ghetto, lost in public housing, lost in joblessness, and lost in literacy’. Wake (2003) is a work comprising 20 photographs of black men and women, including one of yourself as a young man, who are stand-ins for the first Africans sold into slavery at the Jamestown Settlement in 1619. Are more recent events – such as the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 – something you would tap into for inspiration, or are you more interested in historic figures as symbols of the oppression of black Americans?*

**KJM** I wouldn’t do anything around Martin’s murder because, really, the ‘Lost Boys’ piece was already my comment on that.

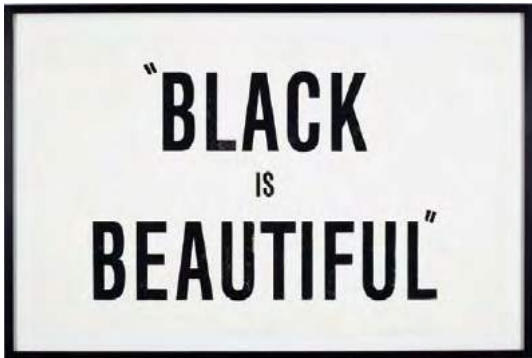
**EMDW** *Only it keeps happening...*

**KJM** Again and again. There’s a way in which making work that responds to current events is just a means of venting, or being able to scream: ‘This thing hurts!’ But all of the marches, all of the protests, all of the celebrities wearing hoodies saying, ‘I am Trayvon Martin’ – that just makes people feel good in the moment because it makes them feel they did something in a circumstance where they’re powerless otherwise. But what they never address are the roots of that powerlessness.

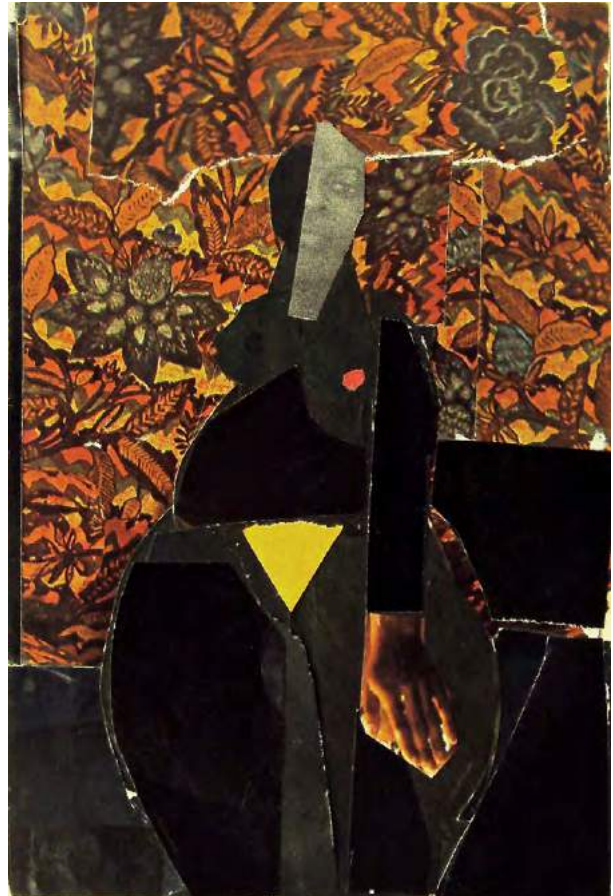
Part of the reason why I make works across the span of history – from the David Walker portrait up to, say, *Red (If They Come in the Morning)*, which references the title of Angela Davis’s 1971 book – is because I’m interested in the precipitating events that cause these



1



2



3

1  
*Lost Boys: AKA  
 Black Johnny*, 1993, acrylic  
 and collage on  
 canvas, 63 × 63 cm

2  
*Black is Beautiful*  
 1998, relief print on paper,  
 64 × 102 cm

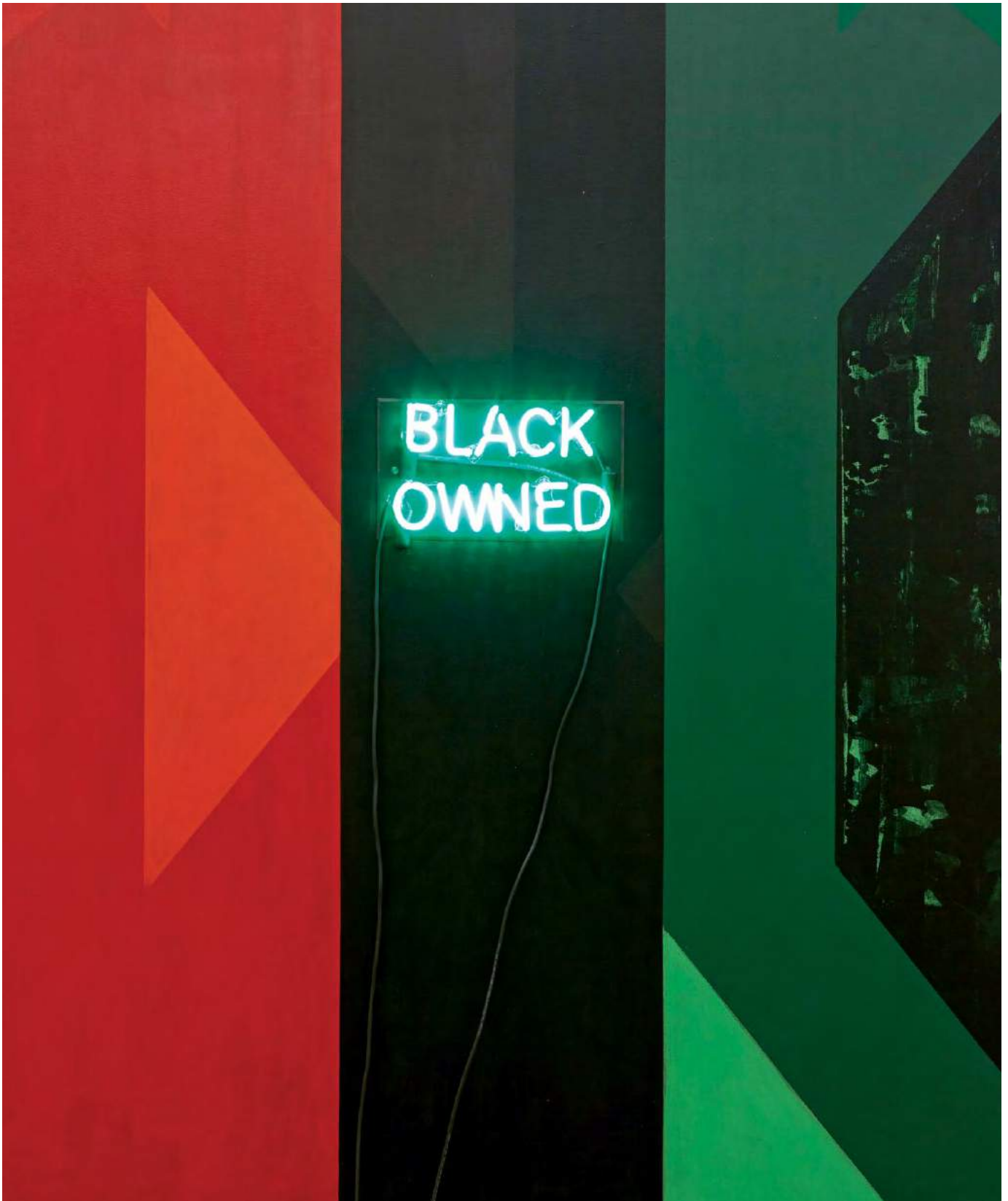
3  
*Untitled (Nude)*,  
 1982, collage, 13 × 10 cm

4  
*Green (Untitled)*,  
 2012, acrylic on canvas,  
 2.4 × 5.4 m



4

1 courtesy: the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Koppin Del Rio, Los Angeles • 2 courtesy: Rennie Collection; photographs: M HKA • 3 courtesy: the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Koppin Del Rio, Los Angeles • 4 courtesy: Rennie Collection; photograph: Wolfgang Thaler



*Black Owned*, 2012,  
acrylic and neon on PVC,  
1.8 × 1.5 m



*'I think the primary thing my work does is establish a black presence. On some level that's really all you can expect it to do.'*

things to happen over time and in succession. In the case of Martin and the idea of racial profiling, the question is not really whether there's racism in society that causes people to act the way that George Zimmerman did when he shot him; the real question is why Martin was vulnerable in the first place.

**EMDW** *We have to go back to the sources.*

**KJM** We have to ask: Why are black people largely economically, socially, psychologically and politically vulnerable? If you want to transform the circumstances of black people writ large, then you have to start looking at the implications of those originating events and how black people got in the position they're in.

**EMDW** *In what way do you think art can effect change in that understanding? Is it a matter of consciousness-raising? Or is there an actual political or revolutionary potential in the images you make and how they're disseminated? How do you get beyond the confines of the museum or the magazines or the discussions around art school tables and into the world?*

**KJM** There are two ways to think about it. One is to consider what the museum represents. When I came here this morning there was a group of about 40 seven and eight year olds touring the museum. If there are black kids in those groups and they only see white people in these pictures then they will be conditioned, like a lot of us are, to expect that you only see white people in art work, and especially art work that is supposed to be 'the best'.

**EMDW** *So, having works in public collections that are about black people, or show black people, is a big start.*

**KJM** It's a big start if they come to museums and encounter images that have black figures in them on a regular basis. Then they don't grow up with this assumption that they don't belong in there. The investment that people make in places like this museum – the building, the structure – matters, and so this is a transformative arena. Its power extends beyond the museum itself because of the encounters that somebody in their formative years will have with what they see in a place like this. That leaves an indelible impression.

Then there are also the images you see within other kinds of visual production. If I pick up European *Vogue*, let's say, or *W* magazine, I could turn 40 pages before I see a picture of somebody who is not white. So you say: 'The preferred image is this woman, this woman represents what is beautiful, what is sophisticated.' So that means the people who are producing those images prefer them. White people like to see themselves and they are comfortable with themselves as representative of what's beautiful and advanced in the world. But if I pick up these magazines and I say that this is also *my* preferred image, how I define beauty, then there's something wrong with that. Because the image of a black figure is not equal, it can never be used as a substitute for what's beautiful. When it's present, it's present as an exception.

**EMDW** *Yes, what most people are presented with through advertising and much of culture is a limited characterization of beauty.*

**KJM** Absolutely. But that limited conception of beauty is an aspirational one that most people are conditioned to respond to. I think human beings have always been in competition with each other. And if there's no sense that everybody has a shot at being on the top at some point, then there are people or populations who are always on the bottom. If you see yourself as a part of the population that always ends up on the bottom, then you have a psychological problem that you have to overcome.

So our problem – and this is the problem of black folks in America and the problem with black folks worldwide, I would argue – is that we've constructed this narrative in which the expression of white desire for images of white beauty is problematic; racist, even, insofar as the white population is seen to be dominant in the world because of the way it has projected its power and its influence over other people, dominating, colonizing and exploiting. So now it has become problematic for people of colour to express any real desire for their own ideals of beauty.

**EMDW** *Which is much more complex than the simple picture that Vogue paints.*

**KJM** But it's not such a simple picture that *Vogue* paints, because every other magazine paints the same picture. Even in the art world, images are an index of power. And if you aspire to power in any way then you should be

producing images that compete for power and dominance, the same way everybody else is producing them. The movie industry is another place where this index of power is manifested. If you take the series of *Harry Potter* films (2001–11), for example, or all these sword-and-sorcery movies, all the fantasies: who kills dragons, who does magic, who talks with animals and travels through time? Who does that? White kids do magic! To me, this is not benign.

How can you live in a world that's structured so that your place in it is primarily the domain of entertainment and service? You have to examine the psychology of being in an environment where you're only able to appreciate the accomplishments of other people. You can like a singer like Jay Z or Beyoncé, and black people have been liked for doing those things throughout history. Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1781 in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* that he thought: yes, these black people have great talent for making music and singing; maybe they even have more talent at it than white people.

But in the domain of intellectual achievement, the question will end up being: can black people get to Mars if white people don't take them there? That's a really important question, because it says something about who shapes the future. This is purely about the position black people occupy in the world. In the competition for global development now, India is a surging force. But even as they are surging they're also economically and technologically behind, because they're coming out of a period when they were colonized and dominated by other people.

**EMDW** *It's hard to imagine a scenario where they catch up or get ahead without terrible things happening, without massacres.*

**KJM** Right, because that's how everybody else, the leading world powers, got ahead.

**EMDW** *What kind of impact do you think your show is going to have here in Belgium, given the country's relatively recent colonial past, with Congolese independence only realised in 1960? What kind of different readings do you think that might generate? How do you feel about your works being interpreted in all kinds of ways related to black history?*

**KJM** I think the primary thing my work does is establish a black presence. On some level that's really all you can expect it to do. It's a physical presence, because there are figures in the paintings; and it's a kind of philosophical or historical presence in terms of those subject matters that have to be addressed. I don't expect art works to do any more than show you something that you might not have seen otherwise, to make you think in a new frame of reference.

**EMDW** *Is figuration your preferred mode because it can communicate more directly to people who are used to reading pictures of people presented to them by the mass media? Is there a fundamentally stronger potential in using figuration because it's what we all know?*

**KJM** My provocative answer would be yes, because figuration is more important than abstraction. It's more necessary, because we live in a world in which image production is the dominant activity and the quantity of images you see really does matter. There needs to be a critical mass of black figures in paintings; period. End of story. Abstraction – from the purely decorative to the brutally austere – is more easily commodified than figurative work. It travels through the marketplace a lot more smoothly than figurative work does. But I think it's less necessary. I think black people should always be producing figurative work because it's naïve to believe that the art world is not a part of the bigger world, and there are political implications to everything that goes on in this domain. If you don't think that's the case then you're somehow deluding yourself. As long as white figure representation outnumbers black figure representation there's a need to produce more black figure representation; it's just that simple. ♦♦

*Ellen Mara De Wachter is a writer and curator based in London, UK.*

*'Painting and Other Stuff' is at M HKA, Antwerp, Belgium, until 2 February. It then travels to Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, Denmark, from 27 February to 4 May; Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, Spain (10 June – 26 October); and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain (12 June – 26 October).*

Sugarman came to art-making fairly late. He went to Paris to study art on the GI Bill in 1951, and after a year of study he spent much of the next three years traveling around Europe looking at art and architecture. He was deeply impressed by the torquing forms in Baroque sculpture and architecture, by the animated exchange between convexity and concavity. All that illusory motion was to enter his sculpture after he got back to the States in 1955. While in Paris he became friends with Al Held, and the two of them carried out an extensive visual dialogue about color in the 1960s.

By the late '50s, Sugarman was producing twisting, carved and chiseled wooden forms that sometimes bridge two pedestals. In 1959, he decided to do away with the pedestal for the most part and to paint the wood in bright, flat, primary and secondary colors. What followed was a decade of riotous invention with polychrome wood sculptures that combine Pop and formalism, before he moved on to larger-scale public commissions executed mostly in aluminum, which also became the material of choice for his smaller, indoor work. Some of the austere tastemakers of the time were nearly apoplectic in their response to Sugarman's output. William Rubin wouldn't even speak to him. Color was felt to be the province of painting, while sculpture hewed to a "truth in materials" monochrome that evinced both the bleached bones of antiquity and the "serious" palette of Cubism.

Sugarman avoided working in series, so the pieces in the Snyder exhibition ran a wide range of forms. The earliest work, *The Shape of Change* (1964), is like a mindless squiggle jotted on paper, given volume and direction through its conversion to sculpture. Placed on a pedestal, the piece is red at the base and blue above. *Black and Red Spiral* (1968-69) stands on the floor, with a stepped series of 2-by-2-inch beams fanning outward to either side. The grandest sculpture and one of the greatest wood sculptures Sugarman ever made is *Threesome* (1968-69), which consists of four freestanding vertical elements that suggest awkward guests at a cocktail party. Two of these elements—each a hollow ramplike form, greenish yellow on the exterior and white on the interior—stand close together and mirror each other like a couple, registering as a single unit and thereby whitening the number of "autonomous" figures to the threesome of the title. Nearby is a celadon green rectangular figure, its top edge sagging into a wonderful, deep U that resembles the sad-sack droop that Amy Sillman can hilariously exploit in her figural abstraction. The final element is an orange zero with its bottom bent to rest on the floor and its top bent in the opposite direction, evoking a person looking around for a drink. A spirit of caricature haunts Sugarman's work from this period, suggesting that his abstract forms could be in conversation with Guston's, just as his palette engages with that of Held and late Stuart Davis.

—Stephen Westfall



View of Kerry James Marshall's exhibition, showing *99 cent piece (One hundred thirty six thousand dollars in change)*, 2012, cast resin with brass overlay, dimensions variable; at Jack Shainman.

## NEW YORK AND WASHINGTON, D.C. KERRY JAMES MARSHALL Jack Shainman and National Gallery of Art

NGA associate curator of modern art James Meyer built a tight exhibition (on view through Dec. 8) around a single 2011 museum acquisition—Kerry James Marshall's painting *Great America* (1994). Installed in the East Building's uppermost gallery, *Great America* hangs among nine other Marshall paintings, many from the same period. Race and American identity are the main themes in these figurative scenes featuring abstract elements and collaged signs and symbols. Ambitiously scaled (the largest measures 9 feet high by 13 feet wide), they are each suspended from grommets inserted in the canvas, evoking flags or tarps. Several allude to aspects of the transatlantic slave trade, and all boast references—some subtle, some explicit—to the art historical canon.

The picture occasioning the exhibition features a vast ocean that nearly fills the canvas. From the top right corner, a green and yellow toboggan-like vessel, which is crowded with four black figures, issues from a tunnel tended by ghosts. The forms of the waves around the boat, along with the compressed picture plane, bring Hokusai's ukiyo-e prints to mind. In the foreground, a large scroll reading "Great America" floats in space; according to Marshall, the words refer to the chain of theme parks of the same name. As a child, Marshall (b. 1955) visited similar parks after his family moved from Birmingham, Ala., to Los Angeles in 1963. Taken together, the text and Marshall's ominous imagery cue an ironic reading of America's greatness.

One striking characteristic of Marshall's style is his bold handling of skin tone. The artist uses the darkest browns and even pure blacks to paint his figures, applying white highlights to define features. The four people seen sailing in *Gulf Stream* (2003)—Marshall's reworking of Winslow Homer's 1899 canvas of the same name—sport Afros and contemporary dress, their dark skin and hair silhouetted against the white sail and blue water.

While the National Gallery exhibition evokes the America of Homer and the *Saturday Evening Post*, Marshall's more recent efforts, on view in "Dollar for Dollar" (all works 2012 or 2013) at Jack Shainman, eschew representation for abstraction and text critiquing American consumerism. *Buy Black*, with its three horizontal bands of red, black and green, recalls both Rothko and, with its drippy washes of green acrylic, Pollock. A red-neon lighting fixture attached to the panel and spelling out the work's title suggests equivalences between commodity and identity even as it brings to mind Nauman and Kosuth. The black acrylic text on a near-black ground in *On Sale Black Friday* evokes a Pop Ad Reinhardt. If a worry lurked around these canvases, it was that Marshall's reworking of the canon could verge on formula; a turn around the exhibition could become an art history quiz.

Yet no art historical precedent obscured the punch of the showstopper at Shainman, a rear-room installation called *99 cent piece* (*One hundred thirty six thousand dollars in change*). Ten resin coins with brass patinas, measuring from 3½ to 5 feet in diameter and weighing up to 300 pounds each, were scattered, as much as gargantuan coins can be, on the floor. Though the four pennies, three quarters, two nickels and a dime add up to 99 cents, the cost of fabricating the piece was the \$136,000 of the title's parenthetical. Though its conception wasn't without cynicism, the work engaged the contemporary art market with humor and even awe.

—Jessica Dawson



View of Donna Dennis's installation *Coney Night Maze*, 1997-2009, mixed mediums, 12½ by 27 by 19 feet; at the Neuberger Museum of Art.

**PURCHASE, N.Y.**  
**DONNA DENNIS**  
 Neuberger Museum of Art

Donna Dennis has been creating "architectural sculpture" since her first commercial gallery show, at Holly Solomon in New York in 1975. Over the years she has exhibited with artists whose work has been categorized similarly, including Alice Aycock, Mary Miss, Jackie Ferrara and Siah Armajani. Coming of age during second-wave feminism, Dennis was uninterested in pure formalism and considered her own life to be a worthy subject for her art. She chose to make her constructions "personalized relics of urban life," as cura-

tor Richard Marshall wrote in a catalogue essay for a 1981 Whitney Museum group exhibition.

Illusion and reality are both endemic to Dennis's work. She doesn't re-create a structure so much as she reinvents it. *Coney Night Maze* (1997-2009), her largest piece to date at 12½ by 27 by 19 feet, occupied the rear of the large windowless gallery at the Neuberger. Made of wood, acrylic paint, glass, metal and light fixtures, it sat on a low platform, the only illumination coming from within the installation.

According to Dennis, this project was inspired by the mazelike entrance of Coney Island's legendary Cyclone roller coaster. Viewers immediately encountered a labyrinth of ramps, walkways and scaffolds, surrounded by chain-link fencing, and were restricted to a pathway around the perimeter. (Originally, she called it *Coney Island Underbelly*, but the title, like the work, evolved over a 12-year period.) Through a turnstile, two empty blue booths and a large rock protruding from the ground with a couple of orange traffic cones around it were visible. Sets of steps and several walkways painted red and green led to the roller coaster. The wooden tracks, flanked by red handrails, ascended in an arc from the floor to the ceiling.

One saw a sign reading "Cyclone" in raised, gold letters as one continued around the structure. At the back of the room, a high rock wall held in place by a scaffold contained a lone lit window, suggesting an inhabitant. A light in a window has been a motif for Dennis in the past. Her 1976 work *Tourist Cabins*, for example, features small bungalows illuminated from within. For the artist, these works are meant to be seen in the dark, with the interior light functioning like a warm heart in a body.

Eventually one became aware of a low, whispering sound of roller-coaster cars. This looped soundtrack, emanating from speakers on the walls, was also reminiscent of surf.

The name *Coney Night Maze* implies the fun and mystery of life. But when and where will the "maze" of our lives end? The installation seemed to suspend time. While much of New York's urban identity has been overrun with trendy bars and clothing boutiques, *Coney Night Maze* is a reminder of what is being lost. The isolated booths, wooden scaffolding and ghostly sound felt less like an homage and more like an altar to human endurance.

—Erik La Prade

**MANCHESTER, N.H.**  
**ABIGAIL ANNE NEWBOLD**  
 Currier Museum of Art

For her exhibition "Crafting Settlement," Abigail Anne Newbold, an artist who lives in Somerville, Mass., fabricated a three-room enclosure based on a type of 19th-century New England farmhouse that efficiently linked domesticity and labor. Related tableaux, consisting of such items as tools, furniture and garments, appeared on and along the walls of the gallery. While Newbold reflects through her work on the histories of pioneer individualism and collective settlement in the U.S., she has developed a





**In the Tower:**  
**Kerry James Marshall**

National Gallery of Art  
June 28 – December 7, 2013

Kerry James Marshall was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955. He moved with his family to Los Angeles in 1963, where he was educated at the Otis Art Institute; he currently lives in Chicago. One of the most accomplished painters of his generation, Marshall has exhibited widely in both the United States and abroad and is the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, among other honors. His work explores the experiences of African Americans and the narratives of American history that have often excluded black people. Drawing upon the artist's prodigious knowledge of art history and African diasporic culture, his paintings combine figurative and abstract styles and multiple allusions. In Marshall's art, the past is never truly past. History exerts a constant, often unconscious, pressure on the living.

