



TRAVEL & SEE Kobena Mercer

BLACK DIASPORA ART PRACTICES SINCE THE 1980S

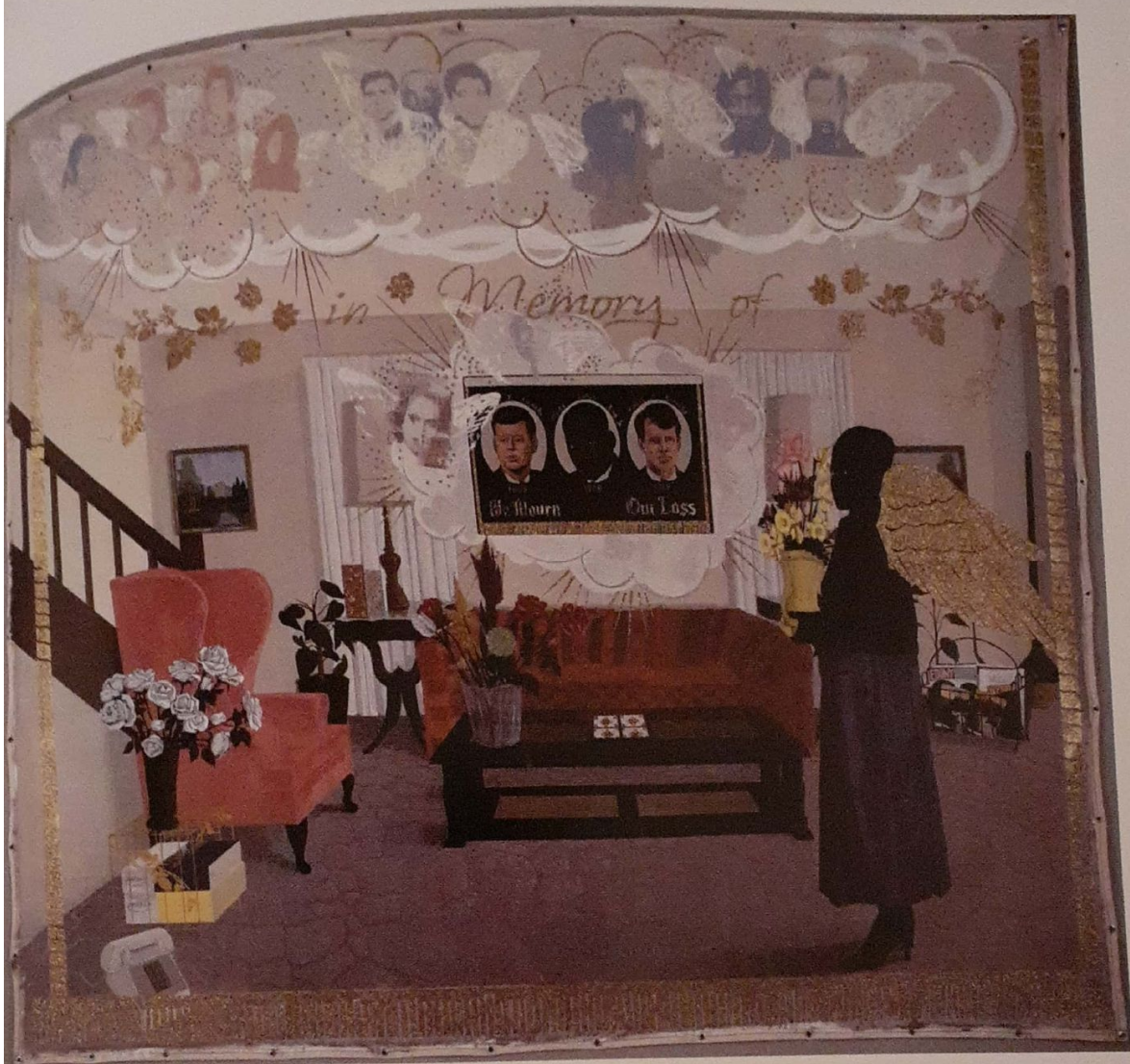
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KERRY JAMES MARSHALL: THE PAINTER OF AFRO-MODERN LIFE

Kerry James Marshall addresses the unfinished history of post-civil rights America. His large-scale canvases place figurative groups among scenic backdrops that often evoke the utopian aspirations of the 1960s, yet his paintings are filled neither with nostalgia nor with irony but open onto an imaginative or even fictional space in which archival relationships between past and present become the subject for future possibilities.

