





**Kerry James  
Marshall**

**A Creative  
Convening**

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**Kerry James  
Marshall**

**A Creative  
Convening**

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# Darren Walker

President, Ford Foundation

## Foreword

In 1968, a few weeks before he was murdered, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. felt frustrated at the pace of change in America and troubled by the state of the country. According to his close friend the entertainer Harry Belafonte, Dr. King said, “For all the steps we’ve taken toward integration, I’ve come to believe that we are integrating into a burning house.”

Belafonte responded, “If that’s what you think, what would you have us do?”

Dr. King replied, “I guess we’re just going to become the firemen.” [1]

For innumerable reasons, this sentiment feels just as relevant today as it did in 1968. Despite the progress we have made, America remains a nation where healing the racial wounds and injustice of our history must be our shared imperative.

So, we might ask ourselves, where are the firefighters today? Who are our firefighters for justice?

I believe that in 2017 artists are chief among this country’s firefighters for justice. Artists have the courage to tell the truth when those in power do not want to hear it. Artists hold up the mirror and demand that the nation pay attention to the gap between the promise of America and the lived experience of far too many of its citizens.

No one does this better than Kerry James Marshall. Brilliant, fearless, inimitable, beloved, Kerry is one of America’s greatest cultural treasures. To view his work is to stand in awe of his courage, his intelligence, his integrity,

[1] Harry Belafonte with Michael Shnayerson, *My Song: A Memoir of Art, Race, and Defiance* (New York: Vintage, 2011), 325.

and his humanity. This was all on display during his remarkable retrospective *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry*, which graced the walls of The Met Breuer from October 25, 2016 to January 29, 2017, and presided over the closing of one chapter in American history and the opening of the next.

Indeed, during this current moment of dismay and consternation, as so many false narratives about black people and our communities are proliferated across the country, Kerry continues to boldly assert an authentic narrative of beauty, sensuality, and complexity. His work addresses what he calls the “vacuum in the image bank” and brings black figures and black stories to the walls of our nation’s most venerated arts institutions—not just filling that vacuum, but shining a light on the incredible beauty of black life.

[Blackness] One need look no further than his astounding *School of Beauty, School of Culture* (2012) [see inside back cover], which reminds us that these two concepts go hand in hand—by changing notions of who or what is beautiful, we might also change the culture in turn. [2]

In this way, and in so many others, Kerry has not only made a name for himself and helped make space for black artists over his long and remarkable career but also paved the way toward a more equal, more just society. As Madeleine Grynsztejn, the Pritzker Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, was quoted in an article in the *New York Times*, Kerry “is painting for a future United States. The expanded history he is creating for us to see today will be the norm tomorrow.” [3]

[2] The Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Kerry James Marshall: Mastry,” press release, October 24, 2016, [metmuseum.org/press/exhibitions/2016/kerry-james-marshall](http://metmuseum.org/press/exhibitions/2016/kerry-james-marshall).

[3] Randy Kennedy, “Kerry James Marshall, Boldly Repainting Art History,” *New York Times*, September 9, 2016, [nytimes.com/2016/09/18/arts/design/kerry-james-marshall-met-breuer-mastry.html](http://nytimes.com/2016/09/18/arts/design/kerry-james-marshall-met-breuer-mastry.html).

I am confident—perhaps radically so—that our democracy will be sustained and improved because of artists like Kerry James Marshall, who are actively standing up for the values we hold dear. This is why at the Ford Foundation we are so proud to support visionary artists like Kerry and exhibitions like *Kerry James Marshall: Mastery*—because we believe in the power of art to address the narratives that perpetuate inequality, to engage our fullest humanity, and to inspire empathy and action.

I hope that you enjoy this volume of transcripts chronicling the creative convening that was inspired by the breathtaking exhibition, and that Kerry's work and words move you to feel, invite you to think, and inspire you, in your own way, to become a firefighter for justice.

# **Sandra Jackson-Dumont**

Frederick P. and Sandra P. Rose Chairman of Education,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

## **Introduction**

“There has to be a point at which you can no longer tolerate a view of beauty and the projection of desire as a kind of singularly white-oriented ideal.” [1]

“All I want to say is that freedom is not conferred. Freedom is assumed. You assume you are free. You take it, you do it, you act it, you behave it, you implement it. That’s what freedom is.” [2]

—Kerry James Marshall

On January 28, 2017, The Metropolitan Museum of Art presented a daylong public gathering titled Kerry James Marshall: A Creative Convening. It marked the closing of the extraordinary exhibition *Kerry James Marshall: Mastery*, on view at The Met Breuer from October 25, 2016 through January 29, 2017. The book you hold in your hands is a transcription of that day, which was, in the words of Thelma Golden, “a combination of school and church at the same time—what I believe museums should be.” [3]

As people spilled into the Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium at The Met Fifth Avenue on the day of the convening, they brought with them an amalgam of exhilaration, anxiety, and anger. The mix of feelings and energies was due in part to the program’s remarkable lineup of speakers. I quickly realized it also stemmed from the fact that this anticipated day of critical reflection stood squarely in the shadow of two noteworthy events that were, in real time, shaking the world’s sociopolitical stage, igniting long-overdue conversations, and exposing raw, deep-seated

[1] See the conversation between Marshall and Molesworth, page 64.

