


 Art

Learn, Baby, Learn!

Kerry James Marshall lights up the canon **BY R.C. BAKER**

When Barack Obama was elected president some asserted that we had moved into a post-racial America. Eight years of partisan obstructionism that edged into vileness (“You lie!” as one congressman called out during a speech Obama gave in 2009) has finally been outed as pure hatred by an alt-right populace driven to apoplexy by their bumptious savior’s gruesome poll numbers. Undoubtedly there are Trump supporters who would be happy to resurrect one of the Constitution’s original clauses, which held that an African American should count as only three-fifths of a human being.

The dehumanizing effect of racism has

been the driving subject of Kerry James Marshall’s formally dynamic, aesthetically nimble artwork for over four decades, and he is well served by the Met’s illuminating retrospective of his paintings, drawings, prints, comics, and insightful odds and ends.

Marshall was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955; in the early 1960s, his family joined the African-American migration out of the Jim Crow South, ending up in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. Although the City of Angels was as rigidly segregated as many Southern towns, the young Marshall was most struck by the unfamiliar landscape: “You know, we had never seen a palm tree,” he recounted in an oral history for the Smithsonian. “And the light was different...our eyes hurt.” Early on

the family lived at Nickerson Gardens, a project of two-story townhouses with grassy areas, a gym, and a library, where, as a kid, Marshall would look “at every art book, without discrimination.”

By the time Watts exploded in 1965 — as curator Ian Alteveer puts it in the exhibition catalog, born of “tensions spawned by enforced overcrowding and rapidly diminishing employment opportunities” — Marshall’s family had moved a few miles north, missing the brunt of the carnage. But the memory of a rotating Jack in the Box sign backlit by flames in a night sky has stayed with the artist for half a century. He has yet to depict it, however, lamenting, “I’ve never been able to do it justice...it was so poignant, just so intense.”

Kerry James Marshall: Mastry

The Met Breuer
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212-731-1675, metmuseum.org
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A vivid absence has remained at the heart of Marshall’s work ever since. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art had opened that same year of 1965, and in a brief autobiography three decades later he recalled, “I had never been to a museum; I hadn’t known there was such a place. ... Once I learned how to get there on my own, I haunted the place.” Renaissance canvases enthralled him, but he quickly realized that images of people who looked like him were largely absent. Capital “A” Art, it became apparent to a young black kid, was an almost exclusively white realm. When Marshall did encounter works by black artists in museums, they were often small in scale. “They don’t immediately call attention to themselves,” he told an interviewer, in 2014. Wanting to counter that modesty, he says, “I started out using history painting as a model, because I wanted to claim the right to operate at that level.”

At 10 feet high and 18 feet across, Marshall’s *7am Sunday Morning* (2003) meets the history-painting standard of large-scale and complicated narrative. But unlike, for example, the Met’s own 21-foot-wide *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), into which German



Kerry James Marshall/Photo: Nathan Keay/MCA Chicago



The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/ARS, New York

**Jacob Lawrence's
*Washington
Crossing the
Delaware* (1954)**

painter Emanuel Leutze crammed dozens of figures struggling across the ice-choked river, the history in Marshall's huge canvas roils beneath a placid and ultimately mystical surface. Pigeons swoop across a blue sky over a row of brick buildings, musical notes flutter on the breeze, a sign over gated windows announces "Your School of Beauty Culture," a figure in a yellow coat hustles out of the path of a speeding car. Sprawling across half a block, "Rothschild Liquors" resembles a bunker, all windowless brick walls and solid steel doors. The street is in Chicago (where Marshall has long lived and worked), but is this 1971 or 2001? The car, which might tell us, is a white blur — we can only conjecture that the gates and impenetrable doors appeared after the looting and burning of the 1960s. Time and place dematerialize as the right half of the composition fractures into rainbow-edged prisms, which mimic a lens flare while juddering with abstract abandon. Curtains in an apartment building wink geometrically, recalling the rectangles and squares energizing Edward Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning*, from 1930 — two different streets, two different eras, two different ways of dazzlingly conflating reality and pure form.

Form is always in service to Marshall's determination to put that which has been invisible for most of Western art history — black bodies — on view. (He has been greatly influenced by Ralph Ellison's 1952 classic, *Invisible Man*, which declares in the prologue, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.") Yet Marshall is constantly pushing his concepts of abstraction, using a hue that is beyond nature for his figures. "People ask me why my figures have to be so black," he explained to an interviewer in 2013. "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. ... Somebody has to start representing that blackness in the extreme and letting it be beautiful." In a series depicting painters in their studios, their flesh is richly dark but the colors on their palettes are mostly bright pinks, yellows, and whites, as if the artists can't paint true self-portraits for an art world that doesn't want too many black faces. Or — maybe these painters are enjoying the arbitrary assignment of color that makes the verdant yellow flesh of Willem de Kooning's

Woman (1944) so beguiling?

Woman is one of roughly forty works Marshall has selected from the Met's collection as an addendum to his own exhibition. In another, from 1991, Gerhard Richter has dragged oil paint across a snapshot of his wife, energizing the smooth surface of the photo with a rough gray hide that demands to be seen on its own, nonobjective terms. This visceral texture chimes with Marshall's mastery at animating every inch of even a twelve-foot-wide canvas such as *Our Town* (1995), which deftly layers paint and collage while mixing illusionistic volumes with flat lettering and clotted patches of white that might be effaced graffiti. Jacob Lawrence's one-foot-high, 1954 version of *Washington crossing the Delaware* was also chosen by Marshall, confirming his observation that many works by African Americans were done at intimate scale — but also revealing, through the angular garments and rhythmically spaced bayonets of the soldiers, that graphic dynamism can enlarge the evocations of even the smallest composition.

As in his paintings, Marshall's writings are multilayered, filled with citations, historical explications, and footnotes. In his most recent essay, "Shall I Compare Thee...?," he quotes the CEO of General Electric: "I like Africa. ... There are eight or nine countries that have an immense amount of natural resources. ... When I go to Africa there's no local competition. I'm competing with Siemens, with the Chinese." Marshall adds, "Some would say that none of this has anything to do with art. That would be true only if you believed that art making was a completely autonomous enterprise not at all related to the historical and political dynamics that temper the desires of humankind." In another text, he enlists the French philosopher André Malraux to lay bare the secondhand originality of the early Western avant-garde: "There was no question what place in the museum to assign the primitive arts; for once they are allowed fully and freely to voice their message, they do not merely invade the museum; they burn it down."

Marshall doesn't want to torch the canon — he's learned way too much from it. Instead, he's using the precepts of modernism to expose art history's blind spots, which he then fills with images of exquisite formal power and *sui generis* content. Maybe one day we'll get to see that Jack in the Box clown levitate into a burning sky.