His figures are composed in enigmatic groupings that suggest potential scenes of dramatic action, but any straightforward access to narrative content is intercepted by a rich ensemble of painterly effects in which various drips, dots, strokes, and scumbles are scattered throughout the mark-making procedures that are so distinctive to Marshall's paintings. To the extent that such painterly "noise" interferes with the figure/ground distinction as a foundational aspect of the practice of painting, it acts as the locus of conceptualization in Marshall's practice, marking the point at which alternative understandings of history are brought to the threshold of representation.

In the *Souvenir* (1997–98) series (fig. 17.1), the politics of the civil rights era are touched upon directly, in the form of a background tapestry that depicts Martin Luther King Jr. alongside John and Bobby Kennedy above a motto that reads, "We Mourn Our Loss." But more often than not, Marshall alludes to the 1960s indirectly, such that a more diffuse sense of pastness associated with childhood memories and the intimacy of family life takes precedence over the public realm in which the tumultuous events of the period took place. In the *Gardens* series, works such as *Better Homes Better Gardens* (1994) or *Untitled (Altgeld Gardens)* (1995) convey a precise feel for period specificity in the shape of the mass housing projects that were built as part of the Great Society program, yet even as the public/private distinction is literally blurred by splashes of paint that interfere with the spatial separation of figure and ground, there is an affective charge of unsettlement, disturbance, and violence conveyed by the way such painterly effects deface any illusion of pictorial depth. Far from summoning history



17.1 Kerry James Marshall, *Souvenir II*, 1997. Acrylic, paper, collage, glitter on unstretched canvas, 274 x 396 cm. Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.
© Kerry James Marshall.

as though it were a given body of knowledge passively waiting to be depicted or narrated, it is the opacity of the ongoing relation between past and present, which renders it enigmatic and resistant to transparency, that Marshall throws into the forefront of the viewer's attention. In this sense, the poetic interference activated by the disparate materials collaged onto the picture plane issues a break with the realist and naturalistic epistemology associated with the history-painting genre in the modern West. But if we could accurately describe Marshall as a modernist whose work operates from an alternate epistemology of collage, in which illumination is generated in a dialectical space where heterogeneous elements cut and mix, then we still face the question of how best to describe exactly what kind of modernist Kerry James Marshall might be.

There is something undeniably strange and haunting about the jet-black figures that have featured in almost all of Marshall's paintings since the early 1990s. At one level, it is their coloration that gives them an estranged and defamiliarized quality. Where African American skin tones might be rendered in a realist or a naturalistic setting with brown-blacks or red-blacks to convey warmth, Marshall's palette creates a striking effect by overlaying a colder tonal range of blue-blacks and gray-blacks as well. As if this was not enough of a denaturalizing gesture in its own right, Marshall's figures possess an equally uncanny quality at another level — at the level of line — whereby their bodies fully occupy the illusory depth of pictorial space, which they flesh out with ease, even as each figure boldly asserts its flatness as a mere shape that exists purely on the picture plane. By virtue of such signature moves, Marshall plays upon the multiacculturality of blackness as an inherently ambivalent signifier, which may refer at one and the same time to the abstract phenomenon of color and to the concrete reality of historically constructed "racial" identities. Having denaturalized the visual inscription of race in this way, Marshall also plays on the tension between the figurative — a codified system of shapes and lines we automatically tend to read in terms of a likeness or verisimilitude to human bodies — and the figural, which is the random, inchoate mass of potentially signifying material as it exists prior to being given distinct form or bounded shape by cultural codes and conventions. In other words, while Marshall produces instantly recognizable (African American) figures, his painterly handling of blackness means the figurative is always brought to the edge of abstraction, which is what the concept of race often did in modern Western history by abstracting concrete humans into signs on which to hang someone else's idea of otherness.