In 2011, the artist's painting *Great America* (1994) was acquired by the National Gallery of Art. The present exhibition — the latest of the *In the Tower* series focusing on art since midcentury — affords a context for understanding this painting and its powerful imagery, and includes several of Marshall's preparatory drawings as well as some of his most arresting paintings. Marshall sat down with James Meyer, associate curator of modern art, to discuss the exhibition.

**James Meyer (JM):** Let's begin with *Great America* [cover], the work that precipitated our show. How did it come about?

**Kerry James Marshall (KJM):** Among a lot of friends and acquaintances of mine there has been this idea of a transitional moment in the experience of Africans being brought to the New World. The moment of the Middle Passage [the transportation of enslaved people between Africa and the New World] was traumatic. There's this idea that many of the attitudes and personality developments in black folks in the diaspora are a consequence of this unresolved trauma. There have been attempts by black artists to try and figure out how to represent that in some kind of way. None of those images were ever really satisfactory. I'd always wanted to do a work that addressed the Middle Passage, but because I don't have any way of comprehending what that experience must have been like, I can only look at some of the aftereffects — how that might have filtered down to generations who still have knowledge, but no direct experience, of it.

**JM:** It's often said that the Holocaust evades depiction. The Middle Passage is also described in this way. Many of your predecessors, such as Romare Bearden and Aaron Douglas, have tried to depict it. How are you doing something different?

**KJM:** We're not dealing with a genuine historic memory but with information we've come to know through indirect sources. As African Americans we're trying to come to terms with a zero point in an evolving history. We can only locate our point of origin at a "no place" in the middle of a vast sea; it represents nothingness. We're trying to figure out a way to construct a point of origin from that "no place." And the reason why we are compelled to do it is because a story has been told. It's a story to which we feel related. The philosopher Cornel West has said, "There are things that one cannot not know."<sup>1</sup> For a lot of African Americans, not knowing something about their origins is one of those things. You have to fill in a lot of the gaps.

Where other artists may have tried to focus on the trauma, I felt like you had to displace it and attach it to some things in a more indirect way that don't appear to be traumatic. Which is how I arrived at the use of the amusement park haunted tunnel ride in *Great America*.

It was the only way I could comprehend what the idea of the Middle Passage was and the closest I could get to something that suggests that kind of fright and anticipation.

**JM:** There are hints of trauma in *Great America*. The ghosts, the head bobbing in the water, the word WOW painted in white on top of a splatter of red paint...

**KJM:** There can only be hints. In order to get to *Great America* I had to imagine the Middle Passage in the most traumatic terms that I could — the reality that 25, sometimes 30 percent of the people didn't make it to the other side. Even setting it up that way doesn't begin with the most extreme manifestation of the trauma: the brutality of being dragged onto a ship, being locked in a hold, being chained down with little space to move. The only thing that seemed to make the most sense when I started out was to begin with the sketch from below the boat showing figures floating down to the bottom [fig. 1]. And then it started to

evolve through the other drawings where the notion of the Middle Passage as a haunted theme park ride started to emerge. The figures in a lot of the drawings don't immediately suggest figures in distress.

**JM:** In some of them you depict water polo players outside of a Tunnel of Love [fig. 2]. Two kinds of leisure activity...

**KJM:** Which don't go together. That's the way I'm trying to figure out how to come to an image that embodies all of the dimensions of the Middle Passage.

**JM:** You set up troubling exchanges between history and the present. Your works are history paintings but not *merely* history paintings.

**KJM:** They aren't costume dramas that locate the events in the past. What you're trying to do is figure out a way to embed all of that historical knowledge into a work that remains compelling in this moment and hopefully for generations to come. It has to exist in a bubble that's outside of any particular time. None of



Fig. 1: Sketch for *Great America: Under Water*, c. 1994

Fig. 2: Study for *Great America*, c. 1994 (right)



the things in the picture are specific to a particular time or place.

**JM:** *Great America* presents several techniques in a single picture. In this painting alone you have figurative images of people, abstract expressionist brushwork, Renaissance one-point perspective, symbols — the red cross, circles of stars — and even different surfaces due to your use of collage. How would you describe your technique? It seems deeply connected to the idea of subject matter you just described.

**KJM:** There are two ways to think about it. There is the classic postmodernist mode of thinking about this *mélange* of styles as “pastiche.”

**JM:** Pastiche was described during the 1980s as a combination of different kinds of images and symbols that projected a lack of meaning. The signs didn’t add up. That kind of work was current when you were coming up as an artist.<sup>2</sup>

**KJM:** I’m going in a completely opposite direction. I would use “amalgamation” more than “pastiche” as a way of thinking about the work. It’s an accumulation and use of styles to create a *unity* — a unified field where everything is linked to the overall narrative in one way or another. I’m not trying to divest images of meaning. I’m not simply deploying them for their own sake. I try and channel the way a viewer is able to think through the relationships between these component parts and to look at the differences between them.

I’m juggling all of these different modes of operating. You’re trying to hold together a multiplicity of parts that under every other circumstance seems to want to fly apart. This is the way I thought about it: You have a car driving down a winding mountain road, the way we see them in movies. Every time it gets to one of those curves the tires skid toward the edge. And then the car gets to a hairpin turn. It goes up on two wheels and is just about to



Fig. 3: *Baptist*, 1992

go off, and then you freeze the frame right there. But you keep the sound of the wheels spinning and the engine roaring. The person who is in the car gets out and walks away. That's the metaphor I use for what I'm trying to do with all of these different elements in a picture.

**JM:** You spoke about the Middle Passage as a “nowhere.” It's also a *passage*, a transition from one place to another and from one state of being to another. In *Baptist*, you depict the Middle Passage as a map of the Atlantic Ocean with two hemispheres visible. A body treads water [fig. 3]. In *Voyager*, you paint a dory with two passengers. The boat is called *Wanderer* [fig. 4].

**KJM:** It was said to have been the last slave ship to disembark cargo in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

The number seven [repeated in the work] is the magic number for the Seven African Powers, the pantheon of Yoruba gods and

deities—Yemaya, Oshun, Ogun, Elegba.... *Voyager* in particular is about becoming something different. The diagrams [such as the elaborate crosses next to the kneeling passenger] are Haitian *veves*.<sup>4</sup> Each one of them represents the different manifestations of those Yoruban gods and deities.

**JM:** *New World translations of African ideas.*

**KJM:** Eshu/Elegba is the god of crossroads, of transitions. Yemaya is the goddess of the ocean. The picture embodies those concepts of transformation, of birth and rebirth. The invention of the African American, or the Haitian or Jamaican, is a consequence of the transatlantic slave trade.

**JM:** *Red crosses recur in several of your works. I assumed they stood for the Red Cross, but apparently they are Yoruban, too.*

**KJM:** They're both. They're syncretic, two things simultaneously: a crossroads. So is the *veve* for Eshu/Elegba. Red is also associated with rescue and distress.



Fig. 4: *Voyager*, 1992



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**JM:** *Plunge* is an important hinge of the show [fig. 5]. You have a swimming pool with the text “Atlantic Ocean,” a toy boat, and a swimmer. A diver is about to jump in. You’ve moved a viewer from the open sea to the suburb, from an extremely marginal state of being into a middle-class ambience.

**KJM:** There is privilege and status embodied in the image of a flagstone-lined pool in a backyard. A little bit of ambivalence is created by the location of the sign on the gate. It says “Private” on the inside. The figure is occupying the space you would have thought she might have been denied access to. Is this side “private” — or is the *other* side?

**JM:** We’ve included two works from your *Housing* series. Many of those paintings depict public housing projects, including Nickerson Gardens in Watts, Los Angeles, where you grew up. In *Bang* [fig. 6] and *Our Town*, however, you depict middle-class children in neighborhoods of white houses and picket fences. The theme of water enters these works, too.

**KJM:** Water was the locus of the trauma. The ocean is that vast incomprehensible, what appears to be nothingness. If you ever find yourself on a boat in the middle of the ocean you look around in every direction and don’t see anything. That’s a terrifying experience. Water still has significance relative to this idea of the Middle Passage. It enters into the suburban environment, through the pools in *Plunge* and *Our Town* and the water hose in *Bang*.

**JM:** The water hose is like a big black snake circling around the girl.

**KJM:** It circles around and it’s *aimed*. It alludes in an indirect way to the events in Birmingham in 1963, when children were water-hosed by the fire department. The theme of the picture and the title are about this duality, this ambivalence.

**JM:** A duality of past and present, of trauma and desire.

**KJM:** For black Americans it’s always all those things all the time: a consciousness that oscillates between these things. It never seemed



Fig. 5: *Plunge*, 1992

to matter how patriotic black Americans have been over the centuries. Because however much patriotism you displayed you were still subject to the same kinds of disenfranchisement as somebody who might not have been patriotic in any way at all. Arriving into the middle class didn't make you immune from any of those victimizations. All of the promises of democracy and the trappings of success were not armor enough to make African Americans immune from the ways in which the overwhelming power of the dominant white group could take advantage of or abuse them.

**JM:** In *Bang*, the little girl holds up the American flag. The boys say the Pledge of Allegiance. A text states, "Happy July 4th. We are one." To the right, it says, "Bang." Two doves hold scrolls in their beaks that read: "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God."

**KJM:** That's a Revolutionary War banner.<sup>5</sup> "We are one" is on the back of the dollar bill.<sup>6</sup>

**JM:** The children are standing in a classic suburb with white picket fences and lawns

sprinkled with flowers. Yet there's this threatening garden hose. And the black barbecue, a Weber, emits billows of smoke.

**KJM:** The figures are situated between these two ideals: between the revolutionary ideal of resistance to tyranny and being welcomed into a collective under the promises of the revolution, and the way in which tools that are supposed to be used to assist and to aid ended up being turned against people who were only trying to exercise rights that had been promised by law.

**JM:** The little girl has a diadem like the Statue of Liberty's [fig. 7]. But African Americans were not immigrants in the same way as others. No "Give me your tired, your poor."

**KJM:** None of that applied. From the moment when the promises of liberty and freedom were inscribed in the founding documents of the country, black folks have been struggling to get the people who believe in those principles to adhere to them and actually live out, as Martin Luther King Jr. said, "the true meaning of its creed."<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 6: *Bang*, 1994

**JM:** As an artist who clearly thinks deeply about American history, what does it mean to exhibit your work at the National Gallery of Art?

**KJM:** For me, having a show here is one more step in the total fulfillment of all of the promises that were outlined in the Declaration of Independence. If the word “all” is to mean anything, then the institutions the country has established to recognize or celebrate the genius of the American project have to demonstrate what that really looks like. We have to be able to embrace all the dimensions of the history that led us to be the kind of country that America is, and not just rhetorically, because I think the material manifestations of the narrative are really important. Progress has always been understood to be driven by exceptional white men. Whether it’s the military victories we’ve achieved, the philosophi-

cal foundations that are the underpinnings of the nation, or our economic ingenuity, all this has been articulated through narratives of exceptional white men.

When you walk through the museum you don’t have a sense that the variety of different people who made up the nation as a whole have made any real meaningful contributions to the development of this country in the ways that people talk about its greatness. And I think to finally start to bring into a place like the National Gallery somebody who does work like mine that is not always celebratory of American ideals, that has an ambivalent and at times critical relationship to the overall story, to finally start to allow that work to be seen and those narratives to be articulated, starts to fulfill the promises that the idea of the country and the founding documents set out to guide us.

#### Notes

1 Anders Stephanson, “Interview with Cornel West.” *FlashArt* 133 (April 1987), 53.

2 For example, the paintings of David Salle or the photographic works of John Baldessari. On pastiche as a postmodernist form see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

3 The schooner *Wanderer* sailed from the Congo to the United States with a cargo of almost five hundred slaves. Each person was accorded a space of twelve inches in width, eighteen inches in height, and five feet in length. The ship arrived at Jekyll Island, Georgia, on November 28, 1858. Eighty individuals perished during the crossing. See Erik Calonius, *The Wanderer: The Last American Slave Ship and the Conspiracy That Set Its Sails* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006).

4 A *veve* or *vèvé* is a religious symbol of West African origins associated with Haitian voodoo.

5 There are historical variants of the phrase. For example, “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God” appeared in 1776 on Benjamin Franklin’s proposed design for the Great Seal and “Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God” was emblazoned on a 1776 Revolutionary battle flag. In the nineteenth century Susan B. Anthony appropriated the phrase as a feminist slogan.

6 The Great Seal of the United States, containing the phrase “E Pluribus Unum” (Out of many, one), appears on the reverse side of the one-dollar bill.

7 The phrase appears in Martin Luther King Jr.’s August 1963 speech at the Lincoln Memorial: “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.’”



Fig. 7: **Study for *Bang***, c. 1994



## Exhibition checklist

Unless otherwise noted, all works are courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Koplin Del Rio, California.

### Gallery 1

#### *Baptist*, 1992

acrylic and collage on canvas  
133.35 × 148.59 cm (52 ½ × 58 ½ in.)  
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund [fig. 3]

#### *Plunge*, 1992

acrylic and collage on canvas  
220.98 × 276.86 cm (87 × 109 in.)  
Geri and Mason Haupt, © Kerry James Marshall, photo courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York [fig. 5]

#### *Voyager*, 1992

acrylic and collage on canvas  
233.36 × 233.05 cm (91 ⅞ × 91 ¾ in.)  
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Gift of the Women's Committee of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1993.1.2 © 2004 Kerry James Marshall c/o Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC [fig. 4]

#### *Bang*, 1994

acrylic and collage on canvas  
261.62 × 289.56 cm (103 × 114 in.)  
The Progressive Art Collection, photo courtesy of The Progressive Corporation, Mayfield Village, Ohio [fig. 6]

#### *Great America*, 1994

acrylic and collage on canvas  
261.62 × 289.56 cm (103 × 114 in.)  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Collectors Committee [cover]

#### *Our Town*, 1995

acrylic and collage on canvas  
254 × 314.96 cm (100 × 124 in.)  
Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, photography by Vancouver Art Gallery

#### *Gulf Stream*, 2003

acrylic and glitter on canvas  
274.32 × 396.24 cm (108 × 156 in.)  
Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2004

#### *Study for Visible Means of Support: Monticello*, 2008

acrylic on PVC panel  
121.92 × 152.4 cm (48 × 60 in.)  
Rodney M. Miller Collection, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

#### *Study for Visible Means of Support: Mount Vernon*, 2008

acrylic on PVC panel  
121.92 × 152.4 cm (48 × 60 in.)  
Pat and Bill Wilson, San Francisco

### Gallery 2

*Study for Baptist*, c. 1992  
conté crayon on paper  
60.96 × 45.72 cm (24 × 18 in.)

#### *Diver*, c. 1992

acrylic and ink on paper  
60.96 × 45.72 cm (24 × 18 in.)

*Study for Plunge*, c. 1992  
ink wash on paper  
45.72 × 60.96 cm (18 × 24 in.)

*Sketch for Voyager*, c. 1992  
pen and ink on graph paper  
27.94 × 21.59 cm (11 × 8 ½ in.)

*Study for Voyager*, c. 1992  
ink wash on paper  
45.72 × 30.48 cm (18 × 12 in.)

*Study for Bang*, c. 1994  
graphite on paper  
48.26 × 40.64 cm (19 × 16 in.)

*Study for Bang*, c. 1994  
graphite on paper  
35.56 × 27.94 cm (14 × 11 in.) [fig. 7]

*Study for Bang*, c. 1994  
graphite on paper  
35.56 × 27.94 cm (14 × 11 in.)

*Study for Bang: Weber Grill*, c. 1994  
graphite on paper  
35.56 × 27.94 cm (14 × 11 in.)

*Sketch for Great America*, c. 1994  
pen and ink on graph paper  
21.59 × 27.94 cm (8 ½ × 11 in.)

*Sketch for Great America*, c. 1994  
pen and ink on graph paper  
27.94 × 21.59 cm (11 × 8 ½ in.)

*Study for Great America*, c. 1994  
conté crayon on paper  
60.96 × 45.72 cm (24 × 18 in.) [fig. 2]

*Final study for Great America*, c. 1994  
conté crayon on paper  
45.72 × 60.96 cm (18 × 24 in.)

*Study for Great America: Mother and Child*, c. 1994  
conté crayon on paper  
60.96 × 45.72 cm (24 × 18 in.)

*Study for Great America: Mother and Child*, c. 1994  
graphite on paper  
35.56 × 27.94 cm (14 × 11 in.)

*Study for Great America: Mother and Child*, c. 1994  
graphite on paper  
35.56 × 27.94 cm (14 × 11 in.)

*Study for Great America: Tunnel of Love*, c. 1994  
graphite on paper  
101.6 × 66.04 cm (40 × 26 in.)

*Sketch for Great America: Under Water*, c. 1994  
pen and ink on paper  
27.94 × 21.59 cm (11 × 8 ½ in.) [fig. 1]

*Study for Great America*, c. 1994  
conté crayon on paper  
66.04 × 101.6 cm (26 × 40 in.)

*Study for Our Town*, c. 1995  
graphite on paper  
45.72 × 60.96 cm (18 × 24 in.)

*Study for Our Town: Running Girl*, c. 1995  
graphite on paper  
35.56 × 27.94 cm (14 × 11 in.)

*Study for Gulf Stream*, 2003–2004  
graphite, watercolor, glitter on paper  
98.43 × 120.65 cm (38 ¾ × 47 ½ in.)  
Collection Walker Art Center, Butler Family Fund

#### *Portrait of Nat Turner with the Head of His Master*, 2011

oil on canvas  
91.44 × 74.93 cm (36 × 29 ½ in.)  
Private collection

The exhibition was organized by the National Gallery of Art.

Sponsored by Dr. Anita Blanchard and Martin Nesbitt and Cari and Michael Sacks

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# WALL STREET JOURNAL

## Vivid Visions of Epic Injustices

By KELLY CROW  
August 2, 2013

It's a tall order to capture the full sweep of history on a single canvas. But that seems to be the goal of Chicago painter Kerry James Marshall, who is making history in his own right as the first living African-American artist to be given a solo show at Washington's National Gallery of Art.



National Gallery of Art, Washington/Gift of the Collectors Committee  
Kerry James Marshall's 'Great America' (1994) is on view at Washington's National Gallery of Art.

The history genre has had its stars, such as 18th-century painters Jacques-Louis David and Francisco Goya, with their roiling battle scenes. Mr. Marshall's wall-size paintings of everyday life often hint at the entire arc of the African-American experience, from slavery to the Civil Rights movement and beyond.

The National Gallery exhibit of more than 30 artworks, "In the Tower: Kerry James Marshall," is on view through Dec. 7 and includes some of the artist's best-known works, such as 1995's "Our Town," the painter's unsettling riposte to Thornton Wilder's idyllically set 1938 play of the same name.

Mr. Marshall's version depicts a seemingly cheery suburban neighborhood rimmed with a white-picket fence but shows a pair of African-American children fleeing the scene, their faces frozen in cryptic terror. The painting, which Wal-Mart heiress Alice Walton bought at auction for \$782,500 four years ago for her Arkansas museum Crystal Bridges, conjures questions that aren't easy to answer about the inclusiveness of upwardly mobile America, said James Meyer, associate curator at the National Gallery.

"Kerry's work is politically potent without telling you what to think," Mr. Meyer added. "That's a tough note to hit well, but he does it—I think he's one of the best painters in America, period."

Another exhibit highlight is "Great America," an amusement park scene from 1994 owned by the National Gallery that depicts a group of black people aboard a "Tunnel of Love" boat ride.

At first glance, the work's brightly colored palette makes everything seem merry, but Mr. Marshall fills his tunnel with ghostly, hooded shapes that evoke the Ku Klux Klan. The passengers are also crammed into the boat in a way that's reminiscent of the Middle Passage, the centuries long slave trade that involved shipping kidnapped Africans to the New World.

In an interview, Mr. Marshall said the challenge of a history painting comes in finding fresh ways to embed symbolic imagery throughout one universally relatable scene, such as that amusement-park ride. The reward for the viewer, he added, lies in "unpacking it all."

Mr. Marshall's past merits a little unfurling as well. Born the son of a hospital janitor in Birmingham, Ala., in 1955, he first encountered art in a scrapbook that his African-American kindergarten teacher kept in her desk and occasionally showed to students who exhibited good behavior. Mr. Marshall was captivated by the book's collage of greeting cards, photographs and cartoons, a more-is-more aesthetic that carries over into his paintings today.

In 1963, racists bombed a Baptist church in Birmingham, killing four black girls and galvanizing the civil-rights movement. Mr. Marshall's mother, who knew the family of one of the girls, soon after told him that their own family was moving to Los Angeles—specifically a housing project in Watts. (Two years later, Watts would become famous as the site of race riots.)

Mr. Marshall said it was in Watts, and later in the city's troubled South Central neighborhood, that he began watching art shows on television and teaching himself how to draw comic-book heroes without tracing them first.

In the seventh grade, a teacher gave him a tour of Charles Wilbert White's studio at the Otis College of Art and Design. (Mr. White, who died in 1979, was a realist who portrayed black America in prints and murals.) "Going into that room changed my life," Mr. Marshall said in the interview. Surrounded by easels and sketches and finished artworks, Mr. Marshall saw the life he wanted. He went home, cut a hole in his parents' garage for added light and turned it into a studio of his own.

By the time he was 25, the artist had put himself through college, read a library's worth of history books and created the painting that would become his imaginative breakthrough, an inky black self-portrait called "Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self." The work's silhouette style got the attention of a gallery owner and would later influence rising-star artists like Kehinde Wiley and Kara Walker, who is known for her own silhouette art.

"I've always been plagued by levels of doubt," Mr. Marshall said, "wondering if the people who make decisions about my chances of participating in the art world know more about things than me. So I've always felt like I had to know my history better than anyone—I had to make myself invulnerable."

**Write to** Kelly Crow at [kelly.crow@wsj.com](mailto:kelly.crow@wsj.com)

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# The Washington Post

## Kerry James Marshall: In the Tower

By Kevin Nance

Published: June 21, 2013



CHICAGO — In Kerry James Marshall’s 1994 painting “Great America,” the centerpiece of an exhibit of the artist’s work opening June 28 at the National Gallery of Art, four black figures are piled into a small boat that’s part of an amusement-park ride. The figures are dark, almost silhouettes, and strangely unaffected by the light falling on the water around them, as if they’re from some other picture altogether.

On closer inspection, in fact, the figures are not smiling. They don’t seem to be having the least bit of fun. Nor is this body of water upon which they sail some fun-house lagoon; there are suggestions of turbulence and depth, and mountains in the distance. This is an ocean, it dawns on us, the Atlantic Ocean. And if the people in the boat are contemporary Americans at leisure, they are also their ancestors embarked on the middle passage, the tragic voyage that brought them here from Africa in shackles.

“The painting is about both the transatlantic slave trade and what it means for present-day black people to be Americans,” says Marshall, 57, in his sprawling studio on the South Side of Chicago. “In a lot of my work, those things overlap.”

Indeed they do. In “Great America” and about 30 other paintings and drawings in the National Gallery’s “In the Tower” series entry — Marshall’s first solo exhibit in Washington — the artist evokes the complete journey of African Americans, from those first ships as human cargo to more recent crossings from poverty to relative affluence (though the latter often feel less triumphant than they might). And from beginning to end, the show floats on images of water, from the treacherous sea to riverside baptisms to suburban backyard swimming pools and back again.

“We move from maritime to suburban imagery, tracing the whole narrative of the middle passage to the African American entrance in middle-class prosperity — the American Dream, if you will,” says National Gallery curator James Meyer, who organized the exhibit around “Great America” — which the museum acquired in 2011 — and its theme of water. “The question of the show is: What is the American Dream for the descendants of slaves? How is it different from those whose families immigrated by choice?”

