



Kerry James Marshall

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

Kerry James Marshall: Telling Stories

Kerry James Marshall is an iconoclastic icon maker. Couching his visual language in terms of ironic ambiguity as well as romantic beauty, he makes paintings that undermine our need for clear-cut stereotypes and simple solutions. His outsized tableaux concoct a spell – equal parts magical and tragic – from a complex recipe based on such diverse sources as traditional fairy tales, African and Haitian parables, the symbolic imagery of Renaissance painting and the iconography of contemporary American media, from Harlequin romances to Hollywood blockbusters. Complicating his sumptuous, theatrical recountings, however, are social and political allusions that ground his allegories in the plain-spoken, often painfully frank, terms of the real world.

Marshall is straightforward about his choice of subject matter. “I stylize my figures purely for effect, to be trouble-

some, to be extreme, to try to explore the cultural stereotypes that polarize us in our everyday interactions. Nothing is simply black or white. Both of these are extreme positions, and I want to take a position against the rhetorical stances people use to define themselves. This is part of the theatrical spectacle of narrative picture making. I want a slow read, I want people to be intrigued enough by the arrangements to spend the time to unravel the narratives.”¹

Despite the directness with which he portrays human features and motivations, there is nothing simple about the construction of Marshall’s visual compositions. In this sense, his painting process mirrors the layered quality of his meaning. His heightened attention to the traditional materials and techniques of drawing and painting meld easily with complex pictorial devices such as collage, profuse use of overlays and repeated, stenciled or stamped images that disrupt his picture plane and thus our perception of time and place.

Marshall studied at Otis Art Institute

in Los Angeles (he received his bachelor of fine arts degree in 1978), working in a realist tradition under the tutelage of draftsman and muralist Charles White and painter Arnold Mesches. After initially focusing exclusively on large-scale figurative drawings with social and political content derived from newspaper articles, he experimented with paper collage, subsequently abandoning the figure for pure abstraction in order to explore the possibility of “making a meaningful picture that did not have a representational image or a specific story to tell.”

His first painting, *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of his Former Self*, 1980, marked a turning point that renewed his commitment to the figure. “Narrative content coincided with my reading of folktales and folklore, and I began to feel that the story was everything.” Marshall began to formulate an increasingly dense compositional structure combining the random, overall quality of collage with the formal control of illustrative drawing and painting. In this lexicon, representation becomes a means of engaging the viewer directly, while abstraction encourages metaphor and analogy.

In *Beauty Examined*, 1993, Marshall explores the singular role of the African-American woman. Casting our gaze on the supine, lifeless body of a woman lying on an autopsy table, we view her like a specimen; we see her sex and her physical attributes labeled with commonplace, descriptive phrases. Immediately, however, our veneer of detached objectivity is punctured by the stern reminder that “beauty is only skin deep.” Like the aphorism at the end of a fable, this simple statement carries a strong moral tone that undermines our comfortably distanced voyeurism. We are no longer watching, we are being challenged to look deeper, to see beyond surface appearances. As if to reinforce this, collaged elements taken from anatomy books disrupt our understanding of the painting as a unified planar surface, just as, through their content, they complicate our assumptions about the human depicted. These visual elements are allowed free interplay: the small white cabin with no windows to the center left and the three portraits (reminiscent of both religious icons and



Slow Dance, 1992-93, mixed media and acrylic on canvas, 75¼" x 75", courtesy private collection.



Century Twenty One, 1992, acrylic and collage on canvas, 84" x 120", collection of the University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson; purchased by the museum with funds provided by the Edward J. Gallagher, Jr. Memorial Fund.

mug shots) that line the top of the painting weave a metaphoric background that is couched in the vernacular of cinematic or oral story telling as much as the formal language of representational painting. For Marshall, "this picture takes the position that the woman is already beautiful. But her body is described in vernacular terms that are particular to the black community – all the things that black men admire about black women – the beauty myth and the norms that men impose on women's bodies. But I was also thinking about Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* in terms of composition. The floral patterns sweeten it up, and the flowers refer to the fairy tale of *Sleeping Beauty*. All of these ideas circle around conceptions of death and beauty."

