

Exhibition 13 June – 26 October 2014
Palacio de Velázquez

Kerry James Marshall

Painting and Other Stuff



Kerry James Marshall, *Better Homes, Better Gardens*, 1994. Denver Art Museum Collection. © Kerry James Marshall. Photograph courtesy of the Denver Art Museum

I've always wanted to be a history painter on a grand scale like Giotto and Géricault... but the moment when that kind of painting was really possible seems so distant, especially after Pollock and Polke. Nevertheless, I persist, trying to construct meaningful pictures that solicit identification with and reflection on Black existential realities.

Kerry James Marshall

The artistic career of Kerry James Marshall is centered on African American life, culture and history. His large corpus of work opens new perspectives onto persistent questions of racial politics, cultural representation and social emancipation. "You can't be born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955 and grow up in South Central [Los Angeles] near the Black Panthers headquarters, and not feel like you've got some kind of social responsibility. You can't move to Watts in 1963 and not speak about it. That determined a lot of where my work was going to go," Marshall says. The idea of blackness constitutes the fundamental principle from which all his work flows. This polysemic concept with its visual, aesthetic and cultural implications allows him to move over a wide terrain ranging from private life to the way the artistic canon is constructed.

In a context where there were no black artists to act as referents and “black studies” were barely off the launchpad at universities, Marshall committed himself to compensating in his work for the absence and invisibility of black culture, adopting a programmatic approach: “The figure will always be black, even inside black.” He considers that the images of blacks offered by the history of art not only show them as the marginal “other”, excluded from the canon as subject (author) and object (theme or motif), but also hinder the construction of a black identity and collective memory.

Marshall attempts to reconcile African American culture with images of western ideals by including both in his paintings, highlighting determinations of black identity within their historical context and the current socio-political situation. In addressing art history too, he conscientiously rectifies what he describes as a “lack in the image bank”, establishing an idea of a counter-archive in response to the dominant visual culture, and raising pertinent questions on how the art system is sustained and issues of legitimization, power and marginalization.

There is a constant flow between aesthetics and politics in his work. References to Afro-American culture are interlaced with social critique and his personal history, as in *Yellow Quarters* (1979), where the apparently abstract and aestheticist principle of the collage, a technique developed by the same cubist artists who used black art as a source of inspiration, is questioned through the narrative of his grandfather’s murder in a place of that name. Another example is *Untitled (Nude)* (1982), where he recomposes the beauty of black people. And in the trilogy formed by *Red (If They Come in the Morning)* (2011), *Black and Green* (both 2012), the artist alters a key title by Barnett Newman (*Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*) and exposes the abstract painting of the “color field” to debate from a political perspective. The colors are those of the Pan-African flag, and the secondary title is taken from a letter from James Baldwin to the activist Angela Davis.

Organized by several European museums, the exhibition at the Palacio de Velázquez is complemented by another at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona, bringing together a selection of works on the different themes and motivations confronted by the artist throughout his career: the visible and the invisible, beauty, the image bank, commemorations, everyday life, artistic formalism and political activism. Rather than offering a retrospective, the show’s intention is to underscore the critical and aesthetic complexity of these counterhistories or visual responses offered by Marshall from “another” modernity.

Acknowledgments

Kerry James Marshall Exhibition Circle: JoAnn & Ronald Busuttill; R.H. Defares; The Deighton Collection; Koplin Del Rio Gallery; Larry and Marilyn Fields; Susan & Lew Manilow; Rodney Miller; Michel Moortgat; Rennie Collection; Jack Shainman Gallery; and Vanmoerkerke Collection.

Palacio de Velázquez

Parque del Retiro



Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

Palacio de Velázquez

Parque del Retiro, Madrid

Opening Hours

From April to September

Every day from

10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.

From October to March

Every day from

10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

Organization:

M HKA (Antwerp), Kunsthall Charlottenborg (Copenhagen), Fundació Antoni Tàpies (Barcelona) and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

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