

# PORTRAIT KERRY JAMES MARSHALL

# 72 PAINTING HISTORY

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Kerry James Marshall has been producing large-format portrait paintings of mostly black subjects for over thirty years. Recently his work has found acclaim among collectors and institutions worldwide, finally getting the recognition it deserves. But is Marshall's visibility a singular case, or has his success had a larger impact on the history and current trajectory of art by black artists? And what does his work tell us about the turbulent and violent 2010s?

*By Arnold J. Kemp*

There is a permanent cultural anxiety in the art world. It is an anxiety about definitions: how does art – its producers, consumers, and critics – define itself within and outside the bounds of identity categories? Layered into this anxiety are histories of colonialism, white supremacy, and global capitalism that have in related ways grouped individuals into categories that fail to account for the complexities of people in their historic moment. Conversations defining black art, for instance, have morphed as discourses and practices have been altered, ever so slightly, to account for these complexities. As a result, we have reached a point where we are looking outside of ourselves in order to solve the riddle of assessment and marketability surrounding what some wrongly suggest is a moment of discovery; or worse, an entirely new phenomenon. We look to critics for orientation, yet the soundbites that the market demands of critics and art historians are clearly not up to the task. Instead, we might look to an artist such as Kerry James Marshall, specifically how he has managed to paint ways through this field, as a way of beginning to grapple with this anxiety.

Born 1955 in Birmingham, Alabama, before the Civil Rights Act, and having witnessed the Watts rebellion in Los Angeles, Marshall has chronicled the African American experience and advocated for black artists for decades. His work references US culture and history, chief among them the Civil Rights era and Black Power movement. Painting in a realist style, he depicts dark figures that celebrate black beauty and confront general racial stereotypes within contemporary American society. After reading Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, with its intense description of the invisibility its black character experiences, Marshall created a series of black-on-black paintings. In these works, such as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self* (1980), figure and ground are rendered in a flat, unmodulated black that underscores his concern with seeing and not seeing. The series also sets up an analogy between black as chromatic and black as racial designation that might look like the classical painterly problem of inserting a dark subject into dark ground (think Manet's *Olympia*), yet these images move the viewer to further consider what makes a black artist in the twenty-first century visible and representable. While visibility and visibility are guiding concerns for Marshall, he also interrogates the historical genres of Western painting: portraiture,

interiors, landscape, grand history painting, nude figure, and abstraction, often at scales that emphasize his obsession with seeing black figures painted by black artists on par with the grandeur found in these Euro-American genres.

Marshall has been exceedingly successful at answering this charge. He has received solo exhibitions throughout Europe and North America, and his work was included in such prestigious exhibitions as the Whitney Biennial, the Venice Biennale, two Documentas (1997 and 2007), as well as the Carnegie International. In 2018, Marshall notably set a \$21 million record for a work by a living African American artist with a sale at Sotheby's of his monumental 1997 painting, *Past Times*. *Past Times* reimagines the urban public housing project as romantic idyll. Placing smartly dressed black figures at the centre of this work, Marshall appropriated the language and compositional elements of pastoral paintings of the Italian Renaissance. Gardens, impossibly green grass, trees, couples holding hands, and children frolicking with bluebirds flying overhead are composed to critique the paradoxically modern public housing apartment complex looming in the painting's depiction of the Chicago skyline. The compositional and conceptual decision-making and rigorous workmanship is balanced with the warmth that Marshall brings to the subject matter at hand: the artist's investigation of African Americans in various states of repose, engaging in leisurely recreational activities more commonly associated with wealthy suburbia than Chicago's urban landscape.

Because of his subject matter, Marshall understands the political tension regarding who decides which questions and answers matter in framing the reception of art by black artists. This is often a tension between the powerful and the relatively powerless; or a war over meaning where the terms of the debate seem up for grabs. For example, in a discussion of Marshall's 1997–98 series "Souvenir", a curator recently misrepresented the central figure in one of the works as the "the angel of black history". The curator's metaphor missed the mark because the central image – a dark, female figure bearing gold angel wings who attends to a pantheon of cultural and political figures who died between 1959 and 1979, including Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. – is really a black angel-of-history writ large. That is, while the angel is black this does not mean that she only attends a

© Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, London



*Black Star 2*, 2012  
Acrylic on PVC panel, 185 x 155 cm





*Untitled (Studio)*, 2014, Acrylic on PVC panels, 212 x 303 cm



The documented lack of images of black people in major museum collections is the cultural landscape in which Marshall has consistently inserted his work and point of view for over three decades now.

racialised history relegated to the disenfranchised and isolated from the larger project of history. This would be a history that in the US is celebrated widely in the month of February and only then. The specificity of Marshall's painting argues rather for a greater goal for its angel: there is in fact healing here. It feels symptomatic of our anxious times that a Euro-American curator, authorised by powerful institutional affiliations, somehow does not get the content right, performing instead a semantic reversal that diminishes the reading of Marshall's work. The misreading solidifies a level of mistrust between black artists and art-world elites that covers up Marshall's greater ambition: to use the genre of history painting to reread the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement and the whole of history in relation to a very complex present.

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cultural landscape in which Marshall has consistently inserted his work and point of view for over three decades now. Marshall uses this history to comment on the lack of representation of African American people, and at the same time his work contributes positively to that very history by augmenting the representation of black people in his paintings. This is not as simple as it may seem. Marshall first had to accept the political space in which his work could operate by recognising that painting history is what artists ultimately did and do. The sheer volume, scale, and mastery of painterly technique – color, composition, and drawing especially – displayed in Marshall's practice have allowed his work to meaningfully participate in, if not transform, a certain narrative of art that reflects the discriminatory hierarchies of collecting institutions.