[2] See *ibid.*, page 77-76.

[3] See the conversation between Golden, Jafa, and Tate, page 218.

emotions. These events were the inauguration of the forty-fifth president of the United States on January 20 and the Women's March, one of the largest coordinated protests in American history, on January 21. In that specific moment, a week after these seminal events, we were facing an extraordinarily divided country following a particularly divisive American presidential election. While the convening was not specifically planned in reaction to the events of January 2017, it certainly felt like a sort of medicinal treatment for them, or at the very least a safer space to interrogate the realities of our time. In that sense, The Met became what museums have the potential to be in profoundly radical ways—a site for the dynamic exchange of actionable ideas, a communal space.

Reflecting on Kerry James Marshall: A Creative Convening, I recall people taking up residence in their seats for the entire day in what seemed like an act of comfortable endurance. I remember watching folks seated next to each other huddle for quick exchanges or even embrace after being stirred by a speaker's words or performance. I also recall overhearing whispers of "I really needed this." I think these murmurs referred to the fact that, more than ever, we yearned for the kinds of discussions that Kerry's remarkable body of work provokes.

It was a gift, a pleasure, and a profound experience to have such a brilliant artist as Kerry James Marshall mount a show at The Met Breuer within the first year of its opening. His profound engagement with the history and power of art is truly inspiring, as is his extensive knowledge of The Met collection. Kerry's work, in addition to demonstrating exceptional formal rigor, asks fundamental questions about the nature of art and about the role it plays in representing history, people, and society. While Kerry engages deeply and thoughtfully with the past, his art resonates with the cultures, challenges, and responsibilities of the present.

Part of The Met’s mission is to “connect people to creativity, knowledge, and ideas.” [4] Kerry James Marshall: A Creative Convening was the outcome of conversations I had with Kerry about strategies for realizing that very goal. We asked ourselves what kind of gathering would engage people in ways that moved, catalyzed, and intrigued them.

While Kerry is flattered by creative responses to his work, what he longed for were interrogations of the ways in which the artwork *actually* “works,” or labors. He and I discussed the notion of mastery as a farce. We debated the fact that the mastery of anything lies not in the product but in the pursuit; the product is simply a material manifestation of practice. As a result of this series of deep talks exploring different vantage points, Kerry and I sought to build a day of criticality among diverse voices that might reveal the conditions necessary for one to pursue a path of personal excellence. What binds people across all professions—artists, scientists, art historians, those working in creative youth development—is that everyone is seeking excellence. We wanted the day to serve as a point of entry—it was intended not to yield answers but rather to sustain debate about the role of mastery as it relates to art in society, social justice, and one’s own personal voice. Our hope was that this convening would further complicate arguments about the art-historical canon as it specifically relates to Black bodies, artists, and practitioners in the creative ecosystem. We also wanted to explore the intersections of museums, various disciplines, and daily life, as work does not happen in an echo chamber but in the world.

The stellar roster of presenters—twenty in all—explored the role of creativity, hard work, social justice,

[4] The full mission statement can be found at [metmuseum.org/about-the-met](http://metmuseum.org/about-the-met).

and imagination in art history, performance, science, and other disciplines. The event was a mix of rich extended conversations and exciting nine-minute presentations. [5] Transcripts of all the presentations are included in this publication except for Huey Copeland's magnificent talk, which will be published in his forthcoming collection of critical essays. [6] Also included is a "bonus track"—the transcript of *An Evening with Kerry James Marshall*, a discussion at The Met between Kerry and Bill Rhoden, which took place six weeks prior to the convening and examined success, power, and identity in the arts and in sports.

Every museum experience is an opportunity to foster meaningful dialogue, engage with timely issues, and see beauty in all its forms—pretty beauty, ugly beauty, unimaginable beauty. We think of Met Education as an active laboratory of art and ideas that catalyzes learning, creative expression, and multidisciplinary experimentation. It is my hope that *Kerry James Marshall: A Creative Convening* was another incremental investment in making museums significant engines for crucial dialogues about the world we live in.

[5] Nine minutes was used as a guideline for the length of each presentation because it takes approximately this long to walk from The Met Fifth Avenue, on 82nd Street and Fifth Avenue, to The Met Breuer, on 75th Street and Madison Avenue. *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry* was one of the first exhibitions mounted at The Met Breuer, the Metropolitan Museum's third location newly opened in 2016.

