

Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955) – Artist Resources

[BOMB Magazine](#) interviews Marshall in 1998 about his mentor Charles White, art history, and ambition. “It takes half a lifetime, really, to develop to a point where you can start to speak effectively with whatever the tools are you’re trying to master...[until you have] sufficiently mastered the forms and the materials of art-making, and the ideas that govern it, to be able to say something with it that was worthwhile.”

[Art21 followed Marshall](#) through the galleries of the Art Institute in Chicago, his studio, and at home with his family in 2001. “The principles that govern the way visual representation works are still the same principles that governed the way it worked 500 years ago...2000 years ago. Makes perfect sense to me to go back to the origins of these things and pick up from there. To take up the challenge, really. To think of another way to make these things seem fresh.”

[Listen to Marshall’s 2012 lecture](#) at the National Gallery of Art on “The Importance of Being Figurative.”

“You’re not just making artworks for yourself,” [Marshall told Art21](#) in a 2014 interview about history, racial segregation, politics, and being a black artist in an historically white system. “You’re making artworks because they fit into a narrative structure that purports to define what kinds of things have value.”



Marshall in Chicago studio, 2016
Photograph: Zbigniew Bzdak / Chicago Tribune

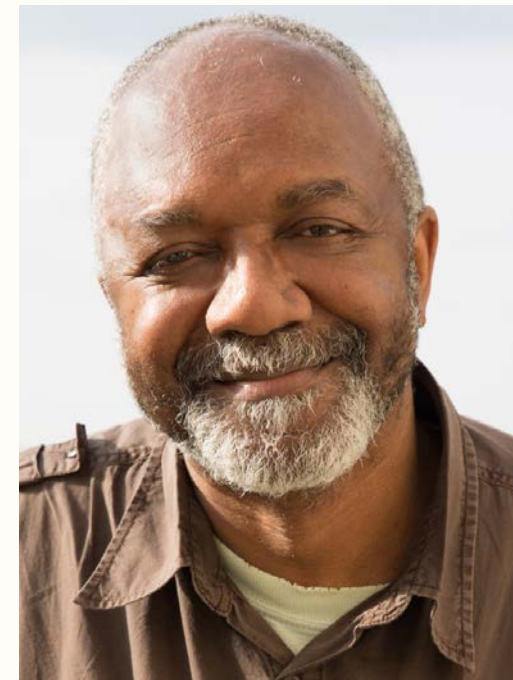
Marshall [speaks at the University of Chicago](#) in 2016 after being awarded with the [Jessie L. Rosenberger Medal](#).

In 2016, Marshall was honored with *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry*, a mid-career touring retrospective bringing together 80 works and spanning 35 years. [The New Yorker](#) reviewed the exhibition’s debut at [The Met Breuer](#). MoCA’s chief curator [talked with Marshall](#) as the retrospective traveled to [Los Angeles](#).

Marshall also spoke with [Interview Magazine](#) about *Mastry*’s opening at the [Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago](#). “I think the museum should be an arena in which ideals can hash it out, fight it out, tooth and nail, for attention. The moment you introduce difference into a museum, then the privileged space is contested...No one has a right to occupy the privileged position all the time, so it should be contested. It should always be messy in there.”

In 2017, Marshall began his largest work to date, a [mural on Chicago Cultural Center titled *Rushmore*](#), honoring the women at the center of Chicago’s cultural history.

Marshall [talks with Tate curator Mark Godfrey](#) in 2018 to celebrate the Tate Britain’s acquisition of [Untitled \(London Bridge\)](#).



Marshall, 2017
Photograph: Annette Hornischer

Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955)

Lost Boys: AKA Young Blood, 1993

Acrylic and collage on canvas

Private Collection; L2020:10.1

Contemporary artist Kerry James Marshall aims to reassess and begin to reverse the underrepresentation and exclusion of Black bodies and experiences in the canon of Western art history. Working within foundational genres such as history painting and portraiture, Marshall uses undiluted and often un-nuanced black paint for his figures, placing them in an unapologetic yet celebratory spotlight in which they refuse to be dismissed. Marshall's *Lost Boys* series takes its title from J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, subverting the romantic fictional narrative of children who don't want to grow up with memorial portraits of real young men who were robbed of the choice.

In each portrait, Marshall honors the lives of individuals too often ignored by a society indifferent to their plight, many of whom died in a proliferation of gang wars and police violence in the late 1980s and early '90s. The word "lost" takes on expanded meaning in Marshall's hands. As he explains, it becomes a multi-layered concept that addresses not only a life lost but also the realities of being "lost in America, lost in the ghetto, lost in public housing, lost in joblessness, and lost in illiteracy." Marshall thus evolves Barrie's premise, asking not whether these boys wanted to grow up, but whether they ever had a chance to grow up at all.

On view Marsh 18 – July 26, 2020





Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955)

Study for Vignette, 2007

Graphite, acrylic, and ink on paper

Private Collection; L2020:21.1

Kerry James Marshall was born in Birmingham, Alabama during the formative years of the Civil Rights Movement and moved to Los Angeles just before the devastating Watts Riots of 1965. These formative experiences shaped his critical approach to painting. His work chronicles the invisible history of Black identities in the canon of Western art, often subverting familiar art historical motifs. **Study for Vignette** is from Marshall's seminal *Vignettes* series (2003-08), which garners inspiration from 18th century French Rococo masterpieces. Marshall brings the period's romanticized images of aristocratic courtship, pleasure, and frivolity into the present to expose the persistent contradictions between romantic ideals and political reality.

Loosely inspired by Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *The Swing* (1767), the lovers in this vignette occupy their space with a sense of intimacy and belonging, placing their bodies firmly within an artistic canon that had rendered their presence invisible. They appear an idyllic, celebratory symbol of love. Marshall undermines the classical archetype, however, removing the display of luxury associated with the Rococo and inserting floating pink hearts as notes of satire and cynicism. Throughout the series, he adds further critique in what he refers to as "classical ideals of Black independence and Black nationalism" – visible here in a gate that doubles as an iconic commodity from the 1970s: an afro pick with the clenched fist symbol of the Black Power Movement.

On view February 26 – May 31, 2020

Extra Resources

[Marshall talks to Art21](#) about the critical romanticism of his *Vignettes* series during the installation of his exhibition, *Black Romantic* at the [Jack Shainman Gallery in New York](#).