The images are also laden with symbols of African cultural and religious practices that the slaves brought with them and maintained, sometimes disguised by or blended with the Christianity that they adopted in the New World, voluntarily or not. There are Yoruba deities such as Yemaja, maternal goddess of the open sea, who watched over the sojourners of the middle passage, and Oshun, goddess of erotic love, who morphed into a mermaid in Haiti and Brazil. There are Vodun (also known as voodoo) effigies and Hoodoo folk magic along with mystical Catholicism and charismatic Protestantism — the African soul adapting and transforming itself into African American soul, restless and resilient, wading in the water.

“The very idea of the baptism is being born again, dying in the water and rising as some new thing,” Marshall says, surrounded by paintbrushes and vast canvases in various states of completion. “But that was a difficult thing for Africans to negotiate, because Christianity didn’t always come as a means of salvation for them. There was a belief at the time that Africans didn’t have a soul, and because of that, they were perfect for enslavement. Later on, people who didn’t convert were often killed, so conversion to Christianity was a way of surviving. In the process, you had to figure out a way to embed your own religious practices into Christian practices, which is why you have African deities masquerading as Christian.”

### **A difficult balance**

It was the church — or, rather, churches — that first sparked Marshall’s visual imagination. Growing up in Ensley, a mostly poor, virtually all-black neighborhood of Birmingham, Ala., Marshall attended the local Baptist church, where the plainness of the surroundings contrasted sharply with the flamboyant

style of the worship, with its swaying bodies, hands raised skyward in praise, dancing choirs and singsong preaching.

In second grade, Kerry James was introduced to an even greater contrast at the chapel of his Catholic elementary school, where Mass was a somber ritual conducted amid a dazzling fantasia of stained glass and flickering candles, carved wood and vaulted ceilings, white-robed choirboys and clouds of incense.

“The chapel was otherworldly — spectacular, to say the least — and the extreme contrast with the unadorned quality of the Baptist church had a powerful effect on my perception of things,” Marshall recalls. “There was the spectacle of place and the spectacle of the body, and it’s that very thing that I’m always trying to juggle in my painting — the balance between intensity and theatricality, between the figure and the space it occupies. The figure is completely independent of what the light in the picture is doing, because the figure has a separate reality. If you have a figure that is effectively black, it doesn’t get blacker when it goes into shadow, because it’s already as black as it can get. And so the figure is inside and outside at the same time. But the ground in the space around the figure has to be activated in an interesting and dynamic way, too. They have to harmonize and vibrate with each other.”

It was during kindergarten at the Catholic church that the budding artist met his first muse, a young teacher named Mary Hill, who kept a scrapbook in which she’d pasted Valentine and holiday cards and photos and illustrations clipped from magazines. “That was the thing that really changed me, made me want to be an artist,” he says. “The images in the scrapbook looked like somebody had made them, and I wanted to be able to make them, too.”

When Marshall was 7 years old, his father, a dishwasher and janitor at the local Veterans Administration hospital, moved the family to Los Angeles, where they settled in the neighborhood of Watts. There, in fourth grade, Marshall met his second muse, another teacher who, while working on holiday decorations in the school corridors, taught him how to paint flowers — she was partial to pansies and daisies — by combining two different colors of paint on a single brush, resulting in a stroke that produced beautiful blended hues. “She was my first art teacher,” he says with a smile. “I still use some of her techniques today.”

Marshall has come a long way, of course, since painting those flowers in fourth grade. While his content and themes are recognizable as uniquely his, his style is consciously eclectic. From piece to piece, he re-creates and reinterprets various chapters of the history of Western art from the Renaissance to the present, including 18th-century rococo complete with Arcadian pastoral scenes, 19th-century romanticism and impressionism, 20th-century expressionism, abstraction, pop and conceptual art.

“One thing that matters deeply to Kerry — I wouldn’t say above all else, but still — is the technique of painting, the notion of mastery,” says Dieter Roelstraete, senior curator at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art, who is working with Marshall on an exhibit of new paintings in Antwerp, Belgium, this fall. “It’s not valid to speak of his work in terms of borrowing or pastiche — he’s not a mixologist —



but it's true that his project is an interrogation of 500 years of Western visual culture. He questions and critiques that canon, but he does it from within, in a way. And before he questions something, he must conquer it first, make it his own."

## **Passages**

Armed with his arsenal of techniques, Marshall has set about creating a body of work that explores African American history from the slave ships to the present, arriving at contemporary scenes of black middle-class life that, while often full of images of leisure and romance, is still haunted by ambivalence and ambiguity, an inability to entirely accept material success as permanent or even lastingly worthwhile.

"It's an inability that's endemic to the black cultural body in the United States and other areas of the Western Hemisphere," he says. "Everything is contingent in one way or another, and it speaks to a belief that circulates among a lot of black people — I certainly have it — that everything, including pleasure and acceptance, is conditional, all the time. Because black people had to negotiate their freedom — negotiate their humanity, even — it's never assumed that anything that you experience or see on the surface is what it appears to be."

And because the black population is a minority population in the United States — and because by definition "minority" means "vulnerable," as he puts it — "You operate in an arena in which you are neither the author nor determiner of your fate."

Except, of course, that Kerry James Marshall has, by and large, determined his own. "He's a remarkable artist with a broad pictorial imagination," Meyer says. "He's able to come up with powerful images to confront American history and the position of African Americans within that history. He knows exactly what he's doing."

Nance is a freelance writer.

## **In the Tower: Kerry James Marshall**

at the National Gallery of Art, East Building Tower, June 28-Dec. 7. Call 202-737-4215 or visit [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov).

## THE LACK IN THE IMAGE BANK



### Kerry James Marshall's Reclamation of Pictures

BY NAV HAQ

To what extent has our imaginary been colonized by stereotypical scenes, from art history and the world of media, whose protagonists are Caucasian figures? Might this not be both the cause and effect of our acute perception of “otherness,” with its wealth of negative implications? Kerry James Marshall, in his wide-ranging pictorial research, analyzes the condition of images, coming to terms with art history, contemporary icons and the dictatorship of an iconographic imaginary that is intrinsically discriminatory, showing how art can become a tool of reappropriation and expansion of our collective unconscious.

Kerry James Marshall has been well established for many years, particularly in the United States, and especially in the city of Chicago, where he lives and maintains his studio. In fact, he is widely seen as *the* most significant artist in the city and a major influence on the subsequent generation that has emerged there. This includes the likes of Theaster Gates and Rashid Johnson, who, like Marshall, have also put the African American experience at the core of their respective practices.

Marshall is best known for his reflections on the everyday, as in *De Style* (1993) and *Our Town* (1995). Yet this is just one way of thinking about the breadth of work he has produced over the decades. He is especially concerned with the means by which we visually apprehend the relevant issues of our day—the circulation of images through the world, and how those images affect our understanding of race and individual identity. Through his practice, Marshall tackles what he has referred to as “the lack in the image bank.” He looks at images generated across a broad range of spheres—society, culture, art—and responds dialogically with a new body of images made from a variety of counter-perspectives. Significantly, it is in this way that his work transcends the confines of the American context and becomes globally resonant.

Marshall is an avid collector of all kinds of things, and has been for many years. A visit to his studio reveals a veritable curiosity cabinet of images and objects. There are dolls everywhere, which he sometimes uses for maquettes. There are small animal models and plastic plants. And there are tens of thousands of clippings from magazines, newspapers, and books—some organized in folders, many more loose in suitcases. These clippings, all of which contain representations of black people, are Marshall’s personal image bank. They can be categorized into two distinct groupings: images of black people in society, and images of black people in art. As a whole they provide a sense of the kinds of roles and stereotypes that operate in image culture. They also begin to tell a story about what is missing—and ways in which people are *not* represented.

Marshall’s video *Gleaning: An Image Reclamation Project* is an ongoing undertaking, begun in 2003. It is an ever-growing sequence of images of faces and body parts, drawn from his collection of clippings. He edits it in a way that specifically foregrounds the gaze toward the black subject, and the relatively narrow range of existing representations thereof. The video also conveys an awareness that images of the black subject play a historicizing role connected with the legacy of colonialism and slavery. If you have been exploited in history, in other words, you can be exploited further through your portrayal in images. Yet it is not ultimately Marshall’s intention to dwell on post-colonial theory. Rather, it is about addressing the condition of images in the world and offering lucid methodologies of progress.

The history of art in the European tradition has evolved its own system for producing the kinds of images it does, as well as self-determination in terms of what it values. We only have to glimpse back at the institutional theory of art to understand this. It has been a decidedly hegemonic affair, to say the least. Black subjects appear rarely enough to be remarkable when they do, as for example in Édouard Manet’s renowned painting *Olympia* (1863), which shows a nude woman looking directly at the viewer, and a black servant with a bunch

of flowers standing behind her. Marshall’s recent painting *Nude (Spotlight)* (2009) recalls *Olympia* and is conceived according to what the critic Kobena Mercer once described as Marshall’s typical “rhetorical blackness.” In this new work, the harsh light that falls on the woman in the Manet becomes a literal, direct spotlight. The nude still directs her gaze at the viewer, but the servant is conspicuously absent. It is a beautiful, culturally loaded work that brings a vividly different kind of character into dialogue with the canonical lexicon of art history.

The will to address art’s history occurs often in Marshall’s practice. His ongoing series of *Vignettes* (2005–ongoing) brings black subjects into the Rococo style of painting, for example, and *Black Star* (2011) has a gung-ho female nude bursting through an abstract painting done in the sober style of Frank Stella. But are these works really attempting a simplistic sort of counter-hegemony? All too often, it has been observed, art that too directly challenges the status quo inadvertently becomes what Hal Foster calls an “inoculation” for the establishment. Meaning, a small dose of something potentially harmful can ultimately serve to bolster immunity, to reinforce resistance to change in existing structures.

But Marshall’s works are more complex than this. They bring other perspectives into focus, emphasizing different possible interpretations and directions for the use of artifacts from art’s history. His 2012 triptych *Who’s Afraid of Red, Black and Green*, exhibited for the first time last year at Vienna’s Secession, tackles Barnett Newman’s *Who’s Afraid of Red, Black and Green* (1966–70) by changing the palette of primary colors to those of the Pan-African Flag. Marshall also departs from Newman’s monochromatic approach by including elements of figure and ground, pictorialization and text. The work could be read as tackling the dubious claim of Modernism to offer some kind of universality of experience; as soon as it is considered in the context of the non-Western world, it becomes clear that it is yet another manifestation of Western imperialism. Similarly, the recurring, tenacious discourse around abstraction and universalism, and its promise of a kind of democracy of aesthetic experience, has only served to highlight subjectivity and individuality. With this series Marshall reorients an icon of Modern art into a different, but equally historically meaningful, signifier from the same era—one that was used in the campaign for racial emancipation. It is a mode of discourse and attitude that has its own complexities. In this instance, merely by changing a selection of colors, it offers a direct confrontation against historic notions of utopian idealism in art.

The idea of commemoration, as played out in imagery, also plays a prominent role in Marshall’s work. Sometimes he focuses on how we undertake commemoration on a personal level. The *Lost Boys* series (1993–95) is a collection of nine portraits of young men who have, for various reasons, been imprisoned. The titles include their nicknames: “aka” followed by “Black Sonny” or “8 Ball,” for example. The pictures are, in a sense, memorials to the men’s nonexistent futures, their lost freedom. Marshall’s work also commemorates on a more collective social scale, as in the series *We Mourn Our Loss* (1997–98) and *Souvenir* (1997–98). The former shows portrait images of leaders from American history who were assassinated, including John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy, painted into compositions that resemble memorial banners. These banners occasionally recur in the *Souvenir* paintings, placed

into domestic spaces along with images of other renowned cultural icons who have passed away. We have a certain attachment to images. They are, after all, one of the primary ways in which we—as individuals or as collectives—maintain meaningful emotional attachments to those who are gone.

Another type of image flow prominent in society is portrayals of idealized representations of the body through advertising and the media. We are particularly heavily bombarded with images of women, filtered so that almost all we see are body types unobtainable for most. Historically these images have also been limited in terms of the spectrum of races portrayed; in fact they have been nearly exclusively Caucasian. And although today things have changed, given the attainment of megastar status by African American celebrities such as Beyoncé or Halle Berry (to give two well-known examples), it is fair to say that what the mainstream considers beautiful is still quite limited in scope.

For Marshall, the notion of beauty is closely connected with our collective image bank. *Nude (Spotlight)* gets at this, as does *Beauty Examined* (1993), the latter depicting a woman lying on a bed with different parts of her body being examined for faults. At the top of the painting, “Exhibit A” objectifies the woman with a series of diagrams and comments suggesting how she deviates from the ideal: “big legs,” “big ass,” and so on. Other works, such as *La Venus Negra* (1984) or *Supermodel (Female)* (1994), bring blackness into realms of representation—art history and the mass media, respectively—that are ordinarily dominated by whiteness. Marshall’s implication with these works and others is that we need many more images in our collective image bank that overtly require us to consider racial difference.

Marshall’s understanding of society’s image bank casts it as a sort of empire—something that yields great currency and great powers of discrimination, and serves to impose and normalize ideals. The flow of “traffic” occurs in one direction only, meaning that individuals have relatively little control over, or ownership of, what they see. His ambition is to demonstrate that we can make images our own: reclaim and adapt them, and create new ones that represent the individual realities we actually exist in. Marshall wishes, in a sense, for us to understand the instability of images, and how art offers a special license to appropriate, change, create, and interpret them, then push them back into the public sphere. The sense of ownership he creates through his style of image making is something that should be considered progressive—necessary, even. It is a more inclusive, perhaps even communitarian, understanding of the role of representation as aiming to counter the massive hegemony of images by expanding the repertoire of our collective unconscious.

Opposite – [The Actor Hezekiah Washington as Julian Carlton Taliesen Murderer Frank Lloyd Wright Family](#), 2009. Courtesy: the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York





Believed to be a portrait of David Walker (Circa 1830), 2009. Courtesy: The Deighton Collection, the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Middle - Scout Master, 1996. Courtesy: the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



Right - Portrait of Nat Turner with the Head of his Master, 2011. Courtesy: the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Below, left - Bride of Frankenstein, 2009. Courtesy: the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



Below, right - Vignette #2.25, 2008. Courtesy: Art Institute of Chicago

Opposite - Untitled (Painter), 2010. Courtesy: the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



**COMIC  
IN DER KUNST**

**KABOOM!**

**COMICS IN  
ART**

**KEHRER**

  
**WESERBURG**  
MUSEUM FÜR MODERNE KUNST

# Kerry James Marshall

Kerry James Marshall ist für großformatige Malerei bekannt, sein künstlerisches Repertoire reicht aber weit darüber hinaus. Für das umfangreiche *Rythm Mastr*-Projekt nutzt er die populäre Form des Comics. Seit 1999 entwickelt der afroamerikanische Künstler das Werk beständig weiter, zunächst als raumgreifende Installation, später als konzeptuelle Arbeit mit dem Titel *Dailies*. Diese besteht aus drei sich überschneidenden Comicstrips mit den Titeln *Rythm Mastr*, *P-Van* und *On the Stroll*. Sie alle spielen in der erträumten, doch fiktiven Hauptstadt einer »Black World«. Ausgehend von der Feststellung, dass es in der Geschichte des Comics kaum schwarze Superheroes gibt, kreiert Marshall seine eigenen Helden. Sie sind teils menschenähnlich, teils fetischartig. Im Comic interagieren sie mit den Menschen. So verbindet sich in den *Dailies* eine zeitgenössische urbane Realität mit dem historisch überlieferten Wissen von afrikanischen Archetypen, die hier gegen die Kräfte der Cybertechnologie antreten. Für Marshall »fasst *Rythm Mastr* all die Spannung und Probleme zusammen, die schwarze Menschen im 21. Jahrhundert haben können. Wie kann man das kulturelle Erbe – das diese Statuen als Symbole einer schwarzen Kultur repräsentieren – in eine technologische Zukunft bringen?« Marshall thematisiert hier nicht nur die soziale und ökonomische Ungleichheit von Schwarzen und Weißen, sondern auch das kunsthistorische Verhältnis der afrikanischen bzw. afroamerikanischen traditionellen Kunst zur westlichen modernen Kunst. Sein zentrales Anliegen ist es dabei, die schwarze Perspektive sichtbar zu machen und die eigene Identität neu und auf positive Weise zu definieren.

Kerry James Marshall is known for large-format paintings, but his artistic repertoire includes far more than this. For the extensive *Rythm Mastr* project, he uses the popular form of comics. Since 1999, the African-American artist has been developing this work further, first as a space-encompassing installation, later as a conceptual work with the title *Dailies*. This consists of three overlapping comic strips entitled *Rythm Mastr*, *P-Van* and *On the Stroll*. They are all set in the dreamed, but fictitious capital city of a Black World. Proceeding from the realization that there are scarcely any black superheroes in the history of comics, Marshall creates his own heroes. They partly resemble human beings and are partly fetishistic. In the comic book, they interact with people. Thus in the *Dailies*, a contemporary urban reality is linked to the historically transmitted knowledge of African archetypes who stand here in opposition to the powers of cybertechnology. According to Marshall, »*Rythm Mastr* encapsulates all the tension and issues that black people might have in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. How can the cultural patrimony – which these statues represent as symbols of black culture – be brought into a technological future?« Marshall thematizes here not only the social and economic inequality of blacks and whites, but also the art-historical relationship between African or African-American traditional art and Western modern art. His fundamental concern is to convey the black perspective and to define his own identity in a new and positive manner.

Text: Verena Rodatus

Seite | Page: 131 – *Dailies from Rythm Mastr*, 2010 (Detail)



# ON THE STROLL

THE MASTR



P-Van



# Kerry James Marshall

SECESSION, VIENNA  
Christian Kravagna

**THE MONOCHROME** is by definition dedicated to one hue. And so it is the modernist format most allied with purity, negation, substance—everything that is not *external* to the picture, everything that is not decoration or history or politics. But with this exhibition at the Secession, Kerry James Marshall used the monochrome to examine the question of color in all senses of the word, from its role in the history of modernist painting to its historical and even iconographic relation to past and present African American visual culture.

Marshall structured his presentation, which included sixteen new works, around three large-format canvases placed in three alcoves within the central exhibition space. The titles of the three pieces—*Red (If They Come in the Morning)*, 2011; *Black*, 2012; and *Green*, 2012—refer to the series of paintings named “Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue,” 1966–70, from the late work of Barnett Newman. Indeed, the exhibition hall of the Secession, with its pure white walls and measured low lighting, would have ideally suited Newman’s work. While the latter marked one of the end points of modernist painting, the former, designed by Joseph Olbrich and built in 1898, evidenced the onset of modernism—specifically, modern

exhibition architecture—so that with his intervention Marshall brought together the beginning and the end of the movement. But Marshall confronted this trajectory of modernist abstraction, which was largely characterized as a search for transcendental experience—from the white walls of Jugendstil to the unmitigated flatness of Color Field painting—with another historical narrative, one grounded in a set of specific social realities and cultural references. Adopting the exact format of one of Newman’s paintings (96 x 214 inches), he replaced that artist’s primary colors with the colors of the Pan-African flag (also known as the UNIA flag, as it was formally adopted by Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1920) and transformed the title of Newman’s series into that of his exhibition, “Who’s Afraid of Red, Black and Green.”

Marshall’s paintings also follow the formal principle of Newman’s series, specifically the structure of a centrally positioned color field bounded on the right and left by narrow strips of color (Newman famously called these elements *zips*). Marshall subverts the pure abstraction of the modernist monochrome with elements of text (in *Red*), symbols (in *Black*), and objective motifs (in *Green*). Through the expansive red of the first painting shimmers the phrase IF THEY COME IN THE MORNING, a paraphrase of the conclusion to James Baldwin’s “An Open Letter to My Sister Angela Y. Davis” (1970), which he wrote to the communist champion of civil rights while she was imprisoned for allegedly having acted as accessory to murder: “For, if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night.” Baldwin’s letter dates from the same year as the last painting by Newman in the “Who’s Afraid” series.

In *Green*, the titular color is represented by the leaves of a tree, while red and black birds complete the triad of the Pan-African flag. Here narrow, band-shaped slivers of two brick buildings in the background, flames shooting from one of the structures’ windows, replace the monochromatic *zips*. In view of *Red*’s reference to Baldwin, the

burning building in *Green* brings to mind the author’s earlier text “The Fire Next Time,” from 1963, a warning that violent revenge might follow a failure to immediately establish racial equality in the US. *Black* seems subtly to indicate that the issue of racial equality in American society, addressed in Baldwin’s text, has not been satisfactorily resolved even today. In the center of the painting, we see the US flag, a bald eagle, and the flag of Chicago, Marshall’s city of residence. To the right of the second flag is a less legible motif, which looks like a large, sculptural *X* in the colors of the UNIA flag. While the flags of the US and

## Marshall returns again and again to the ways in which color can mean.

Chicago are being blown toward the depth of the pictorial space, the *X* suggests a contrary direction of motion from the picture outward, a confrontational gesture opposed to the harmony one might expect from the juxtaposition of these three emblems.

But these rich references to African American history and culture are matched by equally thoughtful resonances with the history of modern painting. In fact, viewers seeking to understand these paintings would do well to keep in mind another sentence from Baldwin’s letter to Davis: “There is always, of course, more to any picture than can speedily be perceived.” Marshall’s fundamental gambit is to politically historicize modernist abstraction, which, at its most extreme, emphasized ahistoricity, “pure” painting, and “pure” ideation. Here (surely nodding to Ad Reinhardt’s as well as Glenn Ligon’s black-on-black monochromes), Marshall slows down vision: The typeface of *Red* is barely perceptible against the red ground—one must stare at it over time to glean it—and in that gradual experience of recognition, the artist flirts with everything beyond legibility. Indeed, in all three works Marshall allows much to flow back into Color Field painting that was excluded from modernist orthodoxies such as those promoted by Clement Greenberg. For example, the objects in *Black* are



clearly arranged perspectively—an overt play on the “flatness” in postwar painting, designated by Greenberg as “American-type painting.” But while these reintroductions were standard for the postmodern turn, Marshall calls to mind the 1960s juxtaposition of the world of painting and the world of politics, the ideology of ahistorical purity in mainstream modernist aesthetics (which understood itself as universal, but was in fact a parochial, white Euro-American concept) and the Black Power movement (which was imbricated within specific historical, cultural, social, and economic realities, seeking not to transcend but to change them). But his paintings also invite the viewer to move beyond thoughts of these worlds existing side by side and to inquire into their historical and intellectual connections. If Newman described his own aesthetic as an effort to enact the sublime, the origins of this notion can be traced not only to Kant, Burke, and Hume but to the hierarchical racial conceptions of European Enlightenment philosophy, which were developed against the background of slavery and played a significant role in the theory of aesthetic sensation.

Marshall not only explores the tropes of high modernism but also examines another face of the Enlightenment: those subjectivities that have heretofore not been represented but were integral to the formation of modern European and Euro-American identity, for example a group of portraits that refer to the Stono Rebellion of 1739 in South Carolina, one of the most important slave uprisings in North America. Here, Marshall depicts the rebelling slaves—of whom no pictures exist—by avoiding period-specific historical detail, instead using elements from Christian Passion and redemption iconography. The *Stono Group* works, all dating from 2012, are less history paintings in the classical sense than painted reflections on sources and documents, on the narrative and mythic components of historiography by historically and politically changing interests.

