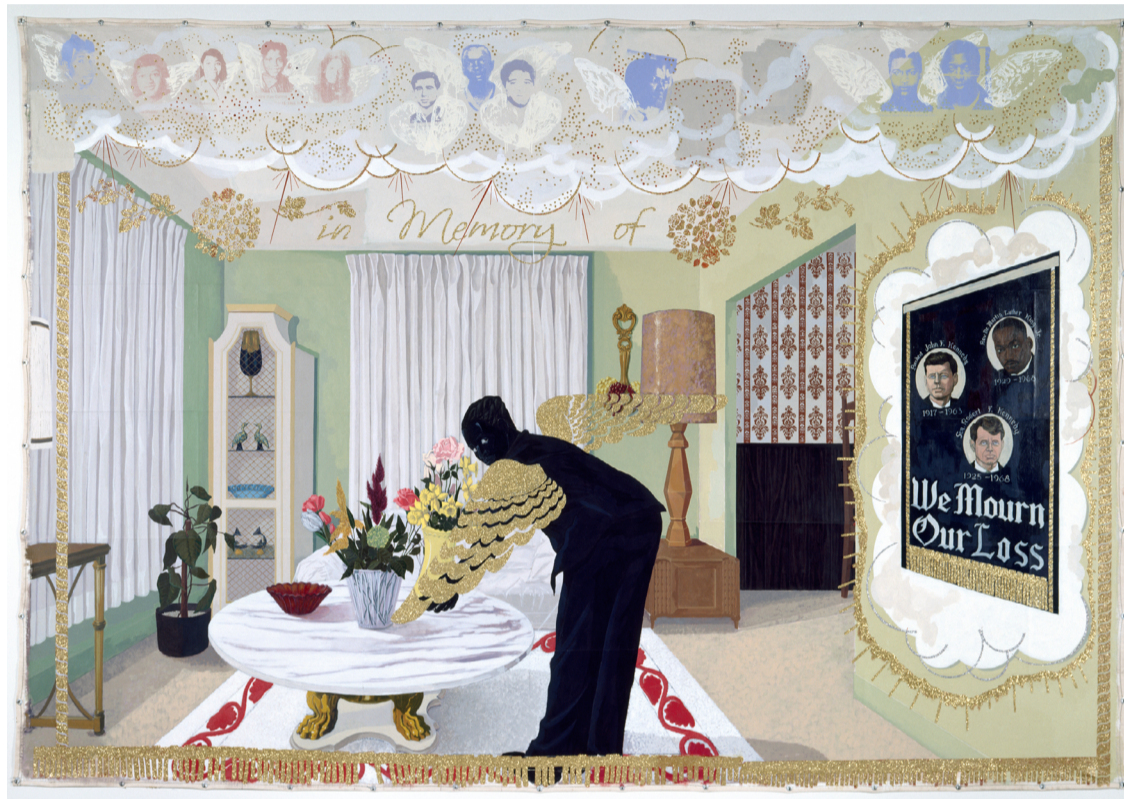


“If You Are Black, You Really Are Coming from Behind”: Orders of Visibility in Kerry James Marshall’s “Mastry”

BY RAÉL JERO SALLEY



Kerry James Marshall, “Souvenir I,” 1997. © Kerry James Marshall. Photo: Joe Ziolkowski.

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’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](#), now on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (April 23 – September 25, 2016), and traveling to [The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) (October 25, 2016 – January 29, 2017), then the [Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles](#) (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](#) (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

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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](#) in an era where 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 un-coincidentally 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*. 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 18th century. These pictures re-imagine the lives and loves of black people as they inhabit a sphere 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.

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