[6] An expanded version of Copeland's talk will be published in *Touched by the Mother: On Black Men and Artistic Practice, 1966–2016* (University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I am incredibly grateful to Kerry James Marshall for his profound and unapologetic love for people of color, and Black people specifically—our beauty, our potential, and our presence. I am also grateful for the ways in which his nuanced cross-examination of the art-historical canon, in the most matter-of-fact manner, makes Black bodies powerfully and visibly central through both content and their compositional placement. I am thankful to him for his complete resistance to mediocrity and his insistence on #blackexcellence. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge his partner in life, Cheryl Lynn Bruce, for her support of such dynamism and for being a creative force in her own right.

Kerry James Marshall: A Creative Convening would not have been possible without the generosity of our sponsor, the Ford Foundation. I extend my personal and institutional gratitude to staff at the foundation—namely Darren Walker, President; Elizabeth Alexander, former Director of Creativity and Free Expression; and Margaret Morton, current Director of Creativity and Free Expression—for their enthusiasm and understanding of this project’s critical import. Ford’s support has helped us spark important exchanges across disciplines, as well as pursue our shared goal of engaging with new and broader communities interested in art and urgent social issues. It has also allowed us to respond to the extraordinary interest in the convening transcripts with the creation of this publication.

The exhibition *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry* was co-organized with the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, so I also thank Madeleine Grynsztejn, the Pritzker Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and Helen Molesworth, former Chief Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and a

cocurator of the exhibition. Of course, the exhibition would not have been possible without the support of our donors—the Ford Foundation, Kenneth and Rosalind Landis, Tony and Marti Oppenheimer, and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

To realize Kerry James Marshall: A Creative Convening, we brought together an incredible advisory committee and asked them to serve as critical friends and partners. In turn, they gave us their warm hearts and brilliant minds. I am grateful to the committee members: Novella Ford, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library; Thelma Golden, the Studio Museum in Harlem; Rujeko Hockley, formerly of the Brooklyn Museum; Jason King, the Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University; Robert O'Meally, Center for Jazz Studies, Columbia University; Nico Wheadon, the Studio Museum in Harlem; and Deborah Willis, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University.

Finally, I must recognize my insightful colleagues at The Met. First and foremost, I thank Sheena Wagstaff, Leonard A. Lauder Chairman, Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, for her initiative to make Kerry James Marshall the first living artist to receive a retrospective exhibition at The Met Breuer. I also want to acknowledge Ian Alteveer, now Aaron I. Fleischman Curator and a cocurator of the exhibition, who worked closely with Kerry to install the breathtaking show at The Met Breuer. He, along with Jennifer Mock, former Associate Educator, Public Programs and Creative Practice, served as my invaluable partners on the convening. In addition, the following colleagues in the Education, Development, and Design departments deserve a standing ovation for their relentless commitment to realizing this project: Lesley Alpert-Schuldenfrei, Hillary Bliss, Alethea Brown,

Elizabeth Burke, Teresa Cajigas, Meryl Cates, Christopher DiPietro, Anais Disla, Anastasiya Gutnik, Jody Heher, Merantine Hens, Clyde Jones, Minji Kim, Tiffany Kim, Daniel Koppich, Emile Molin, Alexis Patterson, Kwabena Slaughter, Kamomi Solidum, Soo Hee Song, and Limor Tomer. This incredible collection of colleagues helped create and record such a moving event.

#### NOTE TO THE READER

We hope you find this documented discourse as insightful, refreshing, and energizing as the live event. At the time of the program that inspired this publication, a book was neither planned nor expected. Rather, it exists because of overwhelming demand for the transcripts of the talks. Transcripts have been lightly edited for legibility and reflect the truest representation of the day. A PDF version of this publication is available online. [7] Please also see video documentation of the convening and *An Evening with Kerry James Marshall*. [8]

This book has two features intended to emphasize the connections between the various transcripts. First, marginalia on the left-hand pages highlight five themes that run throughout: blackness, creativity, freedom, mastery/mas-try, and portraiture. These marginal indices list the pages where the themes are addressed. Second, footnotes offer cross-references, citations, or suggestions for further reading, as well as supplementary information about people, publications, and events that the presenters discuss, for the benefit of the reader. The professional title and biography given for each presenter reflects his or her status at the time of the convening.

[7]

[metmuseum.org/MetPublications](http://metmuseum.org/MetPublications)

[8]

[metmuseum.org/KJMConveningMorning](http://metmuseum.org/KJMConveningMorning)  
[metmuseum.org/KJMConveningAfternoon](http://metmuseum.org/KJMConveningAfternoon)  
[metmuseum.org/EveningWithKJM](http://metmuseum.org/EveningWithKJM)

JANUARY 28, 2017

**Kerry James  
Marshall**

**A Creative  
Convening**

THE GRACE RAINEY ROGERS AUDITORIUM  
THE MET FIFTH AVENUE

On the following pages, participants  
at the convening:

Darren Walker; Thelma Golden and  
Greg Tate; Arthur Jafa; Mario Gooden;  
Rashida Bumbray; Fred Eversley;  
Helen Molesworth and Kerry James  
Marshall; Toshi Reagon















International Airport, California, 1965 (photograph).  
Accessed Library, Getty Research Institute















# Toshi Reagon

“A big part of knowing how to get through, how to execute greatness, is knowing exactly who you are.”



