

1966

Kerry James Marshall



Kerry James Marshall  
 Portrait (detail), 1966. Acrylic and gilder  
 on unretched canvas, 100 x 100".  
 Photo courtesy of Jack Shusterman Gallery.



### Agent of Change

### By Kerry James Marshall

What did Sam Cooke's mother's house look like? If Mercy Dee had a sister, how did she decorate her living room? If you have a likely idea, then chances are good that you are black. Whites, especially of a certain age and class, are more often than not familiar with the songs, but not the people. If you are white, Aretha Franklin's recorded voice may hold a prominent place in the soundtrack of your life, but how often do you hang with your black neighbors, over at their house?

Kerry James Marshall paints images of those people. His "Mementos" show, first exhibited at the Renaissance Society in 1998 and traveling throughout the United States since then, takes the 1960s as its subject. Collective historical memory is its obvious theme. But a different consideration of this Chicago-based artist's "Souvenir" paintings included in the show reveals a consequence of that decade and the gap between a culture and its products still felt very vividly today. Each of these domestic tableaux is based on the actual interior of one of the artist's relative's or relative's friend's houses. In representing these specific environments, Marshall renders visible the problem of being intimate with a cultural product but not its producers, of knowing a culture through its expressions but not its members.

In the wall-sized painting *Souvenir IV*, Marshall depicts an interior based on his mother-in-law's friend's living room, over which emerges a heavenly array of deceased musicians, all identified in their day as "Negro" or "colored." Marshall screenprinted the names and faces of these figures in a zone outside the perspectival space of the room, thus rendering visible the non-corporeal realm of memory. And yet this roster of black cultural greats belongs in this room—together they establish the territory of the painting's surface. By situating a black cultural memory—now in the process of mainstream canonization—within the sweep of a black living space alien to most non-black people, Marshall exposes that white people's media consumption is not a valid substitute for social interaction.

This is a significant point when one realizes that Marshall—whose work has in recent years been shown in such prestigious exhibitions as the Carnegie International, the Whitney Biennial, and Documenta X—chooses to reside and make art in the Third Ward on Chicago's South Side, in what many would say is the heart of the near south ghetto. The specificity of indigence and segregation to this location is an essential consideration in drawing a thread of continuity between this place where he lives and Marshall's artistic and pedagogical practice. (Marshall is a tenured faculty member at the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois at Chicago.)

Marshall's commitment to a skill-based foundation accounts for his varied early works on paper, canvas, and board, using collage, charcoal, tempera, woodcut, and acrylics. As a whole, these works stand as a record of Marshall's earnest pursuit of mastering the manipulation of materials. At the same time as he honed his painterly skills, Marshall also laid the groundwork for what has become a sort of personal hallmark: the image of the jet black figure. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self* from 1980, in which Marshall paints a figure almost too dark to be seen but flashing a gap-toothed Cheshire cat grin, predicts by a decade the powerful use of non-valorized black figures by artists such as Thom Shaw and Kara Walker. And by enunciating his racial identity as a given, Marshall clears a path toward conceptual and art-historical concerns early on, rather than dwelling on narrowly autobiographical narratives.

Marshall's rejection of the strictly autobiographical means that he has chosen to dispense with the artist as storyteller in favor of the artist as critic, theorist, and historian. The resultant seriousness of inquiry has allowed him to work in representational styles not historically associated with the narratives of any marginalized population. In fact, much of his output aims for a stylistic position updating that most hallowed of visual traditions, the painting of the pre- and early Modern European masters. It may be that only an artist with Marshall's seemingly contradictory commitments to an unflinching investigation into the sociopolitical conditions of black American life, on the one hand, and to a painterly prowess in the Western vein, on the other, can make paintings in the classical traditions vital. It is apparent that what is conventionally thought of as the art world's indifference or even hostility to the artist of color has not stopped Marshall from inserting himself into the European representational lineage, and thereby extending it.

A typical example is the mural-sized *Bang* from 1994, in which Marshall scrambles religious motifs, dramatic historical themes, and pastoral ideals of different classical genres into a starkly melancholy view of twentieth-century American secular faith. In the painting, three stout children almost mournfully conduct what seems to be an impromptu pledge to a flaccidly draped American flag. They stand in a backyard complete with garden hose, barbecue grill, and white picket fence, but whose idealization is marred by streaks and gestural splashes of paint. The image effectively links middle-class aspirations to national rituals and to segregated realities. The group of paintings from 1994 and 1995 known as the "Garden Project" continue these investigations. Titled after public housing projects that have "Garden" in their names, the group consists of epic paintings that present

an amalgam of classical elements, mixing Renaissance composition with pastoral themes and Mannerist detail. The overt classical vocabulary in each painting is proportionally balanced by Postmodern elements, including the foregrounding of one or several super-dark figures, and perhaps chiefly, the public housing projects themselves as setting and subject. The overall, obviously Modernistic drips and gestural strokes not only complete the nearly encyclopedic painter's lexicon Marshall employs in these works, but also blunt attempts to force the work into Socialist Realism, except, again, by enlivening and extending that category.