The philosophical and political implications only grow in scope once we observe how Marshall's black figures are arranged into neoclassical ensembles that openly quote from the Western canon, such as the pastoral constellation of the figure group

in *Past Times* (1997) (fig. 17.2). In my eyes it is Andrea Mantegna who comes to mind when beholding the monumental scale that imparts grandeur and gravitas to these figures (and as Marshall's canvases are in the range of eight by twelve feet, his figures are literally larger than life). The artist acknowledges the wide range of citations he makes, from Raphael and Rembrandt to Picasso, as integral to the cross-cultural articulation of his practice, which also includes chalk *vévé* diagrams from Haitian vodun rituals as well as a series, the *African Powers* (1989) woodcuts, based on Yoruba divinities such as Shango and Eshu-Elegba. But when critics seek to capture the strangeness generated by these cross-cultural dynamics, the notion that Marshall simply "inserts" black figures into the pictorial grammar of Western painting, whether classical or modern, completely fails to grasp the agency of transculturation that modifies commonplace understandings of difference and identity across the board. Instead of merely adding black content to a neutral formal container, as though each retains its preexisting identity intact, there is a double-sided move at play that is best captured by Houston Baker's description of black modernism as a set of artistic tactics that enact the "deformation of mastery" while asserting the "mastery of form."¹

Taking the latter part first, we can understand why Marshall disidentifies as post-modern. When he declares a "sense of obligation to advance the discipline" (Jafa, 2000, 74), there is an echo of Clement Greenberg's view that "the essence of Modernism lies . . . in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself."² Born in 1955, Marshall is slightly older than the generation of neoconceptualists working in the medium of photo-text and installation, such as Renée Green or Lorna Simpson, who were associated with the paradigm shift around race and representation in the 1980s. And even though he is roughly of the same age as Fred Wilson or Carrie Mae Weems, it is his choice of painting as a medium that sets Marshall apart. After Marshall graduated from Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles in 1978, where he studied with African American artist Charles White, his formative choices were made during the decade when contemporary art, at the turn to postmodernism, had announced nothing less than the "death of painting." But while the issue of medium specificity in Greenberg's influential account of modernist painting meant the primary focus for postmodern debates on appropriation was photo-text, installation, and an interest in the found image or the found object, it is crucial to note that concepts of re-signification in postmodern criticism were equally applicable to Marshall's aims. When he says, "I don't think there's anything worse than having a good idea that is poorly realized," there is potential for misunderstanding, as if a dualism was set up between materials-based and ideas-based practices. But reading his statement in full, it is his quest to find a space

of complexity precisely at the level of conceptualization that led Marshall to say – “if you hope to break through to something meaningful . . . it’s gotta come out of a more experimental approach to material. That way, you see the possibility in materials for constructing meaning. If you don’t understand the capacity of materials to carry meaning. . . you’re limited in your range to simple expressions rather than complex ideas” (Jafa, 2000, 29).