Toshi Reagon is a one-woman celebration of all that's dynamic, progressive, and uplifting in American music. Since first taking to the stage at age 17, this versatile singer-songwriter-guitarist has moved audiences of all kinds with her big-hearted, hold-nothing-back approach to rock, blues, R&B, country, folk, spirituals, and funk. Her current project is an opera based on Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*.

Vocals and guitar  
TOSHI REAGON

Violin  
JULIETTE JONES

Toshi Reagon anointed the convening and set the tone for the day.

Good morning. [audience responds] I was ready to go;  
they held me back. [laughter] This is Juliette Jones.

[Applause; music; she sings:]

MY NAME

*The caustic distance,  
Heading for a shore of trouble,  
Where is God?  
Oh, the vacant answer,  
Taken from the air,  
To be in life alone.  
What kind of shelter breaks across the water?  
What kind of captain leads this charge?  
Oh, the sail is open,  
Forced against the wind,  
What was before is gone.*

*My name, my name, my name.  
Who knows my name? Is there a sender?  
My name, my name, my name.  
Who knows my name? I try to remember.*

*We breathe the violence,  
We stand the violence,  
Invasion of my all.  
Oh, the face is open,  
Looking for an answer,  
Be it old or small.  
Caught in my action,  
I was actually doing something,  
I had a plan, I had a place to go,  
Oh, caught in my action,  
Gone away forever.  
I to be no more.*

*My name, my name, my name.  
Who knows my name? Is there a sender?  
My name, my name, my name.  
Who knows my name? I will to remember.  
My name, my name, my name. Where goes my name?* [1]  
[Applause, cheers]

A big part of knowing how to get through, how to execute greatness, is knowing exactly who you are. [She sings:]

#### YOU CAN TALK ABOUT ME

*You can talk about me. You can say what you please.  
Hey, you can talk about me. You can say what you please.  
Well, nothing that you say sure going to worry me.  
Yeah. You can talk about me. You can say what you please.  
Oh, you can talk about me. You can say what you please.  
Nothing that you say sure going to worry me.  
Nothing that you say sure going to worry me.  
Nothing that you say sure going to worry me.* [2]  
[Applause; she sings:]

*Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.*

I wish some people would clap their hands this morning.  
[Audience responds] **Yeah!** [She sings:]

[1] Music and lyrics for *My Name* by Toshi Reagon, ©2012 Black Elephant Music, Brooklyn, NY, administered by TRO-Workshop Productions, Inc.

[2] Music and lyrics for *You Can Talk about Me* by Jessie Mae Hemphill.



[Fig. A] Kerry James Marshall,  
*Voyager*, 1992.

FREEDOM

*I say, freedom,  
When she call my name,  
Oh, I wonder if she'll call again? [Freedom]  
Call again and I'll answer. Oh, yeah.  
Call again and I'll answer. Oh, yeah.*

*I don't think we met before.  
I heard some ol' folks talkin' about you like you  
were the Lord.  
Call again and I'll answer. Oh, yeah.  
Call again and I'll answer. Oh, yeah.*

*I say freedom, you must hang out amongst the stars.  
Kind of hard for you in a world like ours,  
We talk about you night and day,  
Thinking that we'll find a way. [Freedom]*

*Freedom, overhear,  
Oh, I know it's not always clear,  
Some of us, we've had our fill.  
Who's gonna stand up with you?  
I, I, I, I will. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.*

*Oh, you, you sound like someone we really need,  
Soul-searching armies looking for a victory,  
Call again and I'll answer.  
Call again and I'll answer.*

*We lost our water from hurt and greed,  
But I can cry you a river of struggle and need.  
Call again and I'll answer.  
Call again and I'll answer.*

[Freedom]  
40-41 67 69 72-73  
75-76 82 86-87 92 94  
99 111 149 160 203  
214 222 252-253

*I say freedom, you must hang out amongst the stars.  
Kind of hard for you in a world like ours,  
We talk about you night and day,  
We're thinking we might find a way,  
Freedom, overhear,  
Oh, I know it's not always clear,  
Some of us, we've had our fill.  
Who's gonna stand up with you?  
I, I, I, I will. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. [Freedom]*

*Oh, they trying to build more and more,  
They don't even know what they building for.  
Call again and I'll answer. Oh, yeah.  
Call again and I'll answer. Oh, yeah.*

*I'm talking about freedom to have air to breathe.  
Freedom to walk the land beneath your feet.  
Call again and I'll answer. Oh, yeah.  
Call again and I'll answer. Oh, yeah.*

*Hey. Freedom, we talk about you night and day.  
Hey. We thinking we will find the righteous way.  
Who's gonna make the sacrifice?  
Who's gonna live for what is right?  
Who's gonna make room in this circle of ours?  
Who's gonna bring you home from the stars?  
Who's gonna believe that love is real?  
Who's gonna stand up for you?  
I, I, I, I will. I will. I will. Hey, yeah. I, I, I, I will. I will.  
I'm talking about freedom.  
Hey, yeah. I, I, I, I will [sustained applause, cheers]. [3] [Freedom]*

[3] Music and lyrics for *Freedom* by  
Toshi Reagon, ©2015 Black Elephant  
Music, Brooklyn, NY, administered  
by TRO-Workshop Productions, Inc.