Snareway Gardens and Wentworth Gardens—two of the housing projects pictured in the "Garden Project"—are a short walk from Marshall's studio. But the projects are only half the story of this part of town. The "interaction"

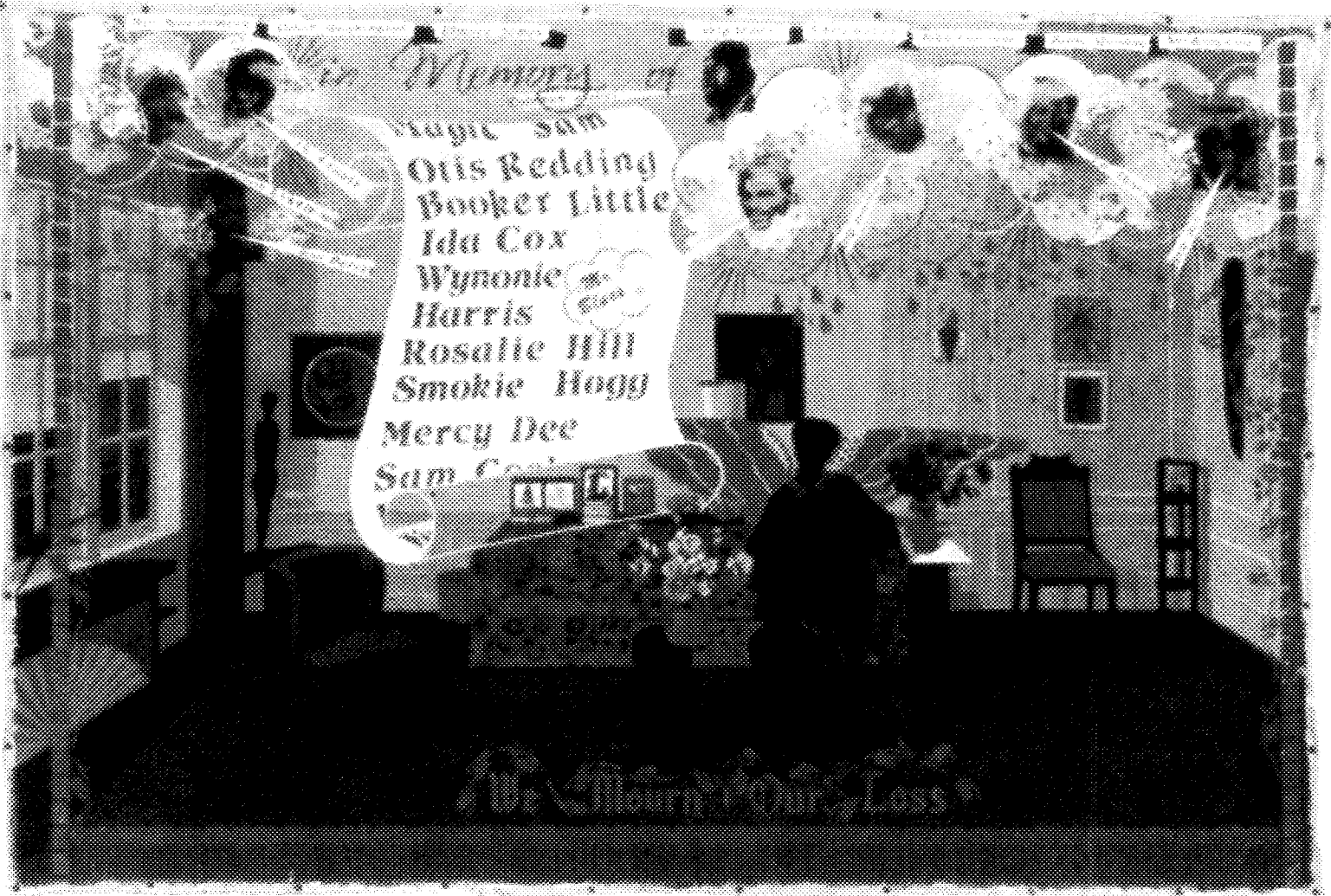
BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY™

Kerry James Marshall  
*Untitled, 1995. Painted print.*

Marshall exposes that white people's media consumption is not a valid substitute for social interaction.

between races on the South Side of Chicago can be described by a term that only now, decades after the population movement reached its fever pitch, can be used without evoking a torrent of fear, guilt, and sadness: white flight. This demographic shift left to black people vast tracts of the city—neighborhoods later made known to the white mainstream through the nightly news, to the liberal white elite through social science, and to neither through actual contact.

If there is a linchpin to the narrative of modern urban segregation, it must be education. Education, as the nation eternally intonates in unison, is a ticket out of the ghetto. And yet underfunding and mismanagement of urban school systems have become the clearest example of institutional failure and inequality in the United States. Ask Marshall about deficiencies in the educational experience and he'll launch into the usual litany of woes: students can't read well, can't write at all, can't



**Kerry James Marshall**  
*Souvenir IV*, 1998. Acrylic with glitter on unstretched canvas banner, 108" x 156".

think, and lack a host of fundamental skills. All of these are predictably understood as problems, except for one thing: he is not talking just about the grade schools several blocks from his studio which serve an impoverished black neighborhood—he's also talking about undergraduate universities and graduate art education and the privileged class of students these programs serve.