Marshall’s use of citations and references is downright extravagant in *School of Beauty*, *School of Culture*, 2012,

one of the most complex (and entertaining) paintings in this exhibition. In a richly decorated beauty salon, black women are occupied with hairstyling and cosmetic treatments, posters advertise black beauty, and an announcement of a Chris Ofili exhibition at Tate Britain adorns the space. Yet the image is haunted by the ghostly ideal of white beauty in the form of an anamorphic projection of a young blond girl’s head modeled on the similarly distorted skull in Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*. In a mirror in the background, one can make out the light of a photographer’s flash—an allusion to *Las Meninas* by Velázquez. On the wall across from *School of Beauty* hangs *Untitled (male nude)*, 2012, probably the most fascinating and cryptic painting in this exhibition. Here the rigid pose and nude body of a black man, lying on a bed with the Pan-African flag in his hands, obviously recall Manet’s *Olympia*, and the historical coincidence that this masterpiece of modern art was painted in the year of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation underscores the complexity of Marshall’s understanding of history painting, the sophistication with which he connects political issues with imagery from both art history and popular culture.

Marshall explored yet another set of historical connections through the *Robert Johnson Frieze*, 2012, a two-part, site-specific work installed under the glass ceiling of the exhibition space. Roughly fifty feet long, this mural interweaves motifs from Johnson’s blues songs (such as “Crossroads”) and visual riffs on the rhythmic structures of the blues with formal elements reminiscent of the *Beethoven Frieze* by Gustav Klimt, which was made for the Secessionists’ Beethoven exhibition in 1902 and is on view today in the Secession’s basement. Like Klimt’s frieze, Marshall’s is a painting about music and the imaginative worlds it evokes. It features golden discs that reference both Klimt’s decadent, ornamental Jugendstil aesthetic and the sound hole of the blues guitar. As with all of Marshall’s best works, these chains of reference are fluid and looping rather than one-directional. Marshall’s frieze leaves one

unable to see Klimt’s in the same way: The latter’s iconography includes demonic beings that are given new expression when considered in relation to the mythology of the blues, particularly the legend of Johnson selling his soul to the devil in exchange for his singular ability.

Just as Klimt’s Symbolist contemporaries and Newman alike explored the material, synesthetic, and symbolic registers of color, Marshall returns again and again to the ways in which color can *mean*. Almost all the works produced for this exhibition are dominated by the color triad red, black, and green, including the two that are not “only” painting. In *Black Owned* and *Buy Black*, both 2012, the eponymous words are neon signs applied to the paintings. They glow, in the manner of shopwindow displays, in front of what are otherwise abstract paintings, and refer to strategies of economic autonomy in the African American community. In view of an art market that continues to be white-dominated, these works also appear to be born of a critical self-irony. Ultimately, the “neon paintings” seem rather schematic and could not keep pace with the best paintings in the show, which are distinguished by a dense interweaving of political, cultural, or historical references and painterly qualities. But these paintings did play a significant role in the context of a presentation that built on the historical model of the exhibition as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as practiced by the Vienna Secessionists, among others. Marshall’s nods to the art market remind us that it is necessarily a constitutive frame for any artistic social and political critique, inviting speculation about the legacy of the “total work” in a contemporary capitalist culture with seemingly unlimited powers of assimilation. In this context, the attention to difference inherent in Marshall’s critical reading of modernism—both early and late—from the perspective of African American aesthetics and politics becomes all the more urgent. □

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Translated from German by Elizabeth Tucker.



Opposite page: Kerry James Marshall, *Red (If They Come in the Morning)*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 8' x 17' 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>". This page, from left: View of "Kerry James Marshall: Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green," 2012. Clockwise from top left: Robert Johnson Frieze (detail), 2012; *The Club*, 2011; *Green*, 2012. Photo: Wolfgang Thale. Kerry James Marshall, *Buy Black*, 2012, acrylic and neon on PVC, 72<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 61".





# KERRY JAMES MARSHALL

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ART-HISTORICAL REFERENCES MIX SEAMLESSLY  
WITH SOCIOPOLITICAL COMMENTARY IN THE  
CHICAGO PAINTER'S GRAND YET HUMBLE WORKS

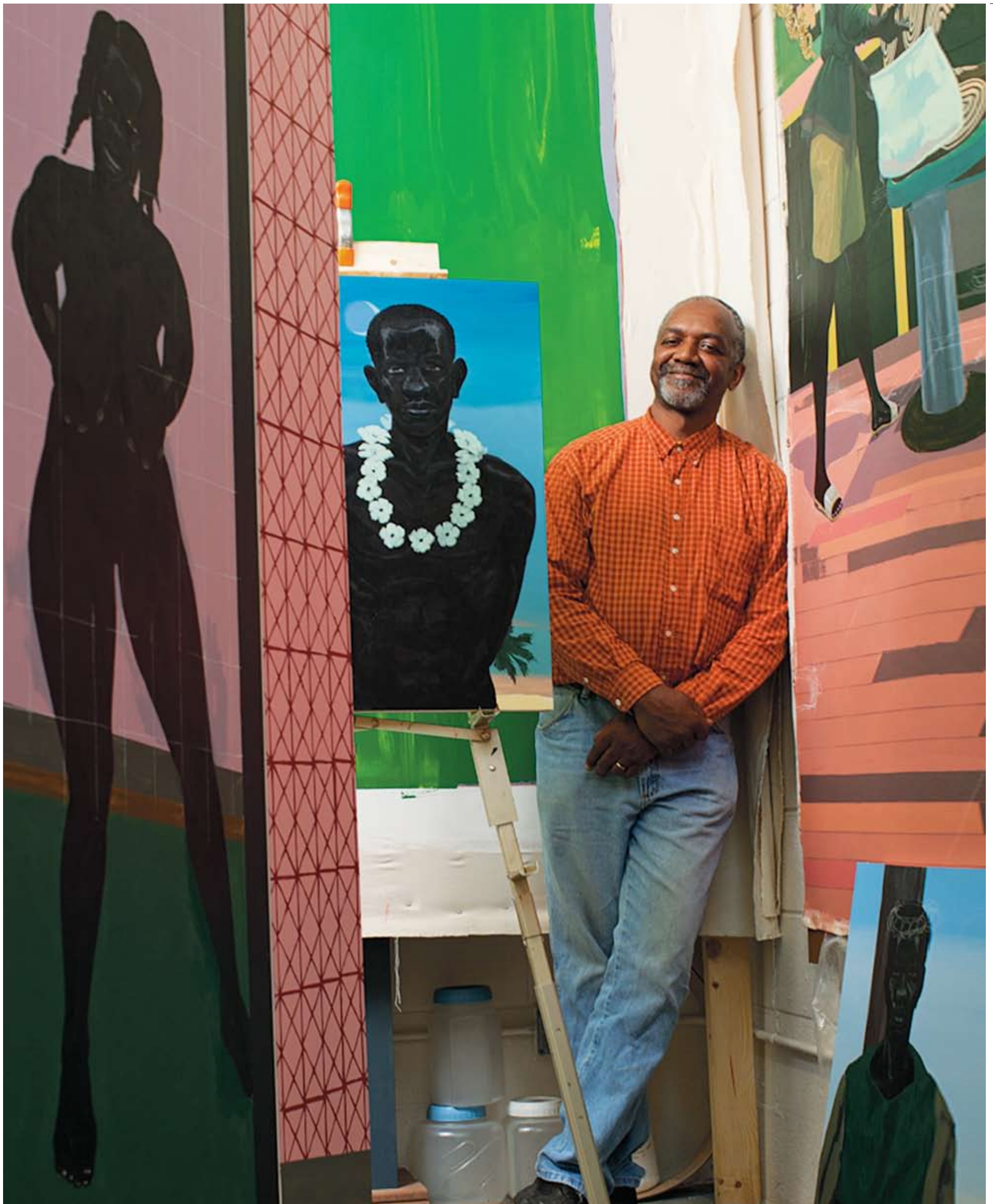
BY RACHEL WOLFF • PHOTOGRAPHS BY KENDALL KARMANIAN

IT'S A SUNNY WEEKDAY AFTERNOON in April, and Kerry James Marshall is showing me around his lived-in studio on a quaint residential stretch of Chicago's South Side, taking a break from fine-tuning a handful of canvases. The artist—who is renowned for his painted musings on art-historical oversights and for taking on the African-American experience as both subject and cause—is an affable presence in person. He is sweet, confident, convivial, and eager to discuss the ways in which he's approaching an ambitious new body of work.

The studio is located in a contemporary carriage house of sorts. A lofted office area is stocked with art tomes, sketching supplies, and comic books in progress (he has published several), as well as the artist's enormous stash of Barbie-style dolls. The dolls are off-brand, for the most part, procured from local secondhand shops; the more expressive, more flexible models were special-ordered

from Hong Kong. Each figure sports an intricate original hairstyle and clothing handmade by Marshall and his assistant. He uses them primarily to study the folds in the clothing and the contours of the hair as he paints. He sometimes detaches a head, affixing it to a mini-stake and painting from that alone. It's easier than relying on models, he says, though he senses the irony in using these 12-inch dolls as the basis for his figures, many of which defy the ridiculously lithe and buxom form. "I don't want my paintings to look like these people. I would be in trouble if they looked like these people," he insists. "I just use them for reference—for angle and for light." When it comes to everything else, he adds, "I am always working against type."

Downstairs, the somewhat narrow main space is lined with Marshall's new paintings. A massive canvas depicting the goings-on within a green-and-pink-hued African-American hair salon is pinned to the center of one wall.





In typical Marshall fashion it's a genre scene of epic proportions, with chic black women and children posing, preening, and interacting among their own cultural signifiers (a poster advertising Chris Ofili at Tate Modern, an LP of *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*). There is also a strange anamorphic rendering of Princess Aurora from Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* hovering near the floor.

A large, black canvas is mounted on an adjacent wall. It is almost a monochrome, save for several subtle variations in the color, a streak of red, and the remnants of flags belonging to the United States, the city of Chicago, and the Black Nationalist movement. The first two are depicted patchily, with bits and pieces of fabric and poles visible behind wide swaths of inky pigment; the third and most obscure of the bunch—a Black Panther touchstone—is ghostlike, masked almost entirely by a thin layer of black paint. On the opposite side of the room, in front of nearly half a dozen more works in progress, two smaller paintings hang on a rack. One of them depicts an eager clubgoer awaiting company; the other shows a sturdy nude clutching a human-scale red, black, and green star, the symbol for Marcus Garvey's reverse-diaspora-serving Black Star Line. She is seen from behind but glares directly at the viewer over her left shoulder.

Visually, each work is very different. But an obvious sense of cohesiveness is not necessarily what Marshall is after. These paintings, which are destined for a major solo exhibition at the Vienna Secession (on view September 21



Top: A working sketch in Kerry James Marshall's studio. Below: The 10-foot-wide *Garden Party*, 2003, documenting the lives of middle-class blacks, typifies the artist's blend of the real and the idealized.

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through November 25), are bound conceptually: They all fit neatly into a framework that Marshall has made by tweaking the title of one of Barnett Newman's most famous series of color field paintings. In Marshall's studio, Newman's "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?" (1965–70) has become "Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green?"—the colors of the Black Nationalist flag. Each painting in the series is a different riff or interpretation

thereof, asking if a launchpad of pure color can lend itself to a deeper commentary about race, America, and fear.

Marshall wants it all—the abstract and the figurative, the political and the sublime. This newest body of work is his latest attempt to get it. It's a lofty ambition, to be sure, but Marshall wears it well. He has long held an interest in that which didn't quite make it into the art history books—black figure painting, for instance, and overtly political abstraction. His desire to revisit, reassess, and recast art-historical memes and styles—sometimes successful ones, sometimes less so—is a guiding principle in his exquisitely executed, highly varied, and deeply engaging work.

"If you look historically at the way painting has moved from representation to abstraction, the implications of that, in some ways, erased what people can identify as political and social content in a work," Marshall says. He wants to know "whether that kind of painting can remain satisfying as a strategy for making new work" while being reinvigorated with the sort of outwardly social and political content that artists like Newman shunned.

As for the content, Marshall is looking



BOTTOM: KERRY JAMES MARSHALL AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK





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From top: Marshall and, at rear left, *School of Beauty, School of Culture*, a work in progress for his fall show at the Vienna Secession; and *Great America*, 1994, in acrylic and collage on canvas.

toward another perceived “end point” in painting: the black arts movement of the 1970s. At that time, African-American artists working in a figurative, politically-charged way were largely marginalized in the contemporary art world. This ultimately led to what is now referred to as “post-black” art, which reflected the idea that “one of the quickest ways you can erase what they saw as limitations of ethnicity and race was to do abstract work,” Marshall says. “And by doing so, you would find your way into the mainstream of the art world.”

“I am trying to demonstrate that there is a great deal of potential left in the black aesthetic and within the specificity of the Black Nationalist position as represented by the colors red, black, and green,” Marshall continues. “That you can transcend what is perceived to be the limitation of a race-conscious kind of work. It is a limitation only if you accept someone else’s foreclosure from the outside. If you go

into it yourself, you can exercise a good deal. And you are limited only by your own ability to imagine possibilities.”

Born in 1955 in Birmingham, Alabama, then the epicenter of the civil rights movement, and raised in South Central Los Angeles not far from the local Black Panthers’ home base, Marshall has long spoken about what he has called “a social responsibility” to tackle black America in his work. But Marshall pairs this sensibility with a deep engagement with the art of the Western tradition, both its pitfalls and its triumphs. When an elementary school teacher’s scrapbook opened his eyes to image-making, Marshall started to pore over books on art history and technique at the local library.

He practiced at home as well. He and his older brother would draw together, sparring with their sketches as if playing an analog version of a video war game. “We would draw opposite sides,” Marshall says. “I would draw an airplane that dropped a bomb on his men. Then he would draw a tank to shoot down my airplane,” all from a “first-person shooter” perspective.

By the time Marshall was in junior high he had fixated on comic books, Marvel editions in particular. He and his friends would get together to copy images of their favorite Avengers and X-Men. Marshall’s renderings were always a little different. “I was also looking at Leonardo’s anatomical drawings in the library and trying to figure out how the anatomy of these superheroes worked,” he says. “So my drawings never looked as good as other people’s drawings. They would do it perfectly—every shape and curve. I was doing planes and structures. My drawings always had a whole lot of lines and a whole lot of erasures. My stuff was labored because I was trying to understand more than just how to copy what I was looking at.”

Such diligence served Marshall well when he moved from comic books to Old Master paintings. Sketching on layer



BOTTOM: KERRY JAMES MARSHALL AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY



after layer of tracing paper, Marshall taught himself how to break down a Titian or a Michelangelo into its most basic parts—a skill that was no longer taught by the time he enrolled in Los Angeles’s Otis Art Institute in the 1970s, when conceptualism prevailed.

Marshall’s early work was vastly different from the large-scale portraits and genre scenes for which he is now best known. As a young artist in Los Angeles he made abstract collages for the most part. But after some constructive criticism from the *Los Angeles Times* (a reviewer, he says, noted that his collages “‘fade into masses of other things that are just like them,’—which was true!”), he decided he needed to find a way to tackle the figure, a way that was new and relevant to him.

“I tried to make a figure that took advantage of all the things I had learned from analyzing classical Renaissance painting, a figure that took advantage of all of that but didn’t

The acrylic on fiberglass *SOB*, *SOB*, 2003.



look like that,” he says. The breakthrough, he adds, was his *Portrait of the Artist as His Former Self*, from 1980, a black-on-black barely-there silhouette that stands in stark contrast to the whites of the subject’s teeth, collar, and eyes. The composition, the angle of the sitter, and the perspective were structured to mirror those of Leonardo; the color, the figure, and the aesthetic were all Marshall’s own.

Marshall pushed the aesthetic further as his career progressed, using his singular figures to express something more universal. His “Lost Boys,” from 1993–95, is a series of stark portraits of African-American youths pictured at the ages of their various incarcerations. The Peter Pan analogy is apt, given the sort of suspended adolescence that tends to arise as a result of a young arrest. “The Garden Project,” 1994–95, was inspired by the many Chicago and Los Angeles housing projects with the word *gardens* in their titles. The canvases are contemporary history paintings, if you will, scaled on a par with those of Jacques-Louis David and Théodore Géricault. They depict housing project residents trying to cultivate environments that will live up to the false promise of their names.

Marshall showed throughout L.A. in the 1980s and was an artist in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1986. He relocated to Chicago shortly thereafter. Since the mid-1980s he has been represented by the Koplín Del Rio Gallery, where his work will be included in a 30th-anniversary exhibition opening in October. The Culver City gallery says that his smaller works are typically priced at \$20,000 to \$50,000, with larger ones selling in the \$400,000-to-\$500,000 range. On the East Coast, he had his first solo show at the Jack Shainman Gallery in 1993 and has been represented by the New York dealer ever since.

Marshall has long been admired in and beyond the art world for the ways in which he manages to both celebrate and scrutinize the African-American experience, and his Vienna-bound new work continues in this vein. “There is a longing to love oneself that informs everything black people do in the United States,” he says. “There are not any black people who do not feel some dimension of that in their lives. If they say they don’t, they’re lying.”

The new work taps into this too, which brings us back to that mysteriously anamorphic Princess Aurora hovering ominously in the beauty salon scene, titled *School of Beauty, School of Culture*. Marshall’s composition makes reference to the optical trickery of the skull inserted in Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, 1533. But there is, of course, a reason that Holbein’s skull has been replaced with Disney’s most Aryan princess.

*Vanitas*, he says, is the idea “that everything—youth, beauty—all ends in death. For black folk, we are haunted by the specter of the Sleeping Beauty and what Sleeping Beauty represents: the dominant standard of what real beauty is. No matter what they do to themselves in that salon, they are haunted by the specter of real beauty, which undermines the legitimacy of the beauty they aspire to.”

“It’s reality and it’s representation,” he adds. “It’s the art world and the real world. It’s all of those things at once. That is another part of my strategy, to have all things happening at one time. Everything at once.” ▣

# art ltd.

## Kerry James Marshall

by caroline picard  
July 2012



Vignette (La La La)  
2008-2012  
Acrylic and mixed media on panel  
72" x 60"  
Photo: courtesy Koplín Del Río, Culver City

Kerry James Marshall's studio stands two-stories high in the Bronzeville neighborhood, on Chicago's South Side. From the street, it is non-descript, more like a very tall, brick garage than anything else; there are hardly any windows. It boasts a green lawn and stands near a new crop of condos; down the same street are some old Victorian brownstones interrupted by empty lots. It's a significant neighborhood in American history. Once known as the country's "Black Metropolis," it was the destination for thousands who, during the Great Migration (1910-1930), left the South for Northern industrial jobs. It is identified with a shift in the country's habit and history: a shift away from slavery coupled with its transition into industrialized labor. Significant musicians and thinkers came from this place--among them, Ida B. Wells, Gwendolyn Brooks and Louis Armstrong. Given the subject of Marshall's work, his creative environment seems significant. The ultimate site for his upcoming solo show is no less so. This September marks the opening of "Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green" at The Secession in Vienna. "It's one of the first artist-created museums, started by Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele," Marshall explains. "They were breaking with the academy and tried to start an independent thing where they could go their own way. The Secession is that thing... It's like the museum for radicals."



Staying his aesthetic course, Marshall grafts his study of African American history onto the canon of western painting to illicit a critical perspective. In his new work, he has conjoined the Abstract Expressionism of Barnett Newman (particularly his iconic work *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III*) with the politics of race. Newman's trademark zips appear on Marshall's first three canvases, but the original color scheme--red, yellow and blue--has been replaced by the red, black and green of Marcus Garvey's Pan African flag. By way of form and concept, Marshall raises the specters not only of Abstract Expressionism, but also several historical African American revolutionaries. It is as if the apolitical, flat picture plane whose backdrop has become the curtain (in Clement Greenberg's words) parts slightly, revealing the social, historical edges of things and bodies. As such, the conviction of the color field, its presumed ability to remain purely aesthetic, anti-anecdotal and sublime is troubled. "You have to embrace [art history] and engage it," Marshall says. "You can't let it go unchallenged. It's not entitled to the privilege of being just adored."

Marshall is known for deconstructing art historical genres and vernacular cultural tropes; in doing so he asserts himself again and again into the history of art, announcing with dogged determination his intention to be incorporated among the "pantheon of great artists," Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael--artists that belong to a traditionally exclusive world. Born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1955, Marshall moved to South Central LA at the age of seven--the same year that the United Civil Rights Committee held its first Civil Rights march. Over a thousand people took the streets calling to desegregate schools. Marshall and his family lived nearby the Black Panther headquarters; their move was part of The Second Great Migration, (1941-1970), during which more than five million African Americans moved north and west to cities for work. Just two years after the Marshall family landed, a six-day riot erupted in Watts. 34 people were killed and over 1,000 injured. A year later in 1966, (the same year that Newman completed *Who's afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III*) a second Watts riot erupted. Given that timeline, there is something ironic about Newman's abstract aspirations, for implicit in them is a denial of the body, a departure from material things into some larger (hoped for) universal: a universal that ostensibly neither included nor represented Marshall.

"Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green" rebels against pure abstraction, though it does so in stages. First, Marshall proves his ability to match the technique of Abstract Expressionists. The first three paintings--each the same size as the Newman piece they reference--feature massive swaths of color. Walking up to one all-black canvas, Marshall points out areas of varying darkness. "There are three different colors of black in there and they are not mixed. Where there is difference in color it's basically from the chemical composition. This is a carbon black," he says, then points to another area of the canvas, "an ivory black" and then another, "an iron oxide black." He takes a step back. "And the iron oxide black is red-black; it's made from rust. On top of this carbon black, the red really shows up." After confronting abstraction, Marshall breaks from Greenberg's aesthetic to incorporate representation. In the black painting, buttressed by zips, swatches of the United States and Chicago flags billow in front of or behind--it's not clear which--the thick black sea of color. A highly prominent bronze-eagle finial hovers, as though mid-flight: the only fully cohesive form. Nearby red and green extremes of a block letter X emerge. The second painting, its edges also defined by zips, contains red text, "If they come in the morning" (a reference to Angela Davis' book of that title), on a red field. These motifs stem from a history of repression and operate like rally cries that channel the Civil Rights movement.

In response to an agonizing absence of diversity in the canon of Western painting, Marshall inserts and asserts the black figure again and again in as many different poses, positions, moods and lifestyles as possible. In *Garden Projects*, he made large-scale landscapes of city housing projects that incorporate "gardens" into their names highlighting the dissonance between their idealized titles and the neglected circumstances that surround their residents. One such painting, *Watts 1963*, shows three black children pressing towards the front of the picture plane; white abstract blobs disrupt the otherwise representational landscape behind them like ghosts. Above, Disney-esque blue birds carry a somber banner reading "Here we rest." In his series *Souvenir*, Marshall painted middle-class African American living rooms whose inhabitants tend to the memories of Civil Rights figures from the 1960s--paintings that both celebrate history yet remain restrained: the houses he captures are perfectly staged, as if careful attention was paid to each object inside. Marshall is not only a painter, however. He has also made a comic book, "RYTHM MASTR," installations, video and sculpture: for instance a series of massive rubber stamps that lay down Civil Rights phrases, like BLACK POWER, which become neutered and ambivalent in the gallery setting. Often he incorporates glitter. In *Vignettes*, a more recent rococo series, he portrays black lovers playing in fields. In response to a book that Taschen put out, "The Great American Pin-Up" (which included no African-American women) Marshall painted black pin-ups. He regularly references other famous paintings in his work, binding his conceptual intent to technique and craft.

Marshall has continually engaged and struggled towards representation. In 1977 he went to Otis, to become a painter. But no one was painting anymore; the art object had been dematerialized, though he rejected that position. Even current abstract works for his show at Secession move toward the body. Two paintings, *Black Owned* and *Buy Black*, operate like conceptual bridges between the color field paintings and later portraits in so far as they evoke the economic structures around the body vis-a-vis neon signs fixed to each canvas (and from which each title is derived). He perseveres in this cause because unlike the white body, the black body has never been overwhelmed with images of itself. "We have a whole history of representation in which the black body was not the privileged body. So there was no crisis of representation for me, because the black figure is underrepresented."