## SESSION 1

# Kerry James Marshall & Helen Molesworth

“There has to be a point at which you can no longer tolerate a view of beauty and the projection of desire as a kind of singularly white-oriented ideal.”

— KERRY JAMES MARSHALL



Kerry James Marshall is an artist, educator, and author. He earned a BFA in 1978 from the Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles. After being an Artist in Residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem (1985), Marshall moved to Chicago, where he continues to live and work. Working across a wide range of media, Marshall has exhibited both nationally and internationally.



Helen Molesworth is the Chief Curator at The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles. From 2010 to 2014 she was the Barbara Lee Chief Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) Boston. Her writing has appeared in publications such as *Artforum*, *Art Journal*, *Documents*, and *October*. She is currently at work on a survey exhibition of Anna Maria Maiolino and a large-scale commission with Adrián Villar-Rojas.

HELEN MOLESWORTH So I have been given the task of being Kerry's interlocutor this morning. I have been talking with Kerry for almost twenty years now, which means that we talk about what most old curators and old artists talk about: real estate [laughter]. But we're not going to talk about real estate just yet. If we run out of things to say, we'll get there. But I've prepared three questions, and I have a bonus fourth, if there's time, because Mr. Marshall is a great talker [laughter]. He's a master at talking [laughter]. But the facts of Kerry's biography are reiterated endlessly. He was born in Birmingham, Alabama; moved to Los Angeles; studied at Otis College of Art and Design [formerly Otis Art Institute] with the late, great Charles White [1]; came to New York to be in the Studio Museum in Harlem residency program; met the love of his life, Cheryl Lynn Bruce; and moved to Chicago.

I want to pause for just a minute, because of where we are, on the Studio Museum in Harlem segment of that biography. In the late sixties, William T. Williams and Mel Edwards worked with the Studio Museum to create the artist-in-residence program [applause]. [2] The foresight of those two artists, and of the people who ran the museum at that time, changed the ecology of the art world in this city and, in doing so, slowly and demonstrably changed the ecology of the art world as we know it. In my lifetime in the art world, the two women involved with the Studio Museum were Lowery Sims and Thelma Golden [applause and cheers]. A lot of people are in this room, in no small

[1] Noted artist and educator Charles Wilbert White (1918-1979) cofounded the Arts and Crafts Guild, painted murals for the Federal Arts Project, and founded the Committee for the Negro in Arts, New York, in 1949.

[2] Longtime friends and collaborators, William T. Williams (born 1942) is a painter and educator, and Mel Edwards (born 1937) is a sculptor.

measure due to them and to the artists before them who created the program. It's just nothing short of a pleasure to give them a shout-out from the stage of The Met. So thank you to the Studio Museum [applause and cheers].

Okay. I've got my hotel notepad. I made a little cheat sheet. I'm nervous; there're a lot of you. Okay. Hi, Kerry.

KERRY JAMES MARSHALL Lady Molesworth [laughter].

HM I did that so he would say that in front of everybody [laughter]. I have a nickname. Okay, I thought we'd talk a little bit of shop, and then build up to some of the bigger philosophical ideas at play in your work. So, just a little bit of shoptalk. When we as viewers come to your pictures, they're already made. They're full, they're complete. We understand their complexity. We have a profound relationship to them. But the pictures are so complex. So, I wonder if you could talk just a little bit about how you make your pictures. Do you see the whole image in advance? Do you ever fail when making them? [Creativity] When you fail—if you fail—what do you do to alter that route? I've been to the studio a lot. I've seen pictures midstream, I've seen pictures that you didn't let out of the studio for a long time. I've seen lots of G.I. Joes and Barbie dolls dressed up in amazing costumes. I've seen hundreds of books and magazines strewn about the studio in various ways. But I really still don't quite know how it starts and how you get from beginning to end.

KJM Well, it happens at about midnight [laughter].

HM Good, you'll be home just in time to start painting tomorrow.

KJM [Laughs] Well, it happens at about midnight. I go into a

little trance. And that's when the trolls and the imps and the fairies come in and do all the work. And when I wake up in the morning . . . [laughter]

HM     You're Santa Claus!