This often jarring contrast between ideal beauty and existential reality lurks behind all of Marshall's imagery, and it is nowhere more apparent than in his intimate portraits. Unlike his large-scale *mise-en-scène*, which always place an

individual or a group of figures in a carefully defined space, works like *Stigma/Stigmata*, 1992, and *The Lost Boys*, 1993, insist on the simultaneity of opposing traits – beauty, class and culture – as being essential to the effective portrayal of human identity. Whether juxtaposing commercially produced depictions of Caucasian romantic heroines with carefully rendered paintings of proud black women, or contrasting the imagined corporeality of his *Lost Boys* with the wraithlike ethereality of their expressionistic surroundings, Marshall is preoccupied with the depiction of survival and remembrance. Just as the female character in August Wilson's play *Two Trains Running* who cuts her legs to make them ugly and so prevent men from looking at her, the woman in *Stigma/Stigmata* bears the scars on her face as a disfiguring but ennobling emblem of survival.² Similarly, the impassive faces of the *Lost Boys* are presented as individual identities under-

mined by the circumscribing acronym *A.K.A.*, a bit of police jargon that projects an uneasy aura of illegality or personal subterfuge. However, in both cases these figures look boldly and directly at us, asserting their own identities in spite of the defining, circumscribing characteristics ascribed to them by others.

Marshall often approaches a complex perspective through the lens of a flatly painted, foreshortened perspective that creates an evocatively framed, cinematic atmosphere. Whether overtly political, like the soliloquy on South African apartheid that takes place in *The Land that Time Forgot*, 1992, or the personalized distillation of American romance and beauty that occurs in *Black Goddess of the Silver Screen*, 1991, Marshall's aesthetic is constantly shaped by a compositional approach that is an outgrowth of his own work as a production designer in such films as *Daughters of the Dust*.³ "For me, there is no difference between my work in the cinema and my painting.

I am still trying to construct a believable space that we all know is false. But I want to make it resonate with enough truth to make people suspend their disbelief.”

Eschewing painterly analogies to active movement, gesture or the passage of time, Marshall’s figures stand isolated within carefully controlled spaces that achieve in painting what the film historian Leo Braudy describes as “a burrowing inward, an exploration of inner space, an effort to get into the invisible heart of things, where all connections are clear.”⁴ Marshall’s pictures are structured in a manner similar to a “closed” filmic space, where a tightly focused picture plane functions like a mirror, rather than the more associative “open” window-like space through which we can comfortably but passively watch particular actions or events as outsiders.⁵

These cinematic influences further echo the precise architectonic structure and distinctive use of figurative ensembles of pre-Renaissance and Renaissance painting. Marshall often combines these two disparate sources in the same picture to create a level of heightened tension, where the impending action or psychological communication is foreshadowed and delivered, as if seen in a long shot of a single scene. The static postures of his posed, hieratic figures convey a classical gravity quite unlike the rushing, teeming, but ultimately fleeting images we receive from television and other mass media. Both urgently contemporary and strongly historic, the faces they offer us, combining the beatitude of Raphael with the living stillness and composure of Mantegna, are like masks, inky black with the merest white outline drawing to give them features. There is about them, as there is about all of Marshall’s images, a sense of concealment as well as revelation: this is what makes them so urgently contemporary at a time when many individuals, black and white, feel as if they are locked into rigidly determined roles. Marshall is “trying to show that the ideals of beauty as defined in both African-American and European cultures are completely imaginary. Whatever you subscribe to, it is basically a socially devised criteria.”

Through his paintings Marshall engages us in a wide-ranging dialogue



Supermodel, 1994, acrylic and mixed media on canvas on board, 25" x 25", private collection.



Lost Boys: A.K.A. Black Johnny, 1993, acrylic and collage on canvas, 27" x 27", courtesy the artist.

about race, beauty, social behavior – with patient directness. Establishing a sense of complicity between the viewer and the viewed, black and white, visibility and invisibility, his nuanced images of gazes and glances articulate the consequences of seeing and being seen.

Terrie Sultan

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(Essay courtesy of Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art)

Notes

1. All quotes by the artist are taken from an interview conducted by the author on Oct. 19, 1994.
2. August Wilson, *Two Trains Running* (New York: Dutton, 1992).
3. *Daughters of the Dust*, a Geechee Girls Production; produced, written and directed by Julie Dash, 1991. Other films for which Marshall worked as production designer include *San Kofa*, produced, written and directed by Haile Grima, 1993; and *Praise House*, produced by Julie Dash and Twin Cities Television, written and directed by Julie Dash, 1991.
4. Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 66; cited by Edward Baron Turk, *Child of Paradise: Marcel Carné and the Golden Age of French Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).
5. op. cit.; *Child of Paradise*, p. 42; Edward Baron Turk discusses “open” and “closed” filmic spaces in terms of opposing directorial attitudes to associative control. He lists prominent directors in the “closed” school as Fritz Lang, Marcel Carné, Serge Eisenstein and Alfred Hitchcock; Jean Renoir stands as a prime example of an “open” filmmaker.

Cover: *Beauty Examined*, 1993, acrylic and collage on canvas, 84" x 98", collection Charles A. Sims.

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