Still, Marshall pushes the same red, black and green motif through every different pictorial style. In this latest "pin-up" painting a woman stands with her back to the viewer looking over her shoulder. Behind her lies a black, green-rimmed star that emanates outwards in green, then red stripes. Her muscular body almost dissolves into the equally dark body of the star but her gaze is direct and unflinching. The combination of her posture against the star's points is reminiscent of da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*. Unlike him, her hands hold the star's points, top and top left, creating a tension: she looks as though she might turn the star on its head.

Hanging beneath the only window in his studio is a large beauty shop painting. While the space described therein isn't deep, the floor feels raked like a stage. It has glitter. It features many figures, in different postures and in the midst of different action. It is dynamic and alive. Yet there are moments that disrupt the illusion of space, the most prominent being a pink and yellow anamorphic image in the foreground: a reference to Holbein's 1533 painting, *The Ambassadors*. A painted poster of Chris Ofili winks deliberately in the back right corner. A central woman squats down near the back of the painting in high heels and a skirt. She has her back to us, bent over to take a picture of the beauty shop through a tall, standing mirror in front of her. A flash of light in the mirror indicates the photo is being taken. She is taking a photograph of the viewer, the audience, gallery or museum on the other side of the canvas. As with the pin-up, a formal interrogation takes place between the figures inside Marshall's world and those without. "When it comes to representation, the black body is a kind of social and political body. And you don't think about the frivolous, the pleasurable or the mundane; we don't really think about those things when we see representations of black people. The goal is for the presence of these black figures to become commonplace."

A series of smaller portraits will also be included in this show; their color is less saturated, as though referencing the past. The faces are solemn, gaunt and dark. A long time ago they organized their own revolt. "In 1739 there was a slavery revolt in South Carolina near the Stono River. It's called the Stono Rebellion." These men took arms and marched down the road from one plantation to the next; they hoped to raise an army of liberated slaves. "The problem was they didn't really understand the circumstances they were in. They thought they could march down the highway with flags chanting liberty. It came to a bad end." At the time, their heads were set on stakes along the road as gruesome warnings against revolt. "I make pictures like these because I think the specter of these people needs to be present."

Marshall doesn't only conjure the specter of the past; he also transcribes its significance. These rebel heads will now be memorialized in a different light: entered into the history books because Marshall decided to paint them. The portraits remind us that their efforts--combined with countless, subsequent others--made slavery impossible to sustain without exponentially increasing acts of violence. At the same, they still died. Terribly. And slavery--an institution that should have never existed--continued for far too long. "A part of what I'm trying to do is to really understand the history from the inside out. Which means it's not just about how the thing looks like on the surface, I need to understand how it arrived at that condition. Once you understand how it arrived at that condition, then you have knowledge."

For Marshall there is no pastoral nostalgia. "I don't connect with the idea of the self-made individual--the immigrant story," he says. "Nevertheless you are still faced with the challenge to make something worthwhile and meaningful out of the life you have to live, in a place that is supposed to be designed for that but wasn't designed for you to do that. I had to prove that you don't have to be limited by what was imposed on you by an institutional frame." Yet while he is working as an artist to envision a new future, he also works directly with the past, inserting historical references from the canon, just as he uncovers marginalized figures of African American history. By weaving those threads together, he tries to cull new possibilities: as a way of teaching history and understanding context, but also challenging historical power structures. "That's a part of my whole project too--to put power in play."

# The New York Times

## **Inside Art: NEW AT NATIONAL GALLERY**

**By CAROL VOGEL**

**Published: April 21, 2011**

Every year at the National Gallery of Art in Washington the trustees and patrons who make up its Collectors Committee provide money to add to the museum's holdings of contemporary art. Often the choices go beyond the obvious and the trendy. This year, for example, to increase the selection of work by black artists, the committee has bought the gallery's first Kerry James Marshall work, the 1994 painting "Great American." (Two years ago it acquired the gallery's first painting by another black artist, Norman Lewis, who died in 1979.)

"Kerry James Marshall is one of our pre-eminent midcareer artists, African-American or otherwise," Harry Cooper, the National Gallery's curator of Modern and contemporary art, said of this 55-year-old painter and sculptor. Three years ago Mr. Cooper visited Mr. Marshall's studio on the South Side of Chicago and studied his work.

"It is an imposing work," Mr. Cooper said of "Great American." "It has a lot of visual fireworks, uses a lot of different painterly techniques, with reference to folk art and to trompe l'oeil." The work is also unusual because it is neither framed nor stretched, but rather has grommets around the edges so it can be tacked onto a wall.

Another acquisition is a work by the Washington sculptor Anne Truitt. While the gallery already owns examples of Truitt's work, Mr. Cooper said, it had no sculptures from what he called her breakthrough period. So "Knight's Heritage," from 1963, a sort of cubic rectangle fashioned from hollow wood and painted in rust, yellow and dark blue color blocks is a critical addition. Truitt, who died in 2004, was influenced by the work of Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt.

The Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea brokered the sale of "Great American," which came from a collector, Mr. Cooper said, while "Knight's Heritage" was acquired from Matthew Marks, the Chelsea dealer representing Truitt's estate.

The new additions will be on view in the gallery's East Building, starting May 1.



January 2011

## Kerry James Marshall

VANCOUVER ART GALLERY, CANADA

Jordan Kantor



**Kerry James Marshall, *De Style*, 1993, acrylic and collage on canvas, 8' 8" x 10' 2".**

**FEW ARTISTS** have imagined the present in the manner of art history's grand styles as successfully as Kerry James Marshall. Although he has made work in many media over the past three decades, he remains best known for large figurative paintings that compellingly interweave explorations of African-American history, the mechanisms of remembrance, and the venerable traditions of old-school European painting. And while the fifty-five-year-old artist has been the subject of important solo museum shows and is a staple of major international exhibitions (including two of the past three Documentas), there have been relatively few opportunities to consider the development of his painted oeuvre on its own.

All the more welcome, then, that the Chicago-based artist's first one-man exhibition in Canada—organized by Kathleen S. Bartels and artist Jeff Wall, and on view at the Vancouver Art Gallery until January 3—conjoins eight iconic canvases from the 1990s with a complement of recent works (including a series of prints). A studied selection rather than a survey, the three-room show provides a valuable chance to take stock of Marshall's position vis-à-vis the histories of painting he strategically engages. The picture that emerges from this restrictive focus is of an artist committed to using the formal conventions of European picturemaking in and of themselves and as springboards for contemporary political and cultural commentary.

The considerable literature on Marshall typically frames his practice in terms of identity politics and reads his paintings against the backdrop of the artist's biography, which coincides with important benchmarks of the civil rights struggle in the United States. It is easy to see why such interpretations prevail, for Marshall has committed himself to an artistic program of visualizing African-American personages and histories and has famously resolved never to include a white figure in his art. (In this vein, his five-venue traveling solo exhibition in 2003–2005 was titled “One True Thing: Meditations on Black Aesthetics.”) To neglect such openly stated polemics would be to misread Marshall's art, but to foreground them at the expense of an account of his formal investments is to sell him short as a painter. Thus, somewhat against this grain, the medium-specific focus of the current exhibition provides space to consider how the artist's extended engagement with the canon of European painting elaborates the more overtly political content of his work.

The earliest piece in the show—a large, colorful 1993 canvas titled *De Style*—inaugurated many of the terms for the artist's subsequent painting practice and provides a good case study for the lens the exhibition affords. In this oversize, multifigure composition, Marshall plays with two seminal traditions of Dutch painting in equal measure: group portraiture and abstraction. By inscribing the vernacular social space of the African-American barbershop within the form of the seventeenth-century large-scale group portrait, Marshall makes good on his agenda of inserting black figures within frameworks from which they have typically been excluded. But the artist pointedly invites the viewer to appraise the nonrepresentational qualities of the picture as well. From his insistent reiteration of the horizontal and vertical lines that organize the composition and emphasize its flatness to his concerted use of the five “zero degree” colors (the primaries blue, yellow, and red, with black and white), Marshall explicitly recasts the painterly tropes of Piet Mondrian. Lest one miss these cues, the artist homophonically titles his piece in reference to the twentieth-century movement associated with such abstractions: When “De Stijl” becomes *De Style*, we know we are in the very particular realm of Marshall's artistic practice. The verbal equivalent of what the artist renders in paint, the title calls out to an important chapter in the medium's past, impressing on it a vital inflection of present concerns and figures.

Such references abound in Marshall's paintings, and it's fun to read many of his formal moves as consciously inhabiting previous artworks. Familiar compositions, figural poses, brushwork, and color palettes from myriad episodes in the medium's history are

everywhere put into play, challenging viewers to seek them out. (I found myself wondering: Is that mirror a quotation of Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*? That figure lifted from Courbet's *Stonebreakers*? Isn't that façure explicitly Gustonesque?) However, the ultimate strength of Marshall's citational strategy transcends the art-historical parlor game it elicits, evincing something more concerted than typical painterly appropriations. Indeed, Marshall's borrowing is fundamentally different from the way Titian might cop a figure group from Giorgione, for example. Marshall is undoubtedly looking for tricks of the trade and guideposts for how to put pictures together, but he is simultaneously aligning himself both within and against a specific history of painting. It is a complex program of reference and amendment, which serves not only to position Marshall within an august lineage but also to read the history of art in light of its blind spots. That is, as much as Marshall conjures painting's history and desires to converse with it, he offers critiques and correctives—unraveling the “naturalized” fictions the medium has often serviced. This is most overt when Marshall addresses the ideologies of narrative painting, laden as it is with religious and political histories of power and social control. But Marshall does not stop there. As Wall argues in his smart, compact catalogue essay, the artist enlists “every part” of the art-historical canon in order to populate these various genres with black subjects and his own aesthetics—rewriting them, marking them with difference.



**Kerry James Marshall, *Souvenir I*, 1997, acrylic and glitter on canvas, 9' x 13' 1".**



Through this interpretative frame, the exhibition can be read as a catalogue of Marshall's tour through art history: The 1995 "Garden Project" paintings can be seen as a hybrid of history painting and the pastoral form; *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein*, both 2009, become Baroque full-length nudes; the three "Vignette" paintings of 2005 read as meditations on sentimental, Rococo fantasy; the *Black Painting*, 2003–2006, is a recast domestic genre scene, and so on. By bopping among forms, Marshall underscores the radical contingency of each and unravels its claim to a totalizing worldview. Thus the forms and content of Marshall's paintings play off one another, taking his project far beyond a literal excursus on issue-based politics and raising more structural questions about representation and visibility generally.

As interesting as this strategy is *between* works, it is arguably even more compelling when it happens *within* individual paintings. Among the works on view here, this "meta" style is most dynamic in the canvases from the mid- to late 1990s. Each of these paintings—drawn from his "Garden Project" and the 1997–98 "Souvenir" series—features an image characterized by several registers of representation overlaid into one pictorial space; together they constitute the heart of the show. In *Watts 1963*, 1995, for example, a loosely naturalistic depiction of three children on a lawn is disrupted by all sorts of diverse pictorial incidents: the text running throughout the image; the pink stenciled forms, cartoonish flowers, stylized bluebirds, and diagrammatic sun; and, perhaps most emphatically, the areas of gestural abstract brushwork. As much as all of Marshall's outward-glancing figures address and implicate the viewer, these shifting modes of representation also serve to, in the artist's own words, "intrude," "disrupt," and "disturb" the fictional transparency of the image. That is to say, while ironically representing urban public-housing projects that have "garden" in their title in a kind of contemporary history painting, Marshall here also underscores the contingency, and subjectivity, of pictorial representation itself. *Watts 1963* and the other paintings of this type are made of distinct component modes, each of which individually proves incapable of relaying the whole story Marshall wants to tell. Working in concert, however, these individual manners add up to a complete image, in which difference, instability, and pictorial interdependence remain at the fore.

Nowhere is this manner of self-reflexive play more apparent than in Marshall's "Souvenir" pictures, each of which contains a stenciled glitter frame within the image that duplicates the rectilinear format of the canvas. These frames not only reinforce the flatness of the paintings, but also echo the memorial banners depicted within many of the images (featuring, for instance, portraits of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King above the phrase WE MOURN OUR LOSS). The charge of this rearticulated framing is most pronounced here in *Souvenir I*, 1997, in which the golden glitter fringe of the felt banner rendered in perspective within the image re-appears around the painting itself—as if stretched and flattened out to coincide with the plane of the surface before which we stand. This device functions to collapse the different spaces of representation and to implicate us in our own looking, revealing Marshall's standing interest in shuttling his viewer's attention between the depicted space and the physical reality of the canvas. It also, interestingly, proposes that the painting might somehow fulfill the same memorializing task as the banner, thus picturing its own use. The very

physical *stuff* of these paintings buttresses this sense of functionality as well, for their supports—swaths of canvas attached directly to the wall with screws, rather than stretched over a wooden frame—bespeak easy portability. More than conventional canvases, which rhetorically project solidity and permanence, these paintings look like they could be quickly taken off the wall, rolled up, and shown elsewhere if need be. They have the physical quality of banners—of images intended more for urgent *use* than for relaxed contemplation. (This is an inquiry Marshall followed to its logical conclusion in other paintings from this time—not included here—which remade banners *as* paintings.)

In Marshall's most recent work, his strategies of collapsing the frames of representation appear to have become more synthetic, knit into the narratives of the images themselves rather than revealed in visibly different constituent parts. When it works, this is an amazing tack, and the most gripping image in the exhibition is among his newest: the life-size, half-length portrait *Untitled; Painter*, 2010. This piece depicts a seated artist in the studio as well as the painted self-portrait on which he appears to still be working. While, of course, any depiction of an image maker provides fertile occasion for a meditation on the mechanisms of making images—that quintessentially modernist preoccupation—Marshall ups the ante here, using the structure of the image itself to poetically explore his central concerns about representation, race, and self. The painted artist, whose face is rendered in Marshall's signature uninflected black, is shown wearing a shirt with a camouflage-like design—he is depicted as doubly invisible. The image he paints, on the other hand, is cast in a vibrant rainbow of pinks, the kind of colors that until recently were marketed in art-supply stores generically as “flesh tone.” Marshall depicts the painter at the moment after he has put down the pink brush and begun to render his own face, filling in ready-made, paint-by-number compartments with dark blue hues. The image is a powerful metonym for the central concerns of the first thirty years of Marshall's art, self-reflexively picturing as it does an unfinished moment of self-representation within the hallowed historical genre of portraiture. And as one of the most recent works in the show, it leaves us with Marshall's contemporary diagnosis, showing that although the painter's image is coming into focus, the most important parts remain a work in progress.

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ARTFORUM



Kerry James Marshall, *De Style*, 1993, acrylic and collage on canvas, 8'8" x 10'2".

## Kerry James Marshall

### VANCOUVER ART GALLERY VANCOUVER

Through January 3 2011

Curated by Kathleen Bartels and Jeff Wall

Kerry James Marshall's 1993 canvas *De Style*, a vibrant, large-scale, multi-figure painting of an African-American barbershop, was a breakthrough for the artist and set the basic parameters of his ensuing practice. In the years since, he has updated the ostensibly moribund genre of history painting with an important corpus of visually complex narrative tableaux. For the Chicago-based painter's first solo show in Canada, *De Style* will join some twenty more recent works, including examples from his iconic series "Garden Project," 1995, which richly reimagines the representation of public housing projects. Organized by Vancouver Art Gallery director Kathleen Bartels and artist Jeff Wall—whose photographic practice also often engages history painting—the exhibition promises a much-needed showcase of Marshall's vital and inventive picturing of America's largely unpictured contemporary histories.





# Afterall





Kerry James Marshall,  
*Vignette #5*, 2004, acrylic  
 on Perspex, 72 × 60cm,  
 detail. Courtesy  
 the artist and Jack  
 Shainman Gallery,  
 New York

**Kerry James Marshall's  
 Tempting Painting**  
 — Terry R. Myers

*What is the line between a painter and an artist who uses paint? In this exploration of Kerry James Marshall's iconic paintings — and his moves away from them towards installation — Terry R. Myers investigates what is at stake in calling an artist 'a painter'.*

Unaware or unwilling to admit that some would be tempted to call certain artists painters because, funnily enough, they make paintings, in an interview that preceded the opening of her documenta X (1997), Catherine David resorted to what is now called 'spin':

Robert Storr: *Other than, possibly, Ryman, definitely Richter, and, alas, not Polke, were there any other artists making paintings that you saw as at least potentially part of this discussion?*

Catherine David: *No. In the exhibition, there are some artists who deal with iconography who you might be tempted to call painters — but I think that label is irrelevant. We invited Kerry James Marshall; we invited Lari Pittman; we invited David Reeb from Israel — and I don't think it's helpful to describe their work as painting. They are privileging cultural operations, crossbreeding, questioning cultural identity and using specific image-strategies.*

RS: *Lari Pittman is most certainly a painter, though.*

CD: *For me, the iconographical work is the privileged point of access to his world and discourse.*

RS: *Yes, but that's a very limited reading. Because if he builds the surfaces the way he does, or if he strips them down the way he does, that's within a language of painting — where the significant meanings have to do precisely with how the iconography appears, not just that it is there.*

CD: *You can call them painters, but it's not really relevant in this documenta, where we've tried to be very precise about image-strategies.<sup>1</sup>*

Whether painting, poetics or politics, one person's precision can be another's erasure. No one, of course, needs to tell Kerry James Marshall this: for more than thirty years he has taken aim at the exclusionary centre of painting even (or especially?) when he began to open his work up to other media in his contribution to the 1997 documenta and other major exhibitions that same year, such as the Whitney Biennial. Nonetheless, it was still surprising that when push came to shove his dramatic paintings were given a golden opportunity to resist the misrepresentations of David's wilful blindness in the installation of documenta X. Isolated in one of the large, light-filled and very painting-friendly galleries of the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel, several of his large canvases were positioned in the literal centre of the city-wide presentation. (Another large space in the museum was devoted to Gerhard Richter's photo-based *Atlas*[begun 1964], while Robert Ryman wasn't included after all, and Sigmar Polke never submitted his required 'proposal'. David Reeb's rather unassuming work was pretty much lost in the mix of the show, and Lari Pittman's enormous and stunning painting was marooned in an upstairs

<sup>1</sup> 'Kassel Rock: Robert Storr Talks with Documenta's Catherine David', *Artforum*, vol. 35, no. 9, May 1997, p. 129.

space that was more hallway than gallery.<sup>2</sup>) Why Marshall's paintings alone were afforded such respectful treatment remains unknown, but I recall thinking at the time that there was no way that David would have had the nerve to stick these particular works of Marshall's in a hallway.

Taken from Marshall's series *The Garden Projects* (1994–95), the canvases shown in Kassel depict scenes from public-housing projects in Chicago and Los Angeles that were given names with what could be considered — if one were to be generous — wishful thinking: for example, Rockwell Gardens, Wentworth Gardens, Altgeld Gardens and Nickerson Gardens. The latter refers to the place where Marshall lived for two years during his childhood and adolescence after his family moved from Birmingham, Alabama to Los Angeles in 1963. Receiving his BFA from Otis in 1978, he would move



to Chicago in 1987, where he remains to this day. (Biography, of course, is anything but incidental here — a consideration that Marshall himself has often put front and centre.<sup>3</sup>) It could be that the presence of such imagery merely satisfies the terms of David's concept of 'iconographical work', which she considered to be the privileged access point to everyone's work, at least in the case of her documenta. If this is what explains his inclusion, then I could stop there, but some of us might be left asking, 'Is that all there

Kerry James Marshall,  
*Watts 1963, 1995*,  
 acrylic and collage  
 on unstretched canvas,  
 290 × 343cm. St Louis  
 Museum of Art,  
 Museum Minority  
 Artists Purchase Fund

<sup>2</sup> Mindful of the various dismissals of painting that he first encountered while a student at CalArts, Lari Pittman had his own concerns about the exhibition but was appropriately playful about them: 'On the one hand I can see that painting is commercially privileged in America [...] that painting can actually sell. But I'm wondering if the problem is that there is a part of the art intelligentsia that is so rigid that doesn't allow [...] I guess I'm thinking of my upcoming meeting with Catherine David, and I'm wondering if this isn't just the stupidest work that she'll ever see — and on top of that it is painting!' See my 1996 interview with Lari Pittman for the *Journal of Contemporary Art*, <http://www.jca-online.com/pittman.html> (last accessed on 22 September 2009).

<sup>3</sup> To cite only one example, in the book *Kerry James Marshall*, Marshall contributed not only a foreword (pp. 9–10), but also a very thorough autobiographical text titled 'Notes on Career and Work', in Eve Sinaiko (ed.), *Kerry James Marshall*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000, pp. 113–23.



is?' For me, these paintings remain some of Marshall's best works, prime examples of how much the material and formal conditions of painting are still able to intensify rather than obscure a critical message, regardless of the history and/or future of its position of privilege in the art world or the museum, or, conversely, its lack of presence and influence in broader cultural production.

Take, for example, *Watts 1963* (1995), the painting that references the Nickerson Gardens housing project in Los Angeles, which, two years after Marshall lived there, became a site of the 1965 Watts Riots. Far from depicting any unrest or difficulty, the large canvas is painted like the dream it presents: supported by an actively painted field of green lawn, the scene plays different styles of illusionistic representation against specific types of material abstraction again and again, weaving a visual and



Kerry James Marshall, *Bang*, 1994, acrylic and collage on canvas, 264 × 305cm.

Both images courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

tactile complexity without which the point of the painting's irony would be severely diminished by remaining only iconographical. It can't be an accident that 'nature' is made to do the heavy conceptual lifting in these works. In this painting, flowers in particular stand as popular symbols (the 'flower-power' daisies in front of the Housing Authority sign planted in the painting's lower left quadrant) as well as pure gestures (the Twombly-esque pastel bursts around the same sign). Despite their pictorial and painterly differences, both sets of blossoms pull the deep space of the picture up to its surface, complicating it in that well-rehearsed yet hardly exhausted manner that painting still is capable of performing unlike other media.

Moreover, this painting – like most of his others – is unashamedly decorative, made even more strident by two banners that simultaneously break and reframe the top half of its edge to significant effect. The painting is at once its own world and from another. The large red banner is broken in two, its incomplete statement reading 'There's ... d more of everyth...', while a smaller, more ribbon-like white banner fills the gap between

the fragments, completing the picture with its key message: 'HERE WE REST'. To decorate here means to commemorate via a self-conscious construction of something worth looking at even after the collective memory fades. Marshall's embodiment of the commemoration of this memory in the emphatically two-dimensional bodies of three children is hyper-symbolic, continuing a trope of 'ultra-blackness' that began with some of his earliest works. Marshall described this notion in a letter responding to the film-maker Arthur Jafa: 'The figures I paint are a literal representation of our rhetorical identity. "Black" people – highly stylised, unequivocal and completely self-conscious. [...] Their undeniable spiritual power is at once irreverently profane, formally complex, viscerally accessible and hauntingly beautiful.'<sup>4</sup> The flatness of Marshall's figures is as powerful as their blackness, as each of them – while standing, kneeling or curled up in a foetal position – is placed on shadows as black as they are. In *Watts 1963*, the shadows – shaped almost like surfboards – put the children in two irreconcilable places at once: 'resting here' in the fantasy of the painting while also standing next to the Housing Authority's sign, a reminder of a living situation not in the painting – an irreconcilable state of depiction and reality reinforced by the materially plain and ideologically provocative unstretched state of these raw canvases. Painted on dropcloth-like tarpaulins (complete with grommets), Marshall's garden paintings are gorgeous yet remain grounded, providing yet one more resting place for his – not to mention our – vision.