KJM     . . . there's a picture there [laughs]. No, there's a picture there. So how does it all happen? Well, I started with that little narrative as a metaphor, because in a way, when I started out, it seemed to symbolize what it meant to be an artist. That making art was somehow—was tantamount to doing magic, and that it was something that happened to artists, that artists sort of went into a trance. They sort of flailed about a little bit or they did a few things, and then somehow this thing sort of magically appeared in front of them, and they had no idea how it came about themselves, much less the ability to tell somebody else how it came about. So I always thought there was a little something wrong with that narrative, because when I was drawing myself, drawing things myself as a child, it never seemed to happen as easily as the kind of magical narrative suggested.

And I think I was, really early on, fortunate to understand that artwork is *work*. I mean, when you make things, you're *making* things. You're making something from nothing, in a way. But that something from nothing is coming from real things. It's real material. You've got paint, you've got pencils, you've got paper, you've got canvas. Those are real things, and you have to somehow understand how to manage those real things. It helps to know something about the properties of those things and what they're capable of doing, and also how they had been utilized to make things before. So, early on, to me, this all seemed to matter a lot. I spent a lot of time early on trying to really come to terms with what those things could do. And, in the process, I think I really began to think about making art the same way

you would think about making just about anything else that you make from raw material. You don't just go dig up steel out of the ground and then put some screws and bolts in it and end up with a car. You start out with a material that looks nothing at all like the steel, that looks nothing at all like the car. And then somebody decides that a car needs to look this way, and that these parts need to fit together a certain way, in order for the thing to run. That takes a lot of time and a lot of effort and a lot of energy. But it also takes a little bit of imagination, because there's no real reason why a car should look a particular way. It can look any way anybody wants it to. So when I start making a work, I always know what I want when I start out. Always, I have an idea.

HM     Is it an idea or a picture?

KJM     Well, the idea is usually accompanied by an image, a certain way of daydreaming what the thing could possibly or potentially look like. So I start with this thing that I think it ought to look like. . . . I start building in all of the things that I think will get me close to the thing that I'm trying to make concrete. I visualize a thing, and then I try to make it concrete. It usually starts, as most artists' work does—especially if you're making work that has images in it—with a notation, with a kind of shorthand note that gives you a sense of what the arrangement of the parts and things is going to be, or what kinds of things are supposed to be in the picture. And then, after that, it's not unlike writing an essay. It's not unlike designing a house, or designing a car, or making a garment, or anything else. First of all, you have to have some idea what its use is going to be. And in the art world, things do have a certain kind of utility. Then, in my case, I set about, in a fairly systematic and strategic way, getting the thing to a place where I can then start making other kinds of decisions about what has to happen there.

The first thing I do is establish a kind of range of images and a set of relationships between things, and then I start adjusting those relationships. It really comes down, in the long run, to calibrating the effect that the work is supposed to have. To do that, you have to have some sort of frame of reference in order to understand how images operate and in what kind of environment, and what kind of treatment the images have to be disposed to in order to get [the work] to function the way you want it to function. So I don't know if that's all you're getting at, but . . .

HM I've got a couple more questions in this register. You talk about the strategic and the systematic, and I think people who've walked through the show understand that this is a very deliberate practice. It's the production of a very deliberate set of types of pictures over time. I'm curious if other modes of being in the studio come into play, such as chance and accident. And again, what happens when you couldn't get things right? Because all we see are these extraordinary final moments—which is totally legitimate. But I'm curious about how you negotiate the moment before that totality, before that finality.

KJM Well, the whole thing is process. I mean, it's all process. I didn't answer one question you posed before—then I'll get to the issues about chance and accident and all those things. But you asked if I ever failed.

HM I did. And I realize that, in this crowd, that could get me in trouble.

KJM Well, I'm going to incite the riot.

HM Thank you [laughter]. Go for it. We need to riot. Let me take you right to Midtown.

KJM [Laughs] Well, so here's my answer: failure is not an option. I mean, in reality, failure is not an option. So, what does it mean to fail? I don't even believe in the concept, basically. What does it mean to fail at a thing? When you fail at a thing, it means you've run out of options, that you have no capacity to imagine another way, or that you don't have a solution to a problem that you've encountered. That's what failure means to me. [Creativity] And to me, it's bigger than just what happens when you go into the studio to do your work. It's a kind of a life posture, that failure. How do you accept failure? See, I don't know how to do that [applause], because I only know how to define another option to get past the barrier that seems to be impeding me. That's the only thing I know how to do [applause]. And I haven't yet encountered a circumstance in which there are not other options. Now, I see how a thing that can be called failure operates in the world. But what failure ends up being, largely, is mostly a failure of imagination more than it is a failure of possibility. It's like existentially, when you arrive in the world, it is already set up, you know? And there's stuff happening in it. There's a period of your life when you are only able to observe, you're only able to see what's going on. As you mature and become more engaged with things that are going on in the world, then you start participating. When you start participating in things, then you start having desires, you start having wants, and you start having needs—and all those things need to be satisfied in one way or another.