Picking up on his painterly interest in flatness, Helen Molesworth points out that instead of the outright rejection of formalist principles, on the part of the post-*Pictures* generation, for instance, and instead of the defensive retreat into endgame abstraction, Marshall responded to the “death of painting” by traveling an alternative path. By virtue of the combinatory principle whereby the picture plane acts *both* as a flatbed receptacle for collaging disparate elements together *and* as a pictorial window that supports illusory depth, Marshall’s originality lies in the way his collage methods bridge a wide range of picture-making traditions, bringing them into a transcultural dialogue. In contrast to the Greenbergian doctrine of purity, we find not only that Marshall’s combinatory principles bring into play elements of linguistic script and musical notation that consistently cut across the picture plane — in *Past Times*, the Temptations’ tune “Just My Imagination” is sounding out from the radio — but also that as a result of such intermedia reciprocity the paintings activate a mood of contemplative reflection in terms of the structure of feeling they elicit from the viewer. In the *Gardens* series, which includes the individual work *Many Mansions* (fig. 17.3), Molesworth sees the paintings as meditations on the historical failure of the grand projects of modernism and modernization that gave rise, in the 1960s, to “American Type Painting,” on the one hand, and to the late modernist architecture of the Great Society mass housing projects, on the other. Where such a meditative tone measures the distance between past and present, Molesworth discerns neither the pathos of nostalgia for a lost age nor the cool distancing associated with the postmodern (where cool often covers over an angry or wounded sense of disappointment), but rather finds in Marshall’s paintings a tender distancing from the almost utopian political hopes of the era that is “born of having believed or having wanted to believe in the thing now treated ironically.”³

Applying this insight to Marshall’s portrayals of Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, or a patriotic scene in which a group of children pledge allegiance to the American flag in *Bang* (1994) (fig. 17.4), one might ask whether Marshall sees the civil rights movement as another historical “failure” of the 1960s. Considering that for many African Americans this moment was their point of entry into the American dream of suburbia and consumerism, my sense is that Marshall presents us with a perspective that could be



72 Kerry James Marshall, *Past Times*, 1997. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 274 x 396 cm. McCormick Place Convention Center, Chicago. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Kerry James Marshall.

labeled *post*-civil rights not because he passes definitive judgment on political successes and failures but precisely because he opens up a novelistic or fictional space in which to reflect upon the thwarted aspirations and unresolved ambitions that, because they remain unfulfilled, continue to spill over from past to present. Far from being closed or completed, it is the archival relation whereby hopes that went unrequited and dreams that were lost or abandoned constantly leak over into the present that make Marshall's paintings not just historical but genealogical as well. The presence of the past in contemporary American politics also prompts one to observe that it was in the modernist architecture of Chicago's low-income housing projects, such as Altgeld Gardens, that Barack Obama began to address his political constituencies.

In any event, it is highly important not to lose sight of what Marshall has achieved by way of combining a formal interest in flatness with the referential dimension of the figurative. The "literary" quality that imparts a protonarrative drive to his works would be anathema for Greenbergian modernism, which saw literary references of any kind as an unwelcome legacy of eighteenth-century academic art, where aesthetic value was determined by iconographic programs at the level of content. So if Marshall's practice does not fit within received definitions of either high modernism or postmodernism, how else might we characterize "the combinatory" out of which he generates the differencing of his painterly practice? The most appropriate term, I would suggest, is the concept of *Afro-modernism*, especially when the idea is understood in light of the heuristic distinctions that Peter Wollen made in his notion of the "two avant-gardes."⁴

Understood as a distinctive variant in twentieth-century art that originated from a specifically African American source in the Harlem Renaissance, subsequently migrating through the Caribbean toward European contexts that include black British artists of the post-1945 period, *Afro-modernism* is an imaginative field of investigation driven by the impersonal rules of a code that makes use of the signifying differences thrown up in the space of cross-cultural encounters as a generative matrix for artistic decisions, choices, and procedures. In this sense, what differentiates *Afro-modern* practices as culturally "black" is not just the biographical origin of the artist or the social conditions of race and ethnicity under which work is produced, but rather the *critically dialogical relationship* that such *Afro-modern* practices engender in relation to the prevailing discourses of modernism in their outlying surroundings. On this view, there are two crucial strands of Marshall's work prior to his mid-1990s breakthrough that need to be taken into account in order to grasp how he arrived at his cross-cultural combinatory.