'Kerry James Marshall: One True Thing, Meditations on Black Aesthetics', 2003. Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Works shown by L. Eduardo. Photography © Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Photograph by Michal Raz-Russo

It is important to recognise here that despite its privileged history, painting gives no guarantee that any message it contains will remain intact, despite attempts to permanently endow materiality with meaning. With *The Garden Project*, I am reminded in particular of Georges Seurat's *Un Dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte* (*A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, 1884–86). (Given its permanent home at The Art Institute of Chicago, I am confident of its significant influence on Marshall.) Regardless of Seurat's attitude toward those people in the park, and – more importantly – his conception of Divisionism as requiring visual labour from its audience, his painting is largely understood as a celebration, so much so that it once provided the inspiration for a Broadway musical, 'Sunday in the Park with George' (1984). The question remains: when the memory fades of what Marshall's 'gardens' actually were, what happens to the message, not to mention the irony?<sup>5</sup>

4 From a letter in response to another from film-maker Arthur Jafa, published in Judith Russi Kirshner, Gregory Knight and Ursula Prinz (ed.), *Korrespondenzen/Correspondences: 14 Artists from Chicago & Berlin* (exh. cat.), Berlin and Chicago: Berlinische Galerie im Martin-Gropius-Bau and Chicago Cultural Center, 1994, p.95.

5 Stephen F. Eisenman's important work on Seurat is to the point: 'by its contradictory mixture of idealism and materialism, epic and comic, classic and contemporary, the *Grand Jatte* ironises aesthetic and social convention. In addition, its Chromo-luminarism demands the collaboration of its audience, thereby positing the revolutionary ideal of overcoming the alienation of artistic producers from consumers within capitalist society'. From his 'Seeing Seurat Politically', *The Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1989, p.214.



In 2000, only a few years after documenta X, Marshall announced a change in his trajectory, resetting the terms for a significant broadening of his practice (which had already partially begun in 1998):

*I gave up on the idea of making Art a long time ago, because I wanted to know how to make paintings; but once I came to know that, reconsidering the question of what Art is returned as a critical issue. A painting is a material object: measurable, readable, knowable. The concept 'Art' resists easy definition and is therefore contingent on shifting ideas and relationships. Paintings and other art forms aspire to the status of Art, but these things don't necessarily meet.*

*I wanted to understand what the painters I admired knew that made them able to achieve such marvellous effects. I tried to codify the difference between really great work and mediocre pictures. [...] Surpassing the achievements of the masters was out of the question, but getting up alongside them on the wall seemed reasonably possible. I've spent all my energies trying to do that much.<sup>6</sup>*

In 1998, a large exhibition of Marshall's post-documenta X work travelled for two years to several venues in the United States. Titled 'Mementos', the exhibition included nine paintings: four that continued the pictorial structure of the unstretched canvases



Kerry James Marshall,  
'Mementos', 1998.  
Installation view, Santa  
Monica Museum of Art

from *The Garden Projects* while making their commemorative status even more explicit (*Souvenir I–IV*, 1997–98), and five smaller paintings on plywood panels that memorialised Martin Luther King, Jr. and John and Robert Kennedy. If these nine works had been the entire exhibition, it would have neatly continued the trajectory of his practice as a painter who was confident in his technical abilities as much as in his grasp of the history of the medium. However, they were hardly half of the show.

In fact, 'Mementos' was Marshall's first incursion into full-blown installation. Included alongside the paintings were photographs, sculpture, prints and a video installation, all of which related in various ways to the overall subject matter of the exhibition: the struggle for civil rights in the United States in the 1950s and 60s. As someone who had begun to appreciate the formal and conceptual focus of Marshall's paintings in the overall painting-poor environment of documenta X, at first I couldn't quite fathom why the artist himself seemed interested in deliberately adding what seemed like distractions in the face of the significant pictorial focus of his earlier work. For example, several sculptures of oversized rubber stamps and stamp pads that were used to make large prints of slogans like 'WE SHALL OVERCOME' seemed to be little more than antagonistic challenges to the paintings, which, by the way, had been made

<sup>6</sup> Kerry James Marshall, 'Foreword', in E. Sinaiko (ed.), *Kerry James Marshall*, op. cit., p.9.

even more decorative than before with the addition of substantial amounts of glitter. In a text published during the tour of the exhibition, Barry Schwabsky remarked that the critical reaction to the exhibition had been subdued when it debuted in Chicago, and went on to make an astute observation:

*[T]here may be more of a contradiction than Mr Marshall is willing to admit between his desire to be seen 'not as "the painter" but as an artist' and his passion for the 'material involvement in the process', which is so much more easily fulfilled in a traditional medium like painting than in more distanced, directorial modes like installations and video.<sup>7</sup>*

In other words, maybe Marshall was trying to have it both ways, to blur the line between being a painter and being an artist who uses paint. An extreme yet critical example of the latter is Felix Gonzalez-Torres. In his brief career he produced just one painting: *Forbidden Colors* (1988). Made up of four monochromatic panels painted in the colours of the Palestinian flag, it takes full advantage of all of the historical weight of painting by virtue of being the *only one* in his oeuvre. Marshall's work for 'Mementos' could be seen as an investigation of what it would mean to make more than the only one, transforming his work to reflect oppositional points of view that have been set up to dismantle hierarchies, but without abandoning his proficient grasp of the Western European aesthetic tradition of painting. Marshall's ambivalence about the operation performed by calling an artist a 'painter' seems different from David's, and more keenly related to the politics and contextualisation of painting practice – rather than David's more art-historically inflected attempt to undermine the idea of a 'medium' of painting by privileging non-medium-specific 'image-making strategies' instead. Marshall extended his investigation of what is signified – and excluded – by 'painting' even further when he transformed a mid-career survey in 2003 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago into anything but another painting show, that is, moving beyond painting in order to reflect the diversity of styles used by black artists by including some of them directly in what was originally intended to be 'his' exhibition, upending a presentational and curatorial model that still dominates what a survey should be, particularly for painting. The show's title, 'One True Thing: Meditations on Black Aesthetics', referred to his desire to examine how artists and institutions have influenced what has been known as 'black aesthetics' since the term 'first emerged within the 1960s civil rights and Black Power moments as a way to raise awareness for black rights, foster black cultural pride and develop strategies for African Americans to participate more actively in the mainstream of US society'.<sup>8</sup> Presented at a time when the concept of 'post-black aesthetics' was emerging, Marshall's intention was to examine, if not complicate, the conundrum itself: 'The world I see is filtered through black-culture lenses. I can't not make work from a black perspective, even if I wanted to. The attempt to do so itself is determined by my position as a black person in America. The fact that this can be formulated as a problem, as a possibility, comes out of current and historical experiences of black people in the United States.'<sup>9</sup> Continuing his commitment to community-based traditions, Marshall invited several other artists to exhibit work alongside his own, relinquishing not only the focus on his work overall, but also, again, his status as a painter whose work would necessarily demand a particular focus on the part of both maker and viewer that also requires the exclusion of other media, contexts or situations that remain apart (and could possibly distract) from the irreconcilable situations that exist within his (and most) painting itself.

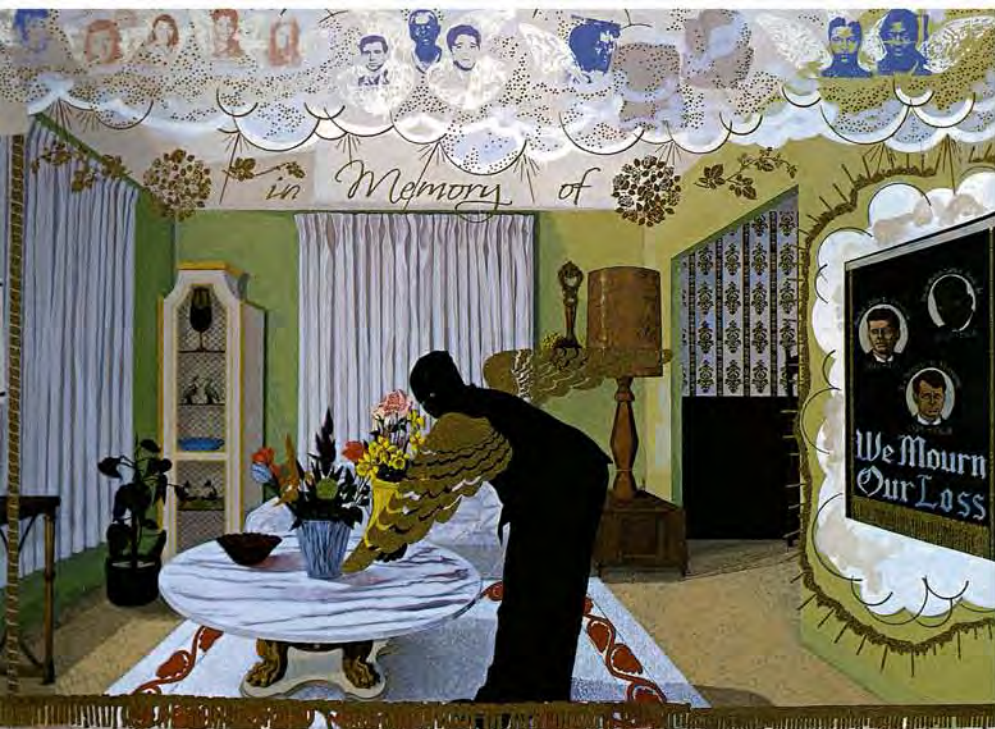
Marshall's recent works suggest that painting has recaptured the full range of his attention. In a series of seven paintings called *Vignette* (2005), he rendered a *mise en scène* that contains a black couple in love (or, as one of the paintings shouts: 'L-O-V-E') in the guise of French Rococo, albeit predominately in black, white and shades of grey. The humour of this painting is a provocative development, allowing its use of pastiche to

<sup>7</sup> Barry Schwabsky, 'Mementos of a Moment and Its Movement', *The New York Times*, 6 September 1998, p.AR29.

<sup>8</sup> From an unattributed text in the exhibition brochure at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

<sup>9</sup> Marshall in Elizabeth A.T. Smith, 'One True Thing!', in *Kerry James Marshall: One True Thing, Meditations on Black Aesthetics* (exh. cat.), Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, p.viii. Taken from an unpublished interview conducted in 2001 by Julieanna L. Richardson for The HistoryMakers, a non-profit organisation in Chicago that compiles oral histories of prominent African Americans.





Kerry James Marshall,  
*Vignette #7*, 2004,  
 acrylic on Perspex,  
 183 × 152cm.  
 Courtesy the artist and  
 Jack Shainman Gallery,  
 New York

work on us in ways we are not accustomed to in Marshall's work. Conversely, and most recently, he has completed an exceedingly large two-part mural for the atrium of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art that will be on view through 2010. Titled *Visible Means of Support*, it depicts distorted views of the plantation estates of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. The work takes Marshall's never-ending commitment to the razor-sharp precision of his image strategies to a whole new level of scale and presence that is rarely done in painting today, returning us to its most opulent *and* most ideological moments (think Michelangelo and Diego Rivera) while reinstating the focus not only on painting, but on Marshall himself. It is premature to conclude here that Marshall has merely retreated to the relative safety of painting, not only because of the communal requirements of producing such a mural (it is also important to note that it can be viewed in the museum for free), but also because of the absolute consistency of his willingness to challenge his – and, of course, our – assumptions of what his work could ever be.



Kerry James Marshall,  
*Souvenir I*, 1997,  
acrylic, paper, collage  
and glitter on canvas,  
274 × 396cm.

Collection Museum  
of Contemporary Art,  
Chicago, Bernice and  
Kenneth Newberger Fund

*Souvenir II*, 1997,  
acrylic, paper,  
collage and glitter  
on unstretched canvas,  
274 × 396cm. Addison

Gallery of American Art,  
Andover, MA. Both  
images courtesy  
the artist and Jack  
Shainman Gallery,  
New York

**Kerry James Marshall:**  
**The Painter of Afro-Modern Life**  
— Kobena Mercer

*Kobena Mercer considers Kerry James Marshall's paintings set against a backdrop of different modernisms: Greenbergian Modernism, with its dialectic of addition and subtraction; postmodernism, with its disdain for painting; and Afro-Modernism, with its negotiations of historical and contemporary contradictions.*

Over the past fifteen years, Kerry James Marshall has become the history painter of post-Civil Rights USA. In his large-scale canvases, figurative groups placed among scenic backdrops often evoke the utopian aspirations of the 1960s, and in this way his paintings open onto an imaginative or even fictional space in which the relation between past and present becomes the subject for a fresh set of narrative possibilities. Structured by the recombinant principle of collage and a painterly interest in the formal properties of flatness, Marshall's body of work is best understood as a manifestation of Afro-modernism on account of its critical relationship to prevailing conventions of modernism. By examining his early work, my intention is to show how Marshall arrived at a set of choices that led him to an alternative to the discourse of postmodernism that prevailed at the beginning of his career in the 1980s, even as he maintained a complex relationship to the discourse of High Modernism that was associated with abstract painting and the views of critic Clement Greenberg.

Marshall's enigmatic compositions, with their figures often in pairs or groups, suggest potential scenes of dramatic action, but any straightforward access to narrative content is intercepted by a rich ensemble of painterly effects in which various drips, dots, strokes and scumbles are scattered throughout the textured surfaces that are so distinctive to Marshall's paintings. To the extent that such painterly 'noise' interferes with the figure/ground distinction as a foundational aspect of painting, it acts as the locus of conceptualisation in Marshall's work, marking the point at which alternative understandings of 'history' are brought to the threshold of representation. By questioning the conditions of representation surrounding African-American history, Marshall's concern with the 1960s parts company from the nostalgic treatment conveyed by a work such as Spike Lee's 1992 film biography of Malcolm X. In addition to displacing documentary realism, Marshall also eschews the ironic handling of the 1960s that is expressed in the retro-kitsch aesthetics of Blaxploitation imagery. Rather, what Marshall achieved in his mid-1990s breakthrough, with paintings such as *De Style* (1993) and *Lost Boys* (1993), was a mode of historical reflection in which lived experiences of the past are invoked through a subtle poetics of allusion.

The *Souvenir* series (1997–98) touches upon the politics of the Civil Rights era directly, in the form of a background tapestry that depicts Martin Luther King, Jr. alongside John and Bobby Kennedy, above a motto that reads 'We Mourn Our Loss'. But more often than not, Marshall alludes to the 1960s indirectly, such that a more diffuse sense of 'pastness' associated with childhood memories and the intimacy of family life takes precedence over the public sphere in which the tumultuous events of the period took place. In the *Garden Projects* series, works such as *Better Homes Better Gardens* (1994) or *Untitled (Altgeld Gardens)* (1995) convey a precise feel for the period in the shape of the mass housing projects that were built in the inner cities during the 1960s. Yet even as the distinction between public and private space on the canvas is literally blurred by splashes of paint – thus overriding the separation between the two realms, as well as interfering with the spatial separation of figure and ground – there is an affective charge of unsettlement, disturbance and violence that, I would argue, is conveyed by the way such painterly effects 'deface' the illusion of pictorial depth. Far from summoning history as though it were a given body of knowledge passively

waiting to be depicted or narrated, it is the opacity of the ongoing relation between past and present that Marshall throws into the forefront of the viewer's attention. In this way, the poetic interference activated by the disparate materials collaged onto the picture plane issues a break with the realism and naturalism associated with the genre of history painting in the modern West. But if we could accurately describe Marshall as a modernist whose work operates from an alternate methodology of collage, in which meaning is generated by the dialectical collision of heterogeneous elements, then we still face the question of how to describe exactly what kind of modernist Kerry James Marshall might be.

There is something undeniably strange and haunting about the jet-black figures that have featured in almost all of Marshall's paintings since the early 1990s. At one level, it is their colouration that gives them their estranged and de-familiarised quality. Where African-American skin tones might be rendered in a naturalistic setting with solely brown-blacks or red-blacks to convey warmth, Marshall's palette overlays a colder tonal range of blue-blacks and grey-blacks as well. If this was not enough of a de-naturalising gesture in its own right, Marshall's figures possess an equally uncanny quality at the level of line. As a work such as *Past Times* (1997) demonstrates, by occupying the illusory space of pictorial depth such bodies acquire a solidity that fills out the spatial recession of figure and ground, even as their 'cold' colouration deprives them of shadow and hence draws attention to their flatness as mere shapes that exist purely on the picture plane. By virtue of this move, Marshall plays upon the ambivalence of blackness as a signifier, which may refer at one and the same time to the abstract phenomenon of colour and to the concrete reality of historically constructed 'racial' identities. Having de-naturalised the visual inscription of 'race' in this way, Marshall also plays with the tension between the figurative – a codified system of shapes and lines we read in terms of a likeness or verisimilitude to human bodies – and the figural, the random inchoate mass of potentially signifying material as it exists prior to being given distinct form or bounded shape. In other words, while presenting instantly recognisable as (African-American) figures, Marshall's painterly handling of blackness means that the figurative is always brought to the edge of abstraction, which is what the concept of 'race' often did in modern Western history – abstracting concrete humans into signs upon which to hang someone else's idea of otherness.

The philosophical and political implications of Marshall's treatment of 'race' grow in scope once we observe how Marshall's black figures are arranged into neo-classical ensembles that openly quote from the Western canon, such as the pastoral constellation of the group in *Past Times*. Andrea Mantegna first comes to my mind when beholding the monumental scale that imparts grandeur and gravitas to these figures – and as Marshall's canvases are in the range of eight by twelve feet (2.4 by 3.6 metres), his figures are literally larger than life. The artist acknowledges the wide range of citations he makes, from Raphael or Rembrandt to Picasso, as an integral part of the cross-cultural dimension of his practice, which also includes chalk *vêvé* diagrams from Haitian vodun rituals and *African Powers* (1989), a series of woodcuts based on Yoruba divinities such as Shango and Esu-Elegba. But when critics seek to capture the strangeness generated by these cross-cultural dynamics, the notion that Marshall simply 'inserts' black figures into the pictorial grammar of Western painting, whether classical or modern, fails to grasp the agency of transculturation that modifies commonplace understandings of difference and identity. Instead of merely adding 'black' content to a neutral formal container, as though each retains its pre-existing identity intact, there is a double-sided move at play that is best captured by Houston Baker's description of black modernism as a set of artistic acts that perform the 'deformation of mastery' while asserting the 'mastery of form'.<sup>1</sup>

Taking the latter part first, we can understand why Marshall does not identify himself as postmodern, as he suggests in an interview with African-American cinematographer Arthur Jafa. Declaring a 'sense of obligation to advance the discipline',<sup>2</sup> Marshall seems to echo Greenberg's view that 'the essence of Modernism lies [...] in the

1 Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

2 Kerry James Marshall, quoted in Arthur Jafa, 'Fragments from a Conversation, June–July 1999', in Eve Sinaiko (ed.), *Kerry James Marshall*, New York: Abrams, 2000, p.74.





Kerry James Marshall, *Garden Party*, 2003 acrylic and paper on canvas banner, 274 x 305cm. Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself'.<sup>3</sup> Born in 1955, Marshall is slightly older than the generation of Neo-Conceptualists working in the medium of photo-text and installation, such as Renée Green or Lorna Simpson, who were associated with a paradigm shift around 'race' and representation in the 1980s. And although he is roughly of the same age as Fred Wilson or Carrie Mae Weems, his choice of medium sets him apart. Graduating from Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles in 1978, where he studied with the African-American artist Charles White, Marshall made formative choices during the decade when contemporary art, at the turn to postmodernism, had announced nothing less than the death of painting. But while the issue of medium specificity meant that the primary focus for debates on appropriation, quotation and re-signification took place in relation to photo-text and installation work with the found image or the found object, it is crucial to note that these concepts were equally applicable to Marshall's aims. While his statement, 'I don't think there's anything worse than having a good idea that's poorly realised', might imply a dualism between material-based and idea-based practices, the full statement expresses Marshall's primary concern with the process of conceptualisation:

*if you hope to break through to something meaningful [...] it's gotta come out of a more experimental approach to material. That way, you see the possibility in materials for constructing meaning. If you don't understand the capacity of materials to carry meaning[...] you're limited in your range to simple expressions rather than complex ideas.*<sup>4</sup>

3 Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' (1961), in Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris (ed.), *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, London: Open University and Phaidon, 1992, p.308.  
4 K.J. Marshall, quoted in Arthur Jafa, 'Fragments from a Conversation', op. cit., p.29.

overleaf  
Kerry James Marshall, *Past Times*, 1997, acrylic and collage on canvas, 274 x 396cm. McCormick Place Convention Center, Chicago



K. MARSHALL '86

Picking up on Marshall's painterly interest in flatness, Helen Molesworth points out that instead of the outright rejection of formalist principles (on the part of the post-'Pictures' generation) and instead of the retreat into endgame abstraction (on the part of painters such as Peter Halley), Marshall responded to the 'death of painting' by striking a path between elements of abstraction, collage and representation. By virtue of the picture plane acting both as a flatbed receptacle for collaging disparate elements together and as a pictorial 'window' that supports illusory depth, Marshall's collage methods bridge a wide range of picture-making traditions into a transcultural formation. In contrast to the Greenbergian doctrine of purity, we find that Marshall's combinatory principles not only bring into play elements of linguistic script and musical notation – in *Past Times*, The Temptations's tune 'Just My Imagination' is shown sounding out from the radio – but that as a result of such inter-media reciprocity the paintings elicit a mood of contemplative reflection from the viewer.

Kerry James Marshall, *At the End of the Wee Hours*, 1986, cut-paper collage, 24.4 x 20.3cm. Collection of the artist, Chicago



In the *Garden Projects* series, Molesworth sees the paintings as meditations on the historical failure of the grand projects of modernism and modernisation that gave rise during the 1960s to Greenberg's 'American Type Painting', on the one hand, and to the late modernist architecture of inner-city apartment blocks, on the other. Where such a pensive tone measures the distance between past and present, Molesworth discerns neither the pathos of nostalgia for a lost age nor the cool irony associated with the postmodern, but rather finds in Marshall's paintings a tender distanciation from the 1960s in the form of a literary quality that is 'born of having believed or having wanted to believe in the thing now treated ironically'.<sup>5</sup>

Applying this insight to Marshall's portrayals of girl and boy scouts, or the 'patriotic' scene in which a group of children pledge allegiance to the US flag in *Bang* (1994), one might ask whether Marshall sees the Civil Rights movement as another historical 'failure' of modernity. Considering that for many African Americans this moment was their point of entry into the American dream of suburbia and consumerism, my sense is that Marshall presents the viewer with a perspective that could be labelled 'post' Civil Rights not because he passes judgement on political successes and failures but because, on the contrary, he opens up a novelistic or fictional space in which to reflect upon the unresolved ambitions that spill over from past to present.

Far from presenting a conception of history that is closed or completed as a fixed narrative, Marshall's paintings suggest that the relationship between the past and the present can be imaginatively reconfigured by the mode of narration in which historical events are understood. By engaging the viewer in reflection on the hopes of the 1960s that went unfulfilled, and the dreams of the Civil Rights era that were lost as a result of the later triumph of neo-liberalism, Marshall's version of history painting treats the past not as memorial or monument but as a genealogy in which traces from a previous era can be reawakened in the contemporary moment. After all, it was in Chicago's low-income housing projects, such as Altgeld Gardens, that Barack Obama began to address his political constituencies.

Marshall's combining of a formal interest in flatness with the referential dimension of the figurative thus achieves a fresh perspective on the political imbrication of 'race' and nationality in US history. But if the 'literary' quality of novelistic reflection that imparts a proto-narrative drive to his works would be anathema to Greenbergian modernism, which disdained literary reference of any kind as an unwelcome legacy of eighteenth-century academic art, then it should also be noted that Marshall's interest in the political legacy of black struggles of the 1960s does not fit within dominant definitions of postmodernism either, where the 'past' was cancelled out as a topic for artistic enquiry by the neo-liberal view that the West had arrived at the 'end of history', as Francis Fukuyama stated in his 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*. So if Marshall's practice does not fit within received definitions of either High Modernism or postmodernism, how else might we characterise what Structuralists would call 'the combinatory', out of which he generates the originality and difference of his painterly practice? The most appropriate candidate, I would suggest, lies in the concept of Afro-modernism, especially when the term is understood in light of the heuristic distinctions that Peter Wollen makes in his notion of the 'two avant-gardes'.<sup>6</sup> By distinguishing two major axes in twentieth-century art – abstraction as 'purification', on the one hand, and collage as selection and combination, on the other – Wollen also undercuts the art-historical impasse that often arises between formalist and contextualist modes of analysis.