HM Wait, hold on a second now. I hear you, but we know from the realm of science, which I know is really important to you, that failure is a key generator of new ideas and possibilities. So, I wonder, is there a space for failure in that regard within the studio practice? Are there pictures that you labored over that took longer to resolve, or pictures

[Creativity]  
46 50-51 93 101 134 148  
183 212-214 221 237

that didn't resolve for some reason that then you decided you liked? Have there been moments when you had to negotiate passages like that, rather than failure writ large?

[Creativity]

KJM See, I don't think I recognize those moments when I'm in the studio myself, because I'm in complete control of everything that goes on there. [Like] the first thing I said: it's process. In a process, there is no fixed resolution, no fixed time for resolution. It's not like, Oh, a picture's supposed to take you two days, twelve hours, sixteen minutes, and forty-five seconds.

HM I've always wondered how long it took him to make them.

KJM [Laughs] Once you set a bunch of things in motion, it's likely that some of those things might not resolve themselves for a year from now. But while that's happening, too, there are other things going on that resolve themselves much more quickly. So it's like when you're in the stream—

HM Right.

KJM You're in a flow, and there's a lot of stuff happening. And you're managing all of those things as a kind of a primary contractor, you know? I remember, I mentioned this to somebody—that I had been reading, in Calvin Tomkins's book *The Bride and the Bachelors*, the interview with Marcel Duchamp. [3] And [Duchamp] mentioned how much he

[3] Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Penguin, 1976), 24.

liked Georges Seurat's work, and he said, "You know, the reason I like Seurat's work, because Seurat makes paintings like a carpenter. He builds paintings like a carpenter." [4]

HM     Right.

KJM     Well, that fits with me. And then, if you come to this thing called chance—I remember reading an interview with John Cage, talking about chance. And in the interview, which struck me, he said, "I'm interested in chance, but I'm not interested in the same kind of chance Duchamp is interested in. I'm not interested in the kind of chance when anything is likely to happen. What I'm interested in is setting up a set of parameters in which the thing that I am looking for is more likely to happen than not. Because I want something. I don't want to see just anything, any old thing." Those things—that approach to everything—seem critical to me. There's a certain kind of self-consciousness in doing that, and there's a certain kind of responsibility that goes with that as well. This is the approach I take. If you think about where we are in the history of making artworks, and the ways in which the practice of making art has been codified and institutionalized in places like The Met, there's a competition going on. There're various things at stake. The things that are at stake have sometimes less to do with the individual artworks per se than they do with the way in which those things function within a much larger social, philosophical, and ideological set of structures. So I take as a part of my philosophy of making art that making artworks themselves is fairly unremarkable. I think that because,

[4] The original quote reads: "The only man in the past whom I really respected was Seurat, who made his big paintings like a carpenter, like an artisan."

if you look back at the record of what human beings have done over the millennia—well, it’s like master’s degrees didn’t determine whether people were able to make artworks or not, you know? That didn’t stop people from making images on rocks, from carving things out of bones, from doing whatever it was, from developing what you could say are installations at gravesites and stuff like that. I mean, who told prehistoric people how they were supposed to do that?

But we are now sort of operating within a social structure wherein the things that are at stake are very different from what was at stake then. And how you engage with the way in which the logical, the impulse to continue making things, is organized and valued, how you engage with that structure has consequences. You agree to participate the moment you go into the studio and start to make another thing. That’s how I see myself working. The things that I’m thinking about while I’m making my work have to do with all of those things, too, as well as with the material reality of the thing that I’m trying to make. And so, from all of the things that you were asking me about in the beginning, I just think that the critical space in which we are operating now seems to be diminishing at a rapid rate. We know that almost anything you can do is possible to do, but whether you should do it or whether it has value at a given time—well, those are the things you’re wrestling with. In the foreword to a book called *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals*, [Kwame] Anthony Appiah wrote, “We who go to museums and art galleries have been trained to accept almost anything as a work of art.” [5] He gave a couple of

[5] Kwame Anthony Appiah, foreword to *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals*, ed. Mary Nooter (New York: Museum for African Art, 1993), 14-15.

examples, like a Coke bottle and some sand and a couple [other] things. And he goes on to say, “But what those things have to be accompanied by is an appropriate, authorizing narrative . . .”

HM Right.

KJM “. . . that gives legitimacy and certifies their value at a given time.” And it really is—it’s not the thing, not the Coke bottle or the sand—it’s the authorizing narrative that really has the most impact, the most power. [Appiah] goes on to say, “Some of these same things, if we saw them anywhere else, we would pass them by like they were trash.” [6]

[Mastery/Mastry] And that’s true.

