



KERRY JAMES MARSHALL

Our Town

1995

Acrylic and collage on canvas

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, 2009.3 Photography by Vancouver Art Gallery



Crystal Bridges
Museum of American Art

OUR TOWN

KERRY JAMES MARSHALL'S WORK OFTEN EXPLORES THEMES OF RACIAL IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, AND BELONGING. OUR TOWN IS PART OF HIS GARDEN PROJECT SERIES, IN WHICH LOW-INCOME HOUSING PROJECTS ARE IRONICALLY RENDERED AS IDYLIC PLACES.

The carefully painted houses, manicured lawn, and bright sky coexist uneasily with graffiti scribbles and trees tied with yellow ribbons, suggesting war or tragedy. Marshall contrasts the tidy scene, dominated by red, white, and blue, with deep black paint and minimal shading on the figures. Here, he emphasizes the blackness of his subjects in an art world that notably lacks images of African Americans. Our Town further evokes Thornton Wilder's 1938 play of the same title, posing the question: For whom does this American ideal really exist?¹

Marshall was born in 1955 in Birmingham, Alabama, a center for the Civil Rights Movement through the 1950s and '60s. In 1963 his family moved to the Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles. The Watts riots of 1965 were among L.A.'s worst incidents of civil unrest, lasting six days and costing 34 lives. Experiences in both of these locations helped shape the nature of Marshall's art.² When speaking about his choice of subject matter, he has said: "You can't be born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955 and grow up in South Central [Los Angeles] 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. That determined a lot of where my work was going to go..."³

Growing up, Marshall knew he wanted to be an artist, but he was frustrated by the absence of black figures and black narratives in museums. He admired old, classical paintings that depicted epic narratives, and wanted to replicate that same grand style, only with black figures, a goal that initially proved difficult for him:

*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... I knew about Charles White's murals, but never saw any of them in person—and the same with 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.*⁴

Since the *Garden Project* series, Marshall has continued to steadily rise in the art world to become one of the most successful living artists of today.

Many influences in Marshall's life helped him find his way as an artist. He developed a lifelong friendship with painter and mentor Charles White after taking his classes as a young teenager at Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. Additionally, reading Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* resulted in a major turning point in his career:

*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 artwork. That's when...I 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 practice everything I had learned so far by studying the art-historical record.*⁵

Today, dark black skin is a constant in Marshall's art, illustrating his resolve to create a new, disruptive art history, one that would insert the absent black figure into the tradition of Western art.⁶ Marshall has spoken extensively about the skin tone of his black figures:

*People ask me why my figures have to be so black. There are a lot of reasons. 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. That's the rhetorical position we occupy. Somebody has to start representing that blackness in the extreme and letting it be beautiful."*⁷

In a separate interview, Marshall further elaborates on this topic:

*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 argument against anything; it is an argument for something else.*⁸

Since the Garden Project series, Marshall has continued to steadily rise in the art world to become one of the most successful living artists of today. His work is represented in major museums across the country, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. He is the recipient of many awards and honors, including the Wolfgang Hahn Prize, a MacArthur Foundation Grant, and an Honorary Doctorate from his alma mater, the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. He lives and works in Chicago.⁹

[1] label text

[2] DeBerry, Linda. Crystal Bridges Blog: "Blackness in the Extreme": Kerry James Marshall. October 17, 2014. crystalbridges.org/blog/blackness-in-t

[3] PBS Art 21 website: Kerry James Marshall. pbs.org/art21/artists/marshall/card2

[4] Marshall, Kerry James, Nav Haq, Okwui Enwezor, Dieter Roelstraete, and Sofie Vermeiren. *Kerry James Marshall: Painting and Other Stuff*. Antwerp: Ludion, 2014, 21.

[5] Ibid., 22

[6] "Kerry James Marshall Shows What It's Like to be Black in America Today,"

The New York Times, October 20, 2016. Accessed May 31, 2018. www.nytimes.com/2016/10/21/arts/design/kerry-james-marshall-paintings-show-what-it-means-to-be-black-in-america.html

[7] "Storytelling: An Interview with Kerry James Marshall." *Art in America*, August 29, 2013. Accessed May 15, 2018. www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/storytelling-an-interview-with-kerry-james-marshall

[8] Ibid., 28

[9] Marshall, Kerry James. *Kerry James Marshall-Look See*. New York, David Zwirner, 2016.





CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The Elaboration Game¹⁰

Divide *Our Town* into several different sections. As a group, observe and describe the different sections of the work.

One person identifies a specific section of the artwork and describes what he or she sees.

Another person elaborates on the first person's observations by adding more detail about the section.

A third person elaborates further by adding yet more detail, and a fourth person adds yet more.

Is there anything in this still life that you would want to taste?

Observers: Only describe what you see. Hold off giving your ideas about the art until the last step of the routine.

After four people have described a section in detail, another person identifies a new section of the artwork and the process starts over.



Idyllic Scenes¹¹

DISCUSSION:

In Kerry James Marshall's Garden Project, he painted idyllic outdoor scenes showing his signature intensely black figures interacting with their surroundings. Onto these cleanly painted realistic utopian scenes, he layered surface interruptions in the form of abstract smears, blobs, drips, or trails of paint. These gestural streaks inject a surprising element into the scene, functioning something like graffiti and suffusing the image with spontaneity and energy that contrasts with the controlled serenity of the painting underneath. Not only is he making visible the process of applying the paint itself, but he is also intervening in or commenting on the quiet scene behind the surface interruptions.

MATERIALS:

Collage materials: magazines, scissors, glue, glitter, fabric, colored paper...

Sharpies and/or paint, tape or stapler

Plastic wrap, acetate sheets or cellophane

Internet for Kerry James Marshall images

PROCESS:

1. Look at *Our Town* and other Kerry James Marshall images from the Garden Project.

What do you see in the image? (describe what is there)

What can the image tell us about the artist?
(interpret: what are his concerns?)

What can the image tell us about ourselves?
(make comparisons to students' lives)

2. Ask students to think of a perfect, idyllic scene. It could be a real place they have visited, an imagined scene or even an image from a book or magazine. Think of adding a person to this scene. What are they doing? Are they alone or with someone?

3. Using collage materials, students make idealized images or scenes. Make it pretty!

4. When complete, cover with a piece of plastic wrap. Pull the wrap tightly from behind and use tape to hold the wrap in place. Alternatively, staple a sheet of acetate or cellophane in front of the image.

5. Using paint or permanent markers, mark the plastic layer with abstract lines, scribbles or blobs, graffiti-like script or slogans, or any marks that interrupt, comment on or contrast with the serene, utopian scene underneath.

6. Display finished work.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

What were some of the most interesting things that students learned or discovered?

How did the image change once the top layer was applied?

Which image do students prefer—with or without the top layer?

Why?



Literature Connection (Upper Level):

Marshall credits reading Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a big turning point in his career. Read the introduction to the *Invisible Man*. Next, show students an image of Marshall's *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, which he made soon after reading Ellison's text. Discuss Marshall's stylistic choices in the image and how they reflect the words from Ellison's book. How might Ellison's words relate to Marshall's subject matter and stylistic choices in *Our Town*?



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[10] Adapted from a Harvard Project Zero Artful Thinking Routine. pzartfulthinking.org/?p=96

[11] Adapted from a lesson plan from the Vancouver Art Gallery. www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/pdfs/Kerry%20James%20Marshall%20Guide.pdf