*Souvenir I*, 1997  
Acrylic, collage, and glitter on canvas, 274 x 396 cm

© Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Placing smartly dressed black figures at the centre of this work, Marshall appropriated the language and compositional elements of pastoral paintings of the Italian Renaissance.

Marshall was not alone in his pursuit to simultaneously operate within and transform the idea of history painting in the US. His 2016 retrospective shed light on the horribly mutilated condition of our racialised psyche. Marshall's show was, however, preceded by the groundbreaking group exhibition *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980*. Curated by Kellie Jones for the Hammer Art Museum in Los Angeles, *Now Dig This!* showcased the work of a number of pioneering black artists who, along with other artists of varied backgrounds, had a significant impact on the artistic practices that developed in Los Angeles from the 80s on. Artists pivotal to Marshall's own thinking, such as Senga Nengudi and Charles White, were highlighted in *Now Dig This!*. Of White in particular, Marshall has written: "I have been a stalwart advocate for the legacy of Charles White.

I have said it so often it could go without saying. I have always believed that his work should be seen wherever great pictures are collected and made available to art-loving audiences. He is a true master of pictorial art, and nobody else has drawn the black body with more elegance and authority. No other artist has inspired my own devotion to a career in image making more than he did. I saw in his example the way to greatness." It seems the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago were listening to Marshall, as the two institutions organized career retrospectives for White in 2018.

Marshall's current market success would be unthinkable without the influence of Charles White, and in addition to his example, other institutions have been instrumental as well. The Studio Museum in Harlem, which has been collecting African



*Past Times*, 1997  
Acrylic and collage on canvas, 290 x 396 cm





Left: *History of Painting (May 16, 2007)*, 2018, acrylic on PVC in artists's frame, 184 x 154 x 7 cm  
 Right: *Day and Night*, 2018, acrylic on PVC in artist's frame (diptych), both 78 x 68.5 x 12.5 cm  
 Installation view, "Kerry James Marshall: History of Painting", David Zwirner, London, 2018

© Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, London



View of "Kerry James Marshall: Painting and Other Stuff"  
 Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, 2014

Photo: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy of Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen



*Untitled (Dog Walker)*, 2018  
 Acrylic on PVC in artist's frame, 153 x 123 x 7 cm

© Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner



American art and advocating for African American artists for the past fifty years, was one of the first supports of Marshall's work, offering him a coveted residency from 1985 to 1986. The residency at the Studio Museum has helped many of the artists who are also currently recognised by the market: a fact that has too often been eclipsed by the market-driven narrative of Marshall's singular successes. Proof of this is the fact that Marshall's recent record-breaking auction result was actually part of a larger lot including works by Sam Gilliam, Lynette-Yiadam Boakye, Julie Meheretu, and others, that were offered so that the proceeds from the sale of the works would benefit the Studio Museum.

Marshall's plan and his argument for representation and figuration of black subjects by

black artists has also inspired the work of a new generation of black painters who are picturing black people in everyday scenes, at home, in urban, suburban, and interior settings. Alongside the work of his precursors and peers, such as Faith Ringgold, Barkley Hendricks, and Charles White, Marshall fits within a figurative tradition that has not only guaranteed his own market demand, but has also proven influential for artists who are embracing figurative painting again. That there has been a greater inclusion and exposure of black artists is an undoubtedly positive change in the art world, but it is one that should not be thought of as a moment of fashionable discovery. This would belie the ongoing struggles within the very messy art world – as institution – broadly cast. But



*Untitled*, 2009  
Acrylic on PVC panel, 155 x 185 x 10 cm

© Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



*Portrait of a Curator (In Memory of Beryl Wright)*, 2009  
Acrylic on PVC, 78 x 63 x 5 cm



*A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, 1980  
Egg tempera on paper, 20 x 16.5 cm

it's not just the art world where black artists struggle, it is in our society at large. That the work of black artists and other artists of color has grown to prominence within many institutions in the last decade – a decade in which Barack Obama, the first African American to be elected to the highest office in the US, served the second of his two terms as president of the United States – is not insignificant.

Just one of many contradictions between the art market and reality is that the Obama presidency

and the emergence of #BlackLivesMatter have been followed by a racist backlash that threatens to overshadow the fact that black artists are continuing to claim space in the artworld. Marshall is just one very powerful point in this ever-unfolding paradox, as black expressivity continues to move from the margins to a place of greater critical visibility: a more accurate reflection of the larger contexts of black experience more generally that may ultimately help to negotiate the often complicated relationships between social and aesthetic subjects.

KERRY JAMES MARSHALL was born 1955 in Birmingham, Alabama, and lives in Chicago. Recent solo exhibitions have taken place at David Zwirner, London, and The Cleveland Museum of Art (both in 2018), and at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (in 2016). Among other group shows he has participated in "Black Refractions: Highlights from the Studio Museum in Harlem" at the Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, in 2019; the 57th "Carnegie International", "Orientation: The Racial Imaginary Institute Biennial" at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; "The Shape of Time" at the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, all in 2018. Kerry James Marshall is represented by David Zwirner (London/New York/Hong Kong) and Jack Shainman (New York).

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