"I asked myself, What would happen to Analytical Cubism if you kept that frag-

mented structure but put back in all the stuff they took out?" (Jafa, 2000, 46). Discussing *At the End of the Wee Hours* (1986), a *papier collé* series he produced on a miniature scale, Marshall clearly aligned himself with the collage axis Wollen distinguishes from the axis of abstraction, which by definition involves a process of "taking things out" that was coded as a logic of extraction, subtraction, and purification for the Greenbergian formalist tradition in contrast to the combinatory logic of selection, mixing, and juxtaposition by which ready-made elements, such as found images or found objects, are "put back in," so to speak. The collage axis of the "two avant-gardes" include artists as diverse as Hannah Höch or Romare Bearden, but what differentiates Afro-modernism is the asymmetrical gradient whereby the collage episteme of selection, mixing, and combination acts as a counterweight to the exclusionary and absolutist consequences of the "purity" in abstraction that became a canonical value at midcentury. And there is more to this crosscutting hybridization Marshall practiced from the start: "at the end of the wee hours" is a quotation from Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* (1938–41), which shows that Marshall's *papier collé* exists in an intermedia condition of literary-cum-visual impurity.

Concurrently, Marshall quoted Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) in a series of paintings—including *Two Invisible Men Naked* (1985)—that enacted the "deformation of mastery" by summoning up the old racist canard that it is only by the whites of their eyes and teeth that blacks are visible in the dark. While their jokey aura meant they were mostly misread as a critique of stereotypical renditions of blackness, these paintings actually marked the point at which Marshall began to play with tonal ambiguities among warm blacks and cool blacks in such a way that made figure and ground virtually unreadable. Taking this latter process a step further, *Two Invisible Men* (1985) pushed the figurative through the figural to the point where mark-making gave way to monochrome (and the "blank" canvas can be seen as the ultimate form of abstraction).⁵ In this diptych that pairs a white and a black canvas, Marshall seemed to play with notions of "racial" polarities, but where the work quietly quotes Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), it summons up a liminal condition of extremity in which the blank canvases put painting "under erasure" just as surely as the paintings suggest that the very idea of visible differences of race breaks down when the figure/ground distinction is no longer readable.

Far from being multiquotational for its own sake, this mid-1980s work explored two kinds of flatness. This enabled Marshall to arrive at the two principal coordinates of his history paintings—playing on the border between the figural and the figurative so as to denaturalize the signification of blackness, inscribed in the blue-black flatness

of his figure groups, on the one hand, while combining the illusory depth of spatial recession with a flatbed or collage approach to the picture plane as a receptacle for the heterogeneous stuff one strand of modernism wanted to "take out" but which another strand wanted to "put back."

To state it another way: Marshall is centrally preoccupied with beauty, and with the protean beauty of blackness as a multivoiced signifier that can never finally be fixed down or brought to closure. By virtue of the "discipline" that informs his painterly practice, his pursuit of beauty thus steps aside from the sentimental or the merely expressive, which is where blackness so often gets trapped in naturalism and realism. As he states, in characteristically trenchant style: "It's not about self-expression. If it were really just about self-expression, then that would require a receiver who is so sensitively attuned to your sensibility that they are capable of recognizing an intrinsic value—not in what it is you are doing, but who it is you are."⁶ In the cleavage of this distinction between the ontological and the epistemological, the impassive monumentality of Marshall's figures bears witness to the violent histories of Afro-modernity, even as their shape-shifting figurality hints at the beauty of what blackness may yet become.

NOTES

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1. Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
2. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1961), in *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, ed. Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris (London: Open University, 1992), 308.
3. Helen Molesworth, "Project America," *frieze: contemporary art and culture*, no. 40 (May 1998): 56.
4. Peter Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes," *Studio International*, November/December 1975, 171–75.
5. See Angeline Morrison, "Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Surface: Monochrome and Liminality," in Mercer, 2006, 134–53.
6. Kerry James Marshall in Wesley Miller, "On Museums," *Art21*, September 25, 2008, http://blog.art21.org/2008/09/25/kerry-james-marshall-on-museums/#.Uu_HOLSAq1c (accessed September 2009).