Understood as a distinctive variant in twentieth-century art that originated from a specifically African-American source, which subsequently migrated through the Caribbean towards European contexts that include black British artists of the post-1945 period, Afro-modernism is an imaginative field of investigation driven by the impersonal rules of a code that makes use of the signifying differences thrown up in the space of cross-cultural encounters as a generative matrix for artistic decisions, choices and procedures. In this sense, what makes Afro-modern practices culturally 'black' is not just the biographical or ethnic origin of the artist nor the social conditions under which the work is produced and exhibited, but rather the *critically dialogical relationship* that

such practices engender in relation to the prevailing discourses of modernism in their outlying surroundings. Taking this view, there are two crucial strands of Marshall's work prior to his mid-1990s breakthrough that need to be taken into account in order to grasp how he arrived at his distinctive cross-cultural combinatory.

'I asked myself, what would happen to Analytical Cubism if you kept that fragmented structure but put back in all the stuff they took out?'<sup>7</sup> Discussing *At the End of the Wee Hours* (1986), a paper-collage series he produced on a miniature scale, Marshall clearly aligned himself with the axis of collage that Wollen distinguishes from the axis of abstraction, which was coded as a logic of extraction, subtraction and purification for the formalist tradition in contrast to the combinatory logic of selection, addition and multiplication by which readymade elements, such as found images or found objects, are 'put back in', so to speak. The collage axis of the 'two avant-gardes' would include artists as diverse as Hannah Höch or Romare Bearden, but what differentiates Afro-modernism is the asymmetrical gradient whereby the collage episteme of selection and combination acts as a counterweight to the exclusionary and absolutist consequences of 'purity' in abstraction. Marshall's aesthetic of recombination refers not only to his canvases but also, as mentioned before, to the system of conceptualisation into which his disparate source materials are placed: Marshall's title, for instance, was actually a quotation from Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* (1938–41), as though to underline the fact that his *papier collé* exists in an inter-media condition of impurity.

Around the same time as making *At the End of the Wee Hours*, Marshall quoted Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) in a series of paintings – including *Two Invisible Men Naked* (1985) – that enacts the 'deformation of mastery' by summoning up the old racist canard that it is only by the whites of their eyes and teeth that blacks are visible in the dark. While their jokey aura meant they were mostly misread as a critique of stereotypical renditions of blackness, these paintings actually marked the point at which Marshall began to play with tonal ambiguities among warm-blacks and cool-blacks in such a way that made figure and ground virtually unreadable. Taking this latter method a step further, *Two Invisible Men* (1985) pushed the figurative through the figural to the point where mark-making gave way to the monochrome (the ultimate form of abstraction). As a diptych comprised of a white and a black canvas, Marshall visibly played with notions of 'racial' polarity, but where the work quietly quotes Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), it also summons up a liminal condition in which the blank canvases put painting under erasure – just as surely as the work suggests that the very idea of absolute difference in 'race' and ethnicity breaks down when the figure/ground distinction is no longer readable.

Exploring two kinds of flatness, this mid-1980s work enabled Marshall to arrive at the two principal co-ordinates of his history paintings – the play on the border between the figural and the figurative which brought about the denaturalisation of blackness, on the one hand, and, on the other, the use of the picture plane as a receptacle for the referential 'stuff' that one strand of modernism wanted to 'take out' but which another strand wanted to 'put back'.

To the extent that the conceptual dimension of Marshall's paintings has often been overlooked in favour of their sensual beauty, it is vital to stress that the artist is centrally preoccupied with 'beauty' not as a secondary element added to the surface textures of his work but as a constitutive aspect of an Afro-modernist outlook that addresses the protean beauty of blackness as a multi-voiced signifier that can never be fixed or brought to closure. By virtue of the 'discipline' of painting that informs his individual aesthetic choices, Marshall's pursuit of beauty thus steps aside from the sentimental or the merely expressive, which is where blackness so often gets trapped in naturalism and realism. As he states in his characteristically trenchant style: 'It's not about self-expression. If it were really just about self-expression, then that would require a receiver who is so sensitively attuned to your sensibility that they are capable of recognising an intrinsic value – not in what it is you are doing, but who it is you are.'<sup>8</sup> In the cleavage of this distinction between the ontological and the epistemological, the impassive monumentality of Marshall's figures bears witness to the violent histories of Afro-modernity, even as their shape-shifting figurality hints at the beauty of what blackness may yet become.

5 Helen Molesworth, 'Project America', *Frize*, issue 40, May 1998, p.56.

6 Peter Wollen, 'The Two Avant-Gardes', *Studio International*, November/December 1975, pp.171–76.

7 K.J. Marshall, quoted in Arthur Jafa, 'Fragments from a Conversation', *op. cit.*, p.46.

8 K.J. Marshall, quoted in Wesley Miller, 'On Museums', 25 September 2008, <http://blog.art21.org/> (last accessed on 8 February 2010).



# History Painting

Kerry James Marshall attacks America's founding fathers.

by Miranda Mellis



Realism should always raise the question: Whose realism? Whether revising false idylls of presidential plantations that treat their slaveholding as incidental; making comic book superheroes based on African deities; or critiquing the reduction of images of resistance to commodified mementos, Kerry James Marshall's paintings and installations of American iconography play with and correct the national record and reveal its obscene elisions. The conventions of history painting provide Marshall with a grammar for thinking with paint. He deploys American-historical tropes to reveal what has been suppressed by (aptly named) "master-narratives"—national myths and mystifications inscribed on mass-cultural surfaces.

*Visible Means of Support*, a new diptych of large-scale paintings by the Chicago-based artist, is currently on view on the walls at each side of the Haas Atrium in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Forming a dynamic gateway into the museum, like two luminous pages of a giant coloring book, the walls distort canonical images of Mount Vernon and Monticello, the estates of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson respectively. The work, which the public can view for free, was installed in February with the assistance of mural artists from Precita Eyes Mural Arts Center, a nonprofit organization that promotes community building through public works. For 15 days in February visitors could watch Marshall and the Precita Eyes muralists on 30-foot-high scaffolds, brushing in the images with house paint, sometimes working from maquettes, on occasion with flashlights in hand.

Standing at the outer edge of each mural, Washington and Jefferson invite viewers at once to their plantations and into the museum. The plantations' topographies include mazes of brightly colored, swerving rectangles, colliding crossroads and dead-end highways, which riff as much on the labyrinthine structure of graffiti as on the topiaries of wealthy estates. The result is a lyrical mosaic that stacks and distributes its elements with a narrative logic that is colorfully disarming and contagiously kinetic.

Marshall deployed the nostalgic vernacular of the coloring book with the intention of making it easier for people to engage with the traumatic history the paintings explore. Two children set out to traverse a risky maze, like players on a game board. The bright colors and cartoon style seem to denote playful games, yet the scene is one of reckoning: Innumerable slaves are rendered variously throughout, here flat as if held under glass, there embedded in the property as if extensions of it. The subtexts of entrapment and escape charge the image with grief. Faces are camouflaged in trees like spirits, oscillating in and out of view. One figure is composed of connect-the-dots, each of which on closer view is a tiny numbered face, economic units in a signifying chain.

By contrast, the presidents' bodies are enormous,

hyper-elongated, and warped, stretching nearly the height of the wall. Washington and Jefferson, as Marshall notes, are the presidents "around whom a certain idea and image of American life has been formulated." Reflecting on their elastic figuration, he remarks that, "It made sense to use the anamorphic image because these figures are really *outsized* in our imagination, and what we know of them is distorted, reduced to sound bites: 'I cannot tell a lie...'" With pouting lips and a jaundiced eye, Jefferson is grim-faced as he displays his estate, Washington likewise as he stands on the neck of a literally downtrodden brown body laid out along the land, also hyperextended, his leg caught in a maze.

The discrepancies in scale graph grotesquely disproportionate hierarchies of power and entitlement. Commenting on the works' contemporary resonance, Marshall, whose past work has frequently engaged with histories of racism and representation, noted that "slavery as we knew it was an American commercial enterprise that required levels of exploitation people say are unacceptable now. But what we see with this global economic collapse is that the means for achieving profitability over the long haul requires almost the same thing. And if the low-wage workers who are disadvantaged have no capacity to reverse the process, then the same dynamic prevails." Marshall described the paintings as "landscapes of privilege," yet they keenly demonstrate the ways in which privilege is on the same map as suffering.

Marshall's diptych is at once cartography, historiography, and a penetrating diagnostic that upends the narrative of the United States' constitution and founding. The paintings recollect that the basis of American capitalism is slavery, while also suggesting that our social structures are transformable. They challenge historical accounts, which merely accrue dead habits of perception, and argue for a multidimensional realism with rhetorical force. ♦

*Visible Means of Support* will be on view until 2010 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



| ART |





# Street Art Comes In From the Cold



By APRIL DEMBOSKY

SAN FRANCISCO  
**K**ERRY JAMES MARSHALL stands before a canvas the size of a movie screen. The milky greens, blues and pinks, rendered in paint-by-number patterns and connect-the-dots figures, seem as if they might swallow him and his id whole. But Mr. Marshall and, he hopes, visitors to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art can hold the Crayola madness in check by studying silhouettes embedded in the landscape.

The two three-story murals depict Mount Vernon and Monticello, the estates of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Planted in Where's Waldo fashion among the bushes and trees in this child-like maze are outlines of the slaves who maintained the estates of a new nation's champions of liberty.

"The coloring book stuff seduces people to become engaged and has them acknowledge the subtext of these places at the same time," said Mr. Marshall, who painted the work over a two-week period last month with a crew of local muralists.

Mr. Marshall, a Chicago artist known for exploring racial identity and black history, said he wants people to acknowledge the contradictions that underlie the veneration of the founding fathers. "I think a more realistic representation is appropriate," he said, rather "than the kind of mythologizing that goes with Jefferson as the author of the Declaration of Independence and Washington as the father of the country."

Although he developed the sketches long before Barack Obama was sworn in as president, he said, the election of the country's first African-American president makes the mural as relevant as ever. The mythic sense of power and leadership, the ability to save the nation with which the people endowed Washington and Jefferson applies to President Obama as well, he said. Yet because Mr. Obama's success is exceptional, he added, it will remain problematic until it becomes common. "I think one always has to understand how complicated America is and start to be more specific about the kinds of changes they think can take place and will take place," he said.

At top, three-story murals by Kerry James Marshall, who details a work at right, in process at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Above, Mona Caron's Market Street Railway Mural in San Francisco.





In many ways the political goals of this work by Mr. Marshall resonate with the mural tradition here. More than 1,000 murals are on view across San Francisco, addressing subjects like the plight of immigrants and farm workers, the impact of the political wars in Central America in the 1980s, AIDS in Africa, gentrification in San Francisco and the joys of bicycling and buying locally grown produce.

"There are very few Republican murals around," Henry Sultan, board president of the Precita Eyes Mural Arts and Visitor Center, said dryly. Muralists from his group, a nonprofit arts organization based in the city's heavily muraled Mission district, were hired to help paint Mr. Marshall's massive design, which is to remain on display until the spring of 2010.

On one level the group's role in realizing the vision of an established single artist working in an established institution seems at odds with its mission. For more than 30 years Precita Eyes has consulted

*For many muralists, the goal is to create art that is physically and conceptually accessible to the people who live around it.*

with neighborhood residents to paint murals that reflect local concerns. The notion is to create art that is physically and conceptually accessible to the people who live around it. Local residents or students often design and paint the murals with the help of experienced muralists.

But Precita Eyes hopes its involvement with the Marshall murals will bring it more recognition and more commissions. It also points out that the San Francisco museum's atrium is free to all, and that the museum's education department is financing a program in which Precita Eyes

muralists will help high school students from nearby Oakland paint a mural in response to Mr. Marshall's in a skate park.

Still, some argue that his art violates the philosophy of public art that many San Francisco street artists hold dear.

"I don't even think of them as murals when they're in a museum," said Megan Wilson, a local artist and muralist. "They're just wall paintings."

For many of the street artists who paint buildings, electrical boxes and manhole covers around the city, the whole point of murals is to avoid the sterile white walls of a gallery and interact with all the irregularities of the urban environment. The point is to catch people unaware as they walk to home, church or work, an audience that either can't afford or is otherwise disinclined to enter a museum.

Nonetheless, some younger artists intend to paint in public only until a gallery owner pulls them indoors. And some others, like the artist Rigo 23 (born Ricardo Gouveia) have embraced a kind of compromise, accepting museum and gallery commissions while remaining committed to public art that challenges viewers to reflect on their relationship to the cityscape.

Rigo 23 is known for his series of downtown murals in the style of street signs, including a large one-way sign at a freeway entrance that reads "One Tree," pointing to

Below, Rigo 23's public art "One Tree," which points to a gum tree near a freeway entrance in San Francisco.



a lonely gum tree on the roadside. He is also the creator of a blue-and-red Interstate sign on a high-rise, low-income housing complex that reads "Innercity: Home."

He said he prefers working in public spaces. For him going to a museum is like going to a grocery store, whereas viewing public art is akin to visiting a farmers' or flea market. Unlike a publicized exhibition, Rigo 23 said, unexpected public art requires the viewer to "negotiate a response on the spot," as if he was bargaining with a local farmer for a bunch of kale.

For the muralist Mona Caron the function of a mural is less about the finished product than about the community's involvement in making and viewing it. She and her assistant, Lisa Ruth Elliott, are now working on a mural in the Tenderloin district, one of the city's grittiest neighborhoods, known for its large homeless population, oversaturation with drug dealers and services for the mentally ill. The wall they are painting has been a regular backdrop for graffiti tagging and food fights among visitors to the soup kitchen across the street.

Over the course of several months Ms. Caron talked to residents, schoolchildren, single-room occupancy managers, clergy members, historians and sex-club owners before coming up with a design. This one will celebrate the neighborhood's hidden past, its once-vibrant jazz scene, its demolished Art Deco theaters, the struggles of its big refugee population and the hopes for an improved but ungentrified future.

In that utopian future people would use public space to meet their neighbors rather than brush past them. In the months it takes her to complete a project, Ms. Caron often finds that this dream is partly realized as her painting process alters people's relationship to the space. "People start changing the way they walk by," she said. "People slow down. Sometimes I look back, and there are 12 people watching." They often offer suggestions that she later incorporates into the mural.

If San Francisco muralists see the street as their canvas for social change, Mr. Marshall sees fine art institutions as his.

"If 90 percent of the images you see when you come to the museum are images of white people and figures, you think that's what you're supposed to see," he said. "Part of my role is to make commonplace the experience of encountering im-



# Coloring Perception

By **BLAKE GOPNIK** | *Washington Post Staff Writer*

CHICAGO

**C**an an artist get much more successful than Kerry James Marshall? Museums everywhere own his work. (The Corcoran was one of his first buyers. And the Baltimore Museum of Art is displaying his “Ladder of Success,” a recent purchase.) In 1997, he won the \$500,000 MacArthur “genius” award, an ultra-prestigious invitation to Germany’s twice-a-decade Documenta show and a place in the Whitney Museum’s biennial. In 2003, a big solo show of Marshall’s work toured the country to rave reviews. That same year, he was in the Venice Biennale. By 2007, Marshall had received an unheard-of *second* invitation to Documenta, where his ghetto-themed

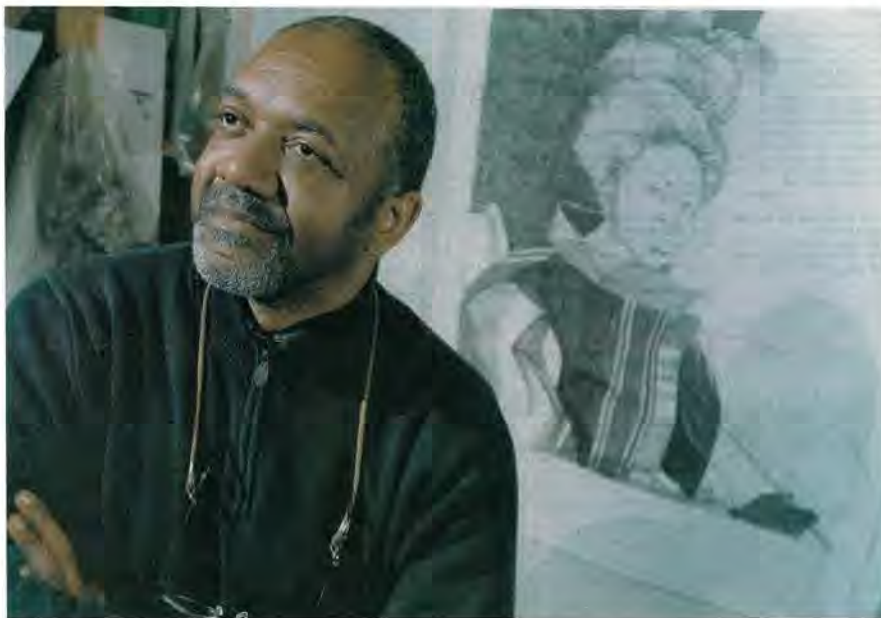


■ In ‘Monuments,’ Marshall’s punch lines pull no punches. **M6-7**

conceptual comics may have been the best thing in the 113-artist show. (To showcase his work, The Post offered Marshall a two-page spread in the paper to fill with an original piece. He came up with the unique Washington installment of his comic art that’s on view in the middle of this section.) Success, after success, after success, such as few black artists have ever had. And not nearly good enough. Marshall says that he has yet to measure up to certain of his best-known rivals: “Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael. . . . They represent the core of the historical pantheon of great artists, recognized worldwide. And a big part of my objective is to be listed in the history among those artists.”

See **MARSHALL**, Page M4

## Kerry James Marshall Thinks the Old Masters Have Room for a New Face: His Own



“You’ve got to invade the space and occupy it in such a way that you can’t be thrown out,” Marshall says of his career strategy: commanding the European art tradition and then putting his stamp on it.



# Kerry James Marshall: Big Success, Bigger Dreams

MARSHALL, *from Page M1*

It's about "a longing to be fully a part of the story of some system you are deeply in love with," says Marshall, no doubt echoing the feelings of a certain other black Chicagoan who has made it big lately. And it's about the certain knowledge that, in art at least, no black person has ever truly reached that goal.

Until quite recently, black people have barely even been the *subjects* of pictures.

Marshall has set out to correct that imbalance. Some of his pictures portray the living rooms of the black middle class. There are also paintings of street toughs, dead before their time. Marshall has painted inner-city housing projects and black lovers by the sea. He's also worked a bit in installation art, photography, video and even puppetry. But whatever the subject, or the medium, his works balance celebration and critique of black America; it's impossible to come to any simple reading of his pictures' point of view. Marshall may be today's most eloquent artistic chronicler, and most compelling analyst, of the African American experience. His success beyond the black community means that he's also opened mainstream eyes to it.



In his chaotic studio in a run-down neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, Marshall talks about his own experience as a black American, and as a black artist. He's dressed in khakis and a jean shirt, with reading glasses on a string and his salt-and-pepper hair and beard cropped short. He could pass for a senior academic outfitted for Saturday yardwork. Which isn't that far from the truth: He moved to Chicago in 1987 to work at the University of Illinois, and only stopped teaching earlier this decade. (He also has a large yard behind his tidy house nearby, but the compulsive gardening is done by his wife, the actress and

swearing machine gives a constant update on the state of her flowers.)

Marshall was born in 1955, into a working-class family in Birmingham, Ala. When he was 7 his father got a job in the kitchens of a VA hospital in Los Angeles, moving the family to the rough streets of Watts and then to south-central L.A.

Home — the whole *neighborhood* — was art-free, so Marshall launched his career at the local library: "You learn you can take books out. . . . I just started walking up and down the stacks." By the third and fourth grades he knew "every single art book in the library."

Marshall started copying from the Old Masters — Michelangelo and Raphael and others. "I saw myself as being one of those guys," he says, and assumed that if only he could acquire what he thought of as their "superpower" skills — "a magical thing called The Mastery" — he'd be on his way.

It took Marshall a while to notice that "those guys" almost never portrayed people who looked like him. "I just assumed that when you look at the figures in paintings, they were all white figures — but you don't think of them as white figures. They're just *art* figures. . . . You never pick up a how-to book that shows how to draw a black man." That assumption only collapsed in the fifth grade, when a project for what was then called Negro History Week led him to a book called "Great Negroes: Past and Present," and its chapter on Charles White, a black artist who drew and painted African Americans. By then, race consciousness was brewing all around Marshall. He'd watched the Los Angeles riots from up close, "almost like in a movie," and his mom had given him one of the first Afros in his class.

The frustrated ambitions of Black America started to affect his budding ambitions as an artist. "When I picked up books on American art, [White] wasn't in them. Neither was Jacob Lawrence." At that point he

be in the books." He also discovered there was a place you could go to learn how to get into them: art school.

He was already there by seventh grade, with a summer scholarship to Otis Art Institute. "I was the only black kid in the class," he says. Which meant he just about fainted when the teacher brought that class upstairs — to a space where White happened to have a studio. "I didn't know Charles White was *alive*." White was in his 50s, and a teacher at Otis. "That was the turning point," Marshall remembers. "Charles White was *the* Old Master to me. . . . I tried to *be* Charles White."

Thanks to exhibitions, awards and mentors, and to several years of lousy jobs and scrimping, by 1977 Marshall had enrolled at Otis as an undergraduate. He discovered that, in an art world full of Bruce Nauman videos, the kind of Old Master skills he'd always admired were now considered "antiquated." And he felt, and still feels, that left ambitious black artists out in the cold. "All those people" — all those *white* people — "who were making a break from the past were making a break from a past they *had*." Black artists, he says, had to prove mastery of the tradition in order to own it, and only then could think about moving on. "The lives of black people, in the U.S., have always been about proving your credentials."

He sees that as the story of his career: proving his ownership of the very grandest European tradition, and then seeing if he can take it somewhere new. He thinks of it in military terms. "You've got to invade the space and occupy it in such a way that you can't be thrown out. The campaign allows you to reach a certain plateau from which you can launch the final assault."

From the start, a big part of that campaign was about making sure that complex, compelling — and critical — images of black people would at last make their way into museum spaces, alongside all those

closed ranks of whites. "People like painting too much for them not to be able to enjoy the black figure in that space," he says. "It's unacceptable to have 600 years of black-free history," at least as told in works of art.



When Marshall paints the living rooms of the black middle class, he paints big, on the scale of Old Master altarpieces and history paintings. Some of those living rooms have included icons of black victory: over-the-sofa pictures of civil rights heroes such as John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. But these same canvases also hint at consumerist complacency: Everything's too new and tidy in those living rooms. Goods matter too much. Marshall depicts this black experience, but he also questions it.

Other paintings have been about the experience of blacks way down the social ladder. Marshall set one series (it won him his first Documenta gig) in infamous public-housing projects with the word "garden" in their names: Wentworth Gardens in South Side Chicago and Nickerson Gardens in Watts, among others. (He once lived in Nickerson, one of the first housing projects in Los Angeles.) The bucolic tone Marshall put into his pictures clearly has an ironic edge, given what we know about the troubles that such "gardens" ended up breeding. But there's also genuine affection there, and a view of lost potential.

But whatever their subjects, Marshall's deluxe, museum-worthy paintings could present a problem for him: They may come too close to the Old Masters to successfully push back against them. Fred Wilson, an African American of Marshall's generation and a fellow MacArthur "genius," makes art by rearranging museum collections to reveal their blind spots and preconceptions, especially when it comes to race. He says he's been a fan of Marshall's art for years.