HM So this is a good segue to my second question. I want to begin with this thing that you’ve been saying recently, that the making of art is not a particularly exceptional activity. I am enthralled by this statement, but I kind of believe it and don’t believe it at the same time. Being someone who doesn’t make works of art, I do experience those of you who do make it as exceptional beings, and I experience the objects themselves as exceptional. Certainly, the reception of your work in this exhibition—we found it in Chicago, we see it in New York, and I’m pretty sure it’s going to happen in Los Angeles—has been overwhelming. If Duchamp is right when he says “the viewer completes the work,” then the quality of many of your viewers this time, so to speak, has been one of awe, wonder, delight, joy, curiosity, and, yes, crying. I have seen people in

[6] Kwame Anthony Appiah is a philosopher, cultural theorist, and novelist. He is currently professor of philosophy and law at New York University.

Chicago and in New York [crying]—I feel like [I’m in] the end of *Blade Runner* all of a sudden. [7]

KJM [Laughs] “I’ve seen—”

HM I have seen tears. I have seen androids crying in front of your paintings [Marshall laughs] in major museums across this country. I’m curious about a couple of things in this register. One is a flat, pedestrian question: how does it make you feel when you see people having that kind of response to your work? I don’t think you have that response to your own work.

KJM I cry all the time [laughter]—no.

HM I have known Kerry James Marshall since 1998, and I have never seen this man tear up once [Marshall laughs]. Are you doing something, Mr. Marshall, to manipulate us, your viewers, in this way [Marshall laughs] on purpose? What is it that you are building into the picture, you think? I mean this seriously. Are tears an effect you’re interested in? Or is it a byproduct of the moment we find ourselves in, in which, clearly, audiences have needed your work in extraordinary ways?

[7] *Blade Runner* (1982) is a sci-fi thriller with a cult following. The monologue they are referring to is from Ridley Scott’s film, delivered by the replicant Roy Batty: “I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die.”

[Portraiture]  
57 61 62 66 207

KJM Whew! Hmm. Yeah, I hear what you say. And I've witnessed it myself.

HM Yeah. It's been amazing.

KJM You know, it's completely unsettling and sort of destabilizing, this idea of making art and its reception. My motto when I started out as an artist was "expect nothing from nobody."

HM That seems to have worked well for you.

KJM [Laughs] No, it's like—I also was encouraged. One of the things that I think stuck with me the most in conversations I had with Charles White was that he said, "You should always make work about stuff that matters, that you think matters." And in the process of making work about things that I think matter, for me, there's something about the amount of time in which I am engaged with the work that gives me a chance to load it up with everything I think, everything I think I know, and everything I feel about the subject that I am making the work about. If the work achieves a certain kind of density, it's because I am completely invested in it while I am making it. And I am. There's this way in which you kind of manage affect and effect, you know? When I'm talking about being self-conscious about the work while it's under construction, I mean it's a belief in the fact that, on the first level, when I'm making a picture, it's a whole picture—all four corners, all four sides, and the interior matter. Charles White said something else to me that really helped. "When you make a picture," he said, "you make the best picture you can. The ideas will take care of themselves." And so the moment I decide that I want to make a picture that has a certain image in it, I give the image its ability to take care of itself,

[Blackness]  
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because I'm going to be with it for a while, and it's going to let me know how all the other aspects of the picture need to be adjusted in order to maximize the effect that the image will have on the spectator when it's encountered.

When I left Otis in 1978, none of this stuff was the way in which artists were supposed to be engaged with an audience. I mean, this is equivalent to being on a stadium stage in some big arena or something. It's like artists don't sell out houses [laughter], you know? You don't do that [applause]. This is not what you expect, so I was never looking for it. I always expected a certain amount of indifference to the work I did. If you look at the selection of images behind [us], those two little collages on the upper right and upper left, those are the kinds of works I was doing before I did the painting *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self* [Fig. A]. And so what I understood while I was making works like those collages really was—you could see it in the work—that there was a fairly limited capacity to get to certain levels of engagement that I thought I wanted to have in my artworks. And the moment I decided that was insufficient for what I wanted to do, that's when I made that painting. I went back to doing figurative work and I made that painting, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, [Portraiture] because I knew that I was never going to get [where I wanted to] with those collages, as much as I enjoyed making them at the time. I clearly wanted the work to do more, be more meaningful—I mean, I was ambitious, to say the least. And when I realized I wasn't going to get where I wanted to go with those kinds of things, I knew I had to go in another direction, a direction that would do two things. One was to solve two problems that I thought needed to be addressed, and the other was [to insist on] a certain kind of presence for the black figure in museums [Blackness] like The Met and like the Los Angeles County Museum of Art,

where I was at the time. And so once that became a part of my mission and my goal and my ambition, I was going to go all in with that. And I was able to go all in because doing those other works and all of the other things that I knew could be done as artworks gave me the capacity to put into those figural works all the things I thought needed to be there in order for the work to achieve the objective I had set—which was [for the works] to find their way into museum collections.

There were two things that I took really seriously when I read about them. One was from the very first art book I ