

by R.C. BAKER | KERRY JAMES MARSHALL BATTLES ART'S BLIND SPOT

The Black Whole

"YOU CAN'T BE BORN IN BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA, IN 1955 and not feel like you've got some kind of social responsibility," Kerry James Marshall told a curator in 2005. "You can't move to Watts in 1963 and grow up in South Central near the Black Panthers' headquarters and see the kinds of things I saw in my development years and not speak about it."

When Marshall spoke at MOMA last year, he began with the Supreme Court's pro-slavery Dred Scott decision and its relation to the current administration's embrace of the "Full Spectrum Dominance" doctrine (which asserts a U.S. right to do anything necessary to maintain unilateral military supremacy of the world). Not your standard artist's slide talk, but it was vintage Marshall, lifting historical moments up to the light to expose how the powerful build Potemkin villages of legality to enforce their dominance, whether over individuals, races, or countries. Discussing his 1998 "Mementos" installation of sculpture, painting, and printmaking at the University of Chicago, which portrayed murdered '60s activists as disparate as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, he pointed out that marching for civil rights "got you killed as quick as being a black nationalist would get you killed."

Marshall's historical, political, and racial subjects are as far-ranging as his media (which also include film and comic books). In a recent e-mail interview with the *Voice* from his Chicago studio, he explains: "There is such scant representation of the Black body in the historical record, that I believe I have a duty to advance its presence using every means at my disposal." That body confronts you in 1986's *Invisible Man*, a warm-toned black figure (with white eyes and teeth) on a cooler black ground, a minimalist riff on Ralph Ellison's book. Compare this to Malevich's 1918 oil painting *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, that famous white square on a white ground that occupies pride of place at MOMA. Marshall notes that abstraction is not an avenue truly available to him, because "non-representational work does not address this important problem" of the black figure's absence

from most of art history. He continues: "An unrequited love of art history haunts me, and I believe, most Black artists, who know deep down they will never achieve the status, in history, of a Jackson Pollock, Rothko, de Kooning, or Jeff Koons. . . . It matters that the history you are compelled to acknowledge reinforces notions of your inferiority with the absence of any meaningful achievement contributed by people who are like you."

And yet Marshall does not let polemics obscure his art. "I don't sacrifice the beauty quotient in order to make a point," he emphasizes. In his mid-'90s "Garden Project" series, huge paintings depicting Chicago housing projects such as Rockwell Gardens and Wentworth Gardens, Marshall dealt with the irony of these pastorally named warehouses for the poor by amping up the color and jamming the canvases with text, graphics, and inspired paint handling—flowers drip down a chipped brick wall—to convey vibrant, if circumscribed, lives.

Marshall's powerful compositions represent a tough hide stretched over deep emotional and intellectual matrices. He once wrote and drew a complete comic book, *Rythm Mastr*, which features a black hero (a rarity in mainstream comics) who combats lawlessness with drum beats that unleash secret powers from within African sculptures. Marshall taped the printed broadsheets to the glass panes of museum vitrines, using the light shining through his lively, double-sided layouts to create a mural veering between literally layered narratives and abstract collage.

His upcoming "Vignette" paintings depict couples in bucolic poses cribbed from the pleasure grounds of Fragonard and other French purveyors of decadent leisure. But Marshall has leached the color from his scenes; rather than riding swings in leafy glades, his lovers make do with flirting across chain-link fences. In *Vignette #3*, wan pink hearts flutter in the air, forming a compositional link to grisaille flowers, while a young girl's hoop earring is echoed in a series of arcs and loops that cascade bewitchingly throughout the composition—something lovely in a denatured idyll. *Jack Shainman, May 22–June 21, 513 W 20th, 212-645-1701.*



A POINTED BUCOLIC: MARSHALL'S VIGNETTE #10, 2007

Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery

Art
Best in Show
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Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Kerry James Marshall: 'Black Romantic'

*Jack Shainman Gallery
513 West 20th Street
Through July 3*

Artist of color:
Kerry James Marshall's *Untitled*, 2008

Black on Black

Kerry James Marshall's paintings of black people simply being human stand out in an art-industrial complex where subjects, artists, purveyors, and consumers are pretty much white folk. In his series of five large grisaille paintings, he imagines a young man lifting his girl through the air in graceful arcs. The lovers are seen from different angles, and viewing the panels in quick succession conveys a swirling, physical joy. This romantic vision is complicated by such kitsch as floating hearts, Black Power fists, and rococo cascades of flowers entwining the word "LOVE." Marshall masterfully leavens old-school pictorial space with poster-shop sentiment, demanding classical vigor from his compositions while also embracing Everyman tastes. In a beach scene, he transcends purposeful cliché with Albers-esque color sophistication—a

cuddling couple basks in an orange sunset, the dusky subtleties of their bodies echoed in the rich contrast of yellow sun flares engulfing a shadowy seagull. A series depicting black artists hefting palettes the size of grand-piano lids plays with an art-historical trope—self-portrait with the tools of the trade. A reminder that the canon has largely turned a blind eye to the black creator, each artist is posed before the ghostly grids you see on studio walls, where drawings and paintings of different sizes have been worked on and then removed. There's defiance inherent in this poignant absence: Here I am, the subjects seem to say—I won't disappear even if my work is unseen.