For Marshall, the integral continuity between the two worlds he inhabits—art schools and inner-city environments—is that both suffer from an absence of expected excellence. That this should be the case when history abounds with exemplary models of behavior challenges Marshall to formulate a practice through which he can articulate a politics of excellence.

In one of a set of murals done for the hallways of a middle school in Chicago in 1994, his assertion of excellence takes the straightforward form of celebrating Frederick Douglass as an exemplar of self-educated black American power. As someone who literally had to beg, borrow, and steal his education, and then wielded it against the system that would keep him enslaved, Douglass represents that combination of elements Marshall finds so lacking in both academia and the social universe outside his studio: a powerful imagination wedded to practical self-discipline. Moreover, judging from our conversations, Marshall's notion of excellence consists fundamentally of a strong work ethic. The high quality of an artist's technical skills, understanding art history, and critical thinking will all follow his or her refusal to cut corners.

As part of the "Mementos" exhibit, the "We Mourn Our Loss" paintings reach an art world audience different from neighborhood middle-school students, but can be interpreted similarly. Composed of images of the modern-day trinity of Martin Luther King and the Kennedy brothers in differing arrangements against flat dark backgrounds along with the solemn words "We Mourn Our Loss," the series historicizes a remembrance that has become so important to the generation of black Americans who lived through the Civil Rights era as to have become emblematic. Marshall, however, recalls the three figures as symbols not only of an idealism lost, but, just as importantly, of an ability to meet the challenges of circumstances, to

excel despite political obstacles and personal flaws, and to inspire others to commit their own acts of greatness.

In an age in which the demonized liberal and the ultra-cynical conservative define the poles of the political spectrum, Marshall's message takes on added resonance and depth. He insists that the impulse and ability to change the world arises most powerfully from a will to excellence. Paradoxically, it may be the marginalized who are best positioned to advance new standards of excellence, since they have the most to gain in a changed world.

Marshall's work speaks the language of contemporary art confidently, having lately moved into video, sculpture, and installation. It also amplifies two long-standing black traditions. The first is politicized self-reliance, the icons of which range from Marcus Garvey to the Black Panthers. Interestingly, Marshall's unique contribution to this legacy is the generalized application of a peculiarity belonging to the art world: the anticipation of critique. To give one case, in his suite of five "Black Power" prints from 1998 Marshall enlarges the subject of critique to include the strategic orientation of the Black Power movement itself, and not simply the objects that make up the suite. Each piece bears a dated slogan such as "Black is Beautiful" or "By Any Means Necessary" simply printed in block letters in quotation marks but without other adornment, thereby memorializing a crucial chapter of struggle without erasing the movement's flaws. Just as artists anticipate critical reception from friendly audiences, these prints suggest that partisans likewise ought to interrogate the strategies of their own political movements and histories, and remove the blockages that prevent self-critique. The strikingly neutral presentation of such incendiary expressions sufficiently reopens critical reassessment of, for example, the Black Panther Party. As he travels parallel socioeconomic spheres both suffering from normalized underachievement, it is this kind of ethic—an independence that takes responsibility for its own self-reflection and dispenses with blind loyalties (whether political or aesthetic)—that Marshall seeks to instill in young people.

The second black aesthetic tradition employed by Marshall is that of the artistic imaginary: from Sun Ra to DJ Spooky, black artists have

Art schools and inner-city environments both suffer from an absence of expected excellence.

always used available linguistic and technological tools to project into the sci-fi future, to envision a changed world. One of Marshall's current ventures fits right into this strain of black culture. He's developing a comic strip called *Rythm Mastr*, in which his twin concerns of art history and urban black society continue in a futuristic setting with the added layer of narrative development over time. As with his painting, in which he masters the language of the canonized traditions in order to spotlight the deficiencies of those same traditions, Marshall began this enterprise with his own learning process. A dozen or more books about animation, cartoons, and comics sit near his drawing tables and on his shelves. After researching the medium, Marshall put time-tested comic book devices such as the unlikely superhero and the dramatic visual sequence to work telling the story of a crew of young black people discovering superhuman powers in a not-so-imaginary time of social distress. The result is an apocalyptic world filled with lots of fine and popular art-historical references and a hip-hop sensibility.

*Rythm Mastr* is the latest example of Marshall's artistic and educational philosophies in action: he works to possess a knowledge of art-historical precedent (in this case, the popular art of cartooning), a command of materials, and the ability to gauge one against the other in the course of producing a work of art. In combination, these skills allow Marshall to rightfully claim status as an agent of change within the field. This level of empowerment is also the goal he sets for his students, and a model which he hopes to present to those of his inner-city neighborhood.

Already having had a limited run in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* as an extension of his contribution to the 1999 Carnegie International, and with future comic-book installments forthcoming, *Rythm Mastr* promises to solidify the bridge between Marshall's worlds in mass-media form, and will undoubtedly question the established reach of the art world. As always, for Marshall, the quality of the product will determine the potency of its questioning. **NEW|ART**

Dan S. Wang makes art in Chicago.

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