But he recognizes mainstream success as “a double-edged sword” for Marshall. On the one hand, getting a painting into a museum can get viewers to accept it, and to take time with it. “People of all stripes can see the [racial] references, and not take offense.” On the other hand, Wilson points out, when art’s too easily consumed, “it can blunt the power of the work.”

Marshall’s paintings sell awfully well to objects with a radical agenda. “He’s kind of recession-proof,” says Jack Shainman, Marshall’s New York dealer, pointing out that his show last summer pretty much sold out. A large Marshall can sell for about \$400,000, but that’s not much, compared with the multimillion-dollar works of equivalently successful, and much more prolific, white artists. In 2003, Marshall did a “text painting” that addressed this racial discrepancy: It listed the \$5,615,750 record for an object by Jeff Koons, for instance, beside the record for a Martin Puryear that came in at one-seventh that.

Among other black artists, Marshall’s success in the white art world, and in its market, produces a “special kind of tension,” says Leslie King-Hammond, an artist and writer who is also founding director of the Center for Race and Culture at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. She herself considers Marshall’s art “a rapturous, carnivorous bacchanal.” But for many other African American artists and viewers, his paintings’ complex, seemingly ambivalent take on blackness can be “a bit disconcerting,” she says.

Marshall’s comic strips may address the problem, if only because they’re so clearly not deluxe. They come straight out of a visual culture that’s not freighted with the powerful “whiteness” of great art, while still being built around old-fashioned skills that have always mattered in the black community, and that leave no doubt about an artist’s “mastery.” Comics also have a particularly democratic feel, accessible to viewers of all kinds and colors — they’re the perfect art form, for instance, for printing in the pages of a newspaper. A comic, however subtle and artful, positively gains from leaving the museum wall and ending up in cheap ink on newsprint.

And according to Wilson, popular artistic formats, such as Marshall’s comic strips, can get viewers to lower their guard, taking in content they otherwise might not: “You learn something, because you’re open.”

In Marshall’s hands, comic-strip readers take in a strong dose of anti-establishment values — more, maybe, than in his paintings, and much more directly. His comics’ recurring characters (heroes, almost) include hookers on the stroll. Other figures spend all their time sitting in a passenger van, endlessly discussing what goes on outside.

And yet the guiding notion behind Marshall’s experimental comics has been that, even against a background of dysfunction, there’s room for true black heroism. The superhero in his very first strip, titled “Rhythm Mastr,” discovers the power of the gods in a museum’s African sculptures (no stranger a premise than the “gamma rays” that belted the Hulk) and uses them to fight his culture’s enemies, even when they come from within.

You could bill Marshall’s Rhythm Mastr hero as the Nat Turner of the projects: a symbol of resistance that others can take inspiration from. It’s not a comforting symbol, of course. Turner was a coldblooded killer, and probably half-mad. Marshall’s notion of grafting a memorial to him onto the Washington Monument — as pictured in the pages that he’s done for us — is clearly meant to be provocative. As King-Hammond says, Marshall’s “in a minefield and he [expletive] dives into it.”

For Marshall, the issues he’s addressing demand strong imagery. He believes that electing a black president is a fine achievement. “But the moment that Nat Turner appears on a postage stamp” he says, “is more of a turning point.”

Kerry James Marshall always walks a tightrope between inspiration and provocation. So does the art he’s contributed to this section of *The Post* (see pages M6-7). Marshall’s conceptual comic proposes a “Monument to Nat Turner, Freedom Fighter” for the Mall, and conceives it as a kind of black-granite growth on the body of Washington’s great, white-marble obelisk.

Some of Marshall’s viewers may read his project as celebrating a bloodthirsty terrorist — and be appalled at the idea that Marshall wants to pollute the sacred monument to our first president.

Others may see the project as Marshall’s fitting celebration of a man, oppressed as anyone could be, who took his fate into his hands — and as a long-awaited reminder that the founder of our nation, however heroic, was also guilty of the clear sin of owning other humans.

All, in a sense, would be wrong. Marshall isn’t proposing such a monument; he’s making art. And like a lot of art, his comic asks, “What if?” What if someone were to propose a monument to Turner on the Mall? It forces us to run a thought experiment, as a community, and to watch ourselves as we react to it in all our different ways. He himself depicts the reaction of the disadvantaged, disempowered blacks he meets every day in the South Chicago neighborhood where he lives and makes his art.

In the strip that Marshall calls “P-Van,” he wonders whether the street sages who, for years, sat all day, every day, chewing over life in a parked van by Marshall’s studio, might be moved enough to actually visit the monument.

In another strip, “On the Stroll,” streetwalkers talk about the tithing that they’ve done to get the project built. Their marginal “profession” does not, to Marshall’s thinking, have to deprive them of a role in public life.

— Blake Gopnik



“Lost Boys: 8 Ball”



“Souvenir IV”



ABOVE: JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY; IMAGES BELOW: COPYRIGHT KERRY JAMES MARSHALL

“Watts 1963,” from Marshall’s series devoted to infamous public-housing projects that incorporate the word “garden” in their names.



# BOOKFORUM

DEC/JAN 2006

## JULIA BRYAN-WILSON

### **KERRY JAMES MARSHALL: ONE TRUE THING, MEDITATIONS ON BLACK AESTHETICS**

ESSAYS BY HELEN MOLESWORTH, JEFF DONALDSON, NATHANIEL  
McLIN, AND CHARLES MILLS, WITH A FOREWORD BY ROBERT  
FITZPATRICK AND AN INTRODUCTION BY ELIZABETH A. T. SMITH  
CHICAGO: MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, CHICAGO. 104 PAGES. \$30.



“Racial politics,” proclaimed *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter in April 2005, “is ‘out’ at the moment in art.” Despite the winking scare quotes, Cotter’s statement is a chilling acknowledgment of how the art market turns politics into style, the ruthless logic of trendiness demanding a certain oppositional structure—“in” versus “out,” “hip” versus “outmoded”—as critical modes of analysis are shuttled between the two columns like hem lengths. However breezy, this declaration of our new “postethnic” moment is troubled, if not refuted outright, by recent efforts by artists, scholars, and curators who are engaged with debates concerning racial identity and its effect on artistic production and reception. Part of the bottom-line mentality of what has been termed “managerial multiculturalism” is an obsession with counting and statistics, and three recent books on black art in the United States and Britain take up, quite differently, the history and ongoing legacy of this numbers game. At their best they resist the rigid binarism that freezes interpretation into assessments of “hot” or “not” (or, to put it in more familiar terms, “positive” versus “negative” representations).

The very title of the anthology *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, covering the proceedings of a Duke University conference of the same name, utilizes a chromatic scale of “shades” to indicate how “blackness” in Britain is not confined to an either/or register but encompasses any number of nonwhite identities—South Asian, Caribbean, North African, mixed race, etc. The Black Arts Movement that emerged within the context of Thatcherism and anti-immigrant sentiment in Britain included such artists as Mona Hatoum and Keith Piper, whose work made visible the fractured nature of diasporic identity so as to explode the false promises of domesticated “inclusion.” Skeptical of consolidating this loose affiliation of politicized, postcolonial artists into a single school, the editors of this volume do not shy away from its many contradictions. As a result, the book is a sprawling, uneven, but ultimately vibrant collection that includes historical essays, artists’ conversations, a narrative account of the conference proceedings, and a comprehensive, ninety-page time line. Within these pages, the contributors often disagree profoundly about

the impact of the Black Arts Movement. Artist and critic Rasheed Araeen accuses artists of relaxing their militancy and becoming prominent art stars, while by contrast curator Gilane Tawadros and artist Lubaina Himid mourn what they see as the current invisibility of those artists affiliated with the movement. Others resist totting up successes and failures, choosing instead to investigate broader movements in art, politics, and culture in the wake of the ‘80s. Periodization becomes a particular sticking point: How do we historicize such recent art? How much time needs to pass before these things can be appropriately assessed? Stuart Hall’s “Assembling the 1980s: The Deluge—and After” gives a lucid genealogy of the Black Arts Movement that accounts for a “profound epistemological shift from what we might call the anticolonial to the postcolonial.” This task of historiography is made all the more important by the persistence of ‘80s conservatism and the ever-weakening resistance to its pressures. As such, writes Hall, it is “an unsettled history in which everything is still urgently at stake.” Likewise, while Kobena Mercer in “Iconography after Identity” argues that it might be “too early to try to define the

are contingent sociological structures) and artworks (which are usually physical objects).” Given his call for a deeper iconography and attention to the “relative autonomy of the art object itself,” it is thus a disappointment that these authors do not investigate the Black Arts Movement in terms of style or medium—the art objects and performances are neither described nor analyzed—but address only the wider institutional questions about criticism, public funding, and globalization. In contrast to Mercer, who sees art history as imperative to the task of appropriately assessing the decade, artist Keith Piper chastises “critics, art historians, and other empowered agencies” for “smooth[ing] the individual artist into grand historical continuums.” Piper calls for artists to write their own histories, contesting the idea that some measure of distance, either personal or tem-



**Top right: Kerry James Marshall, *First* (detail), 2003, ink-jet print on paper mounted on laminated acrylic. Above: Kerry James Marshall, *7 am Sunday Morning*, 2003, acrylic on canvas. Opposite page: Kerry James Marshall, *Grocery Circular* (details), 2003, acrylic on panel.**

1980s as a closed or finished period,” he nonetheless exhorts art historians to produce a history that pays attention to “the circuit and interrelationship between three very different sorts of things: artists (who tend to be human beings); art worlds (which

poral, might be required in order to write these narratives.

The project of self-historicization is taken up by Kerry James Marshall in his 2003 exhibition, “One True Thing: Meditations on Black Aesthetics,” organized by Chi-



cago's Museum of Contemporary Art. Marshall resisted the impulse to summarize his work for what was originally conceived as a conventional midcareer survey and instead made a new, ambitious suite of works (including photographs, drawings, installations, mixed-media pieces, video projections, and paintings) that offers an extended rumination about African American histories and experiences. Despite the title, Marshall is interested not in any "one true thing" but in a multipronged approach that applies to his varied media as well as to the vast public archives from which he draws source material. When he writes, "The world I see is filtered through black-culture lenses," the plural matters; Marshall even invited three other artists to participate in his "solo" show in order to "challenge traditional assumptions about individuality, originality, and authorship." (Not exactly a strong "challenge," considering that words like *originality* have long been the stimulus for exasperated eye-rolling.)

With this invitation, Marshall also effectively appropriates the role of curator. In his essay "Back to Birmingham: Notes on Kerry James Marshall's Method," David Moos suggests that Marshall has been forced to be both critic and historian of his own work: "Marshall emerges as his own most articulate spokesman and nuanced interlocutor." Moos casts Marshall as maker *and* interpreter, that is, as artist *and* curator—a split position that the format of the catalogue echoes. The curator's brief foreword (itself an admission of the unprecedented level of involvement the artist had in the content of the exhibit) and the glossy color plates are oriented one way, while the essays are upside down—and inverted; one must flip the book over to read through it, suggesting that the images and the essays are in some sense at odds. Even though the book ostensibly boasts no "front" or "back," this somewhat clumsy design unfortunately reiterates the theory/practice divide. The book does not attempt to synthesize or comprehensively address Marshall's vastly

diverse oeuvre. Rather, many of the brief essays orbit like satellites around the art, as do Nathaniel McLin's rallying cry about the lack of funding for African American art museums, for example, and philosopher Charles W. Mills's loose riff on the paradoxes of racial formations in the United States. Helen Molesworth's essay, which examines Marshall's "sustained relationship with photography," is a welcome engagement with the artist's material practice. Marshall's work demonstrates how difficult he is to categorize and how astonishing his range as a producer is. By and large, the catalogue attends to the two most visible roles Marshall has been asked to inhabit (promoter and artist), but this diminishes rather than expands our sense of him as a truly multimedia maker, a thinker, an advocate, and beyond. Even as *One True Thing* seeks to resist the superficial consolidation of his many guises into any unified "oneness," it is still haunted by the logic of dichotomy.

This bifurcation, of course, has a long history. In his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois posited that African Americans occupy a split identity, a "twoness" wrought from what he terms a "double consciousness"—a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston's 2005 exhibition "Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since 1970" paid explicit homage to Du Bois. The show included work by several generations of black artists whose work is loosely categorized as conceptual, from Senga Nengudi and Adrian Piper to Sanford Biggers and Ellen Gallagher. The accompanying catalogue demonstrates its debt to Du Bois graphically, as the opening pages are printed with ghostly photographs of the writer—one positive, one negative—that overlay his definition of double consciousness. Though Du Bois's notion implies a disjuncture or disembodiment that is optical in nature, more could have been made of how vision is a subject of ambivalence both in the writing of Du Bois and in the conceptual work of black artists. Curator Valerie Cassel Oliver defines conceptual art as "art in which the idea is central," yet the show demonstrates an appropriately complicated range of responses to "conceptualism," as much of this work also focuses on visual pleasures and is characterized by an attention to craft.

The art gathered under this widely cast net, however, does not always make sense within the strict rubric of doubling. What other axes of difference might be at stake here? And can Du Bois's idea of splitting be expanded to encompass ideas of slippage and illegibility? In Howardena Pindell's 1980 video *Free, White, and 21*, the artist depicts herself in elaborate whiteface. At the end of the tape, she peels the white skin off her face: This masquerade—which is as much about gender, age, and class as it is about race—is less invested in "twoness" than it is in multiplicity and fragmentation. Oliver's essay "Through the Conceptual Lens: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of Blackness" deals with art only schematically as the author charts the linguistically shifting nature of the term *black*. While the catalogue attempts to chart how black art came out of '60s social unrest and conceptualism's political investments in dematerialization and anti-institutionality, it relies on an illustrated time line to do the bulk of its historical work (and its ten brief pages pale next to the exhaustive chronology in *Shades of Black*). As a result, questions about education, regionalism, or the growing influence of an art market that has alternately fetishized and reviled overt markers of racial difference go unasked.

*Shades of Black* quotes anthropologist Janet Abu-Lughod's assertion that "[t]here is no Archimedean point outside the system from which to view historic 'reality.' The only antidote to this dilemma is . . . triangulation." But how is the number three any better than two, or one? It still leaves us counting on one hand. In 1999, Kara Walker and other African American artists formed a "Negro Emancipation Association," calling for "not one stereotype, but many." Black artists are often confined by dyadic judgments of "goodness" or "badness," as if fed into an interpretive machine that has only one switch. Perhaps endless proliferation is one way out of the relentless Manichaeism that denies the complexities of black visual culture and an art economy that insists that we must wait for the gears of fashion to grind around again and declare racial politics "in." □





Kerry James Marshall: *Souvenir II*, 1997, acrylic, collage and glitter on unstretched canvas banner, 108 by 120 inches. Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Mass.

## Heroes and Martyrs

*At a time when the success of the 1960s Civil Rights movement is widely debated in the U.S., Kerry James Marshall pays tribute to its leaders in a traveling exhibition of recent work.*

**BY SUSAN SNODGRASS**

**"M**ementos," Kerry James Marshall's traveling exhibition currently at the Brooklyn Museum, is an evocation of things past and, in particular, a poignant meditation on the Civil Rights movement. A requiem for a tumultuous era and its martyrs, the show reminds us of what was lost and gained during those years and what is yet to be realized now, when the struggle for racial equality has grown diffuse and resistance has resurfaced.

As presented at the Renaissance Society in Chicago this past spring, this multifaceted exhibition included four paintings, two photographs, sculptural objects, prints and a video installation. With two exceptions, all are new works conceived as interrelated parts of a conceptual whole.

Like any wake, "Mementos" is purposefully wistful yet celebratory. *We Mourn Our Loss* (1997), a small acrylic-on-masonite painting that hung in the gallery's entranceway, functions as an index to the rest of the show. Centrally placed against the painting's ink-black background are medallionlike portraits of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr.—a trinity that recurs throughout the show. Above this saintly looking group hovers a swatch of pale blue paint that proves to be a ghostly image of Malcolm X, the controversial black separatist leader. And running along the bottom edge of the painting is its title, spelled out in gold Gothic lettering.

The Kennedy-Kennedy-King trinity is likewise the dominant motif in the two untitled C-prints included in the show. In one, a murky visual field is pierced by the tip of what appears to be a letter opener marked





*Souvenir I*, 1997, acrylic, collage and glitter on unstretched canvas banner, 108 by 156 inches. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. All photos this article courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

with an image of the threesome. In the other, an interior scene, the trio's portrait is prominently displayed on a wall in a gilded frame, the edges of which hold photographs, political buttons and newspaper obituaries, all related to the exhibition's theme. In the lower left-hand corner of this image, a small mirror reveals the arm of a male figure, presumably the artist, in the act of photographing his shrine.

The words of Reverend King, "We Shall Overcome," and Malcolm X, "By Any Means Necessary," are quoted in an untitled series of text-based relief prints. These simple but powerful pieces repeat these and other well-known dicta, such as Stokely Carmichael's "Black Power" and the rallying cry "Black is Beautiful." Executed in the black nationalist colors of green, black and red, these ink prints bespeak a narrative of diverse political strategies, ranging from black pride to separatism to violent revolution. The plates from which these multiples were printed, meanwhile, have been incorporated into separate works as the faces of five colossal rubber stamps, fabricated to Oldenburghesque scale. Fusing Pop art's product fetishism and Hans Haacke's wry social commentary, Marshall questions the meaning of these canonical phrases today: are they still important calls to political action, or have they become overused rubber-stamp clichés?

While these works expand the formal parameters of Marshall's previous investigations, his strengths still reside in his paintings. For instance, "The Garden Project" (1994-95), his group of satirical, mural-sized canvases of housing projects, presented last year at Documenta X and the Whitney Biennial, has proven Marshall an astute pictorialist

[see *A.i.A.*, Oct. '97]. Subverting the images of violence and poverty often associated with low-income housing, Marshall presents idealized cityscapes where black residents live and work as a community and in harmony with nature.

**P** rimary components in the current exhibition are three paintings from the "Souvenir" series, which is closely related to "The Garden Project." However, in place of the public realities addressed in the earlier series, the "Souvenir" works offer tableaux of black private life. Here, a suite of well-tended living rooms reflects the black middle class whose rise coincided with the Civil Rights movement. Presiding over these rooms—and acknowledging the viewer's presence—are solitary black angels with stoic, dignified faces reminiscent of African masks. These winged caretakers appear to be the agents of celebrated African-American figures who died during the '60s—artistic and political leaders whose visages appear above them in clusters of heavenly clouds. *Souvenir III* and *Souvenir IV* (both 1998) pay homage to various African-American musical and literary icons and are rendered in a subdued palette of acrylics emulating old black-and-white photographs. The colorful, more decorative *Souvenir I* (1997) mourns the loss of those who died in the struggle for freedom, including Malcolm X, Medgar W. Evers, Black Panthers Mark Clark and Fred Hampton, and the four young girls killed in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., in 1963.

The surfaces of the "Souvenir" paintings are considerably flatter



**Marshall's large, bannerlike canvases recall various Annunciation scenes, as well as the symbol-laden spaces of Northern Renaissance painting.**



*Untitled, 1998, C-print, 30 by 20 inches.*

than those of the "The Garden Project," although certain passages are embellished with either silver or gold glitter. Marshall's brushwork is noticeably restrained and less gestural than before, and his forms more hard-edged. Early Renaissance painting provides the formal inspiration for Marshall's two-dimensional works, which he infuses with a specifically black iconography. Measuring 9 by 13 feet, these unstretched, bannerlike canvases recall various Annunciation scenes, as well as the symbol-laden secular spaces of Northern Renaissance painters. More specifically, they bring to mind the shallow stages, archetypal figures and unified emotion of Giotto's frescoes in the Arena Chapel. "I've always wanted to be a history painter on the grand scale of Giotto and Géricault," the artist has stated.<sup>1</sup>

The artist's knowledge of filmmaking is also apparent in these works, whose grand themes are played out in cinematic proportion. Marshall has worked as a production designer on several films, including Julie Dash's atmospheric *Daughters of the Dust* and Haile Gerima's *Sankofa*. Presented here is *Laid to Rest* (1998), Marshall's first video installation, which takes the form of a large, sealed mausoleum constructed of masonite faced with Lexan that has in turn been painted with glue so as to create a marble effect. Through a series of small

peepholes piercing the walls of the structure, we see a casket and three projection screens. One screen shows two whirling Lincoln pennies and a stereotypical blackface, while the other two feature contemporary scenes of drug abuse and violence collaged from various media sources. Together they script a litany of social ills and epithets the artist wishes dead and buried.

The various talismans and remembrances that comprise this exhibition represent a collective history, reflecting a chorus of individuals as diverse as the contemporary black community itself. "Mementos" also points to the sobering fact that racial inequity persists. Countering today's demons with the many angels who inhabit this new body of work, Marshall's mournful treatise refuses to lay the movement to rest. □

1. Kerry James Marshall in a letter to Arthur Jafa in *Correspondences: Fourteen Artists from Berlin and Chicago*, Berlin and Chicago, Berlinische Galerie and the Chicago Cultural Center, 1994, p. 95.

"Mementos" was organized by the Renaissance Society, Chicago, where it was on view May 6-June 28. It may currently be seen at the Brooklyn Museum [Sept. 10-Nov. 29], after which it travels to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art [Jan. 1-Apr. 6, 1999], the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston [June 9-Aug. 22, 1999] and the Boise Art Museum [May 20-July 30, 2000].

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*Installation view of the "Mementos" exhibition showing "rubber stamp" sculptures (foreground) and three of four paintings from the "Souvenir" series; at the Renaissance Society, University of Chicago. Photo Tom van Eynde.*

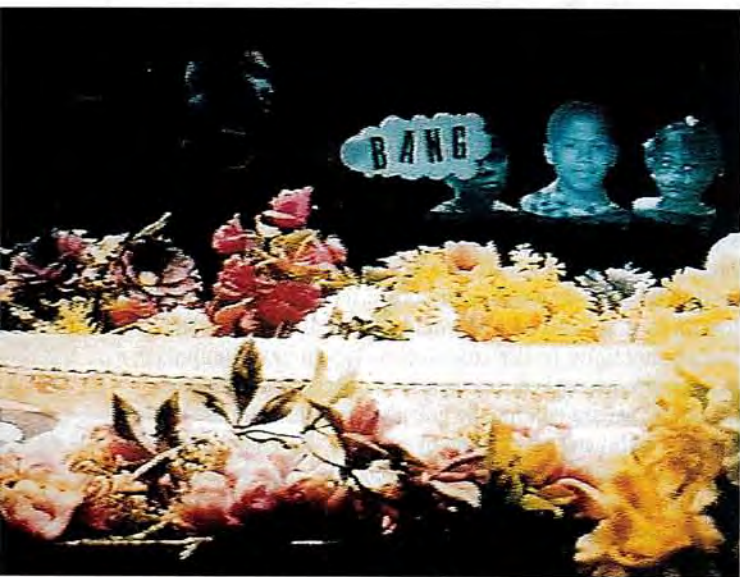
"Rubber stamp" relief prints, 1998, ink on paper, each 33 by 47½ inches (framed) shown with *Untitled* (16th St. Baptist Church), 1998, acrylic, plastic vase, silk flowers, approx. 5 feet high; at the Renaissance Society. Photo Tom van Eynde.







*Souvenir III, 1998, acrylic with glitter on unstretched canvas banner, 108 by 156 inches.*



*Still from Laid to Rest video, 1998, approx. 6 minutes.*

*Installation view of Laid to Rest, 1998, glue, Lexan covered masonite, 9 1/4 by 13 1/4 by 12 feet; at the Renaissance Society. Photo Tom van Eynde.*

