

GETTING TO KNOW THE COLLECTION



Kerry James Marshall

b. 1955

Our Town

1995

Acrylic and collage on canvas

101 x 143 in.

ABOUT THE ART

This large-scale work on unstretched canvas depicts a young boy on a bicycle and a young girl dressed in a Campfire Girls uniform running beside him. On her other side, their dog races to keep up with them. Behind them, a lady stands

waving in front of an idyllic home, complete with above-ground swimming pool and swing set. Bright blue sky, a stylized sun, small, less-detailed houses, and trees fill the remainder of the canvas. Portions of the painting, particularly the lawns and trees, are covered with graffiti-like blobs and drips. The words "Our Town," which serves as the work's title, are splayed across the top of the painting, surrounded by Disney-esque blue birds holding yellow ribbons in their beaks.

In this, as in most of his paintings, Marshall depicts his figures in a deep black that stands in stark contrast to the vivid colors found throughout the rest of the painting. Marshall uses his choice of skin color as a rhetorical device, explaining, "When we talk about ourselves as a people and as a culture, we talk about Black history, Black culture, and Black music. That's the rhetorical position we occupy. Somebody has to start representing that blackness in the extreme and letting it be beautiful."ⁱ Marshall is quick to point out that not all images in his works are beautiful or positive, explaining, "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 stereotypic 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."ⁱⁱ

The Garden Project Series

Our Town is one of a series of works from the mid-1990s called *The Garden Project Series* that Marshall based on various housing projects throughout the United States, particularly those he was most familiar with in Chicago and Los Angeles. Using a combination of both an idyllic setting and graffiti-like blobs and drips, Marshall is exploring what these housing projects meant for the African American community. Marshall uses white geometric shapes, blobs, and drips that cover portions of the idyllic scene in the background to represent the difficulties faced by the residents and encouraging the viewer to think about the duality of life in the projects, sometimes a place of violence and poverty and other times a place where children played and life was celebrated.

As a young child, Marshall lived for a short time in the Nickerson Gardens housing project in Watts, California, and while he has fond memories of his time there, he understands that there is more to the story. He shares that these paintings "represent what is complicated about life in the projects. We think of projects as places of utter despair. All we hear of is the incredible poverty, abuse, violence, and misery that exists there, but there is also a great deal of hopefulness, joy, pleasure, and fun."ⁱⁱⁱ Through these works, he's asking viewers to reexamine preconceived notions about the projects.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kerry James 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. 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..."^{iv}

Marshall knew from a young age that he wanted to be an artist and would pursue this dream almost single-mindedly in the years to come. He credits both grade-school and junior-high teachers, as well as the television show *John Nagy's Learn to Draw*, with helping him gain the fundamental technical skills he would need to be an artist. At 14, Marshall began taking summer classes at Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, California. One of these was a drawing class with African American social realist artist, Charles White. Under White's guidance, Marshall learned about drawing figures and proportion. In 1978, Marshall would graduate from Otis with a bachelor of fine arts degree.

Marshall recognized the need to master a medium before using it to make a statement or tell a story. From an early age, he was interested in the painting and compositional styles of Renaissance artists and he really set out to understand how they were creating masterpieces. Marshall shares, "I had an unwavering desire to be like a lot of these artists I admired from art history books. My whole developmental period was geared toward trying to know what they knew, whatever it was that made their work look the way it looked. Periodically I tried to say something with the work I was doing, but I knew I wasn't equipped to use the medium or use the tools the way they could be used effectively. So I didn't worry too much about being self-expressive. That will come later, I figured."^v Marshall feels that it took him until the early 1990s to fully understand the mediums he was working with and to begin expressing the story that he wanted the world to hear.

Race is front and center in Marshall's work, which deals quite straightforwardly with the difficulties faced by a Black population in an environment established and largely governed by the white population. Though many of his contemporaries were creating abstract works, Marshall was instead interested in bringing the Black figure into the narrative of the museum world. Noticing that Black figures were incredibly underrepresented in these spaces and in the larger context of art history led Marshall to pursue the figure as his primary subject. In 1980, he created his first figurative work, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*. Marshall believes that, "...the Black figure has the greater capacity of changing people's expectations when they go to museums...because it's the least familiar thing that you encounter at the art museum."^{vi}



Kerry James Marshall courtesy of Steven Ironside Photography

SOURCES:

i & ii DeBerry, Linda. Crystal Bridges Blog: "Blackness in the Extreme": Kerry James Marshall, October 17, 2014, <http://crystalbridges.org/blog/blackness-in-the-extreme/>.

iii Keegan, Anne. "Kerry James Marshall's Garden Project is Opening Eyes." *Chicago Tribune*, November 28, 1995. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1995-11-28/features/9511280027_1_housing-project-kerry-james-marshall-nickerson-gardens.

iv PBS Art 21 website: Kerry James Marshall, www.pbs.org/art21/artists/marshall/card2

v Reid, Calvin. *BOMB-Artists in Conversation*. Winter 1998 Issue.

vi "Keynote Lecture: Kerry James Marshall," Crystal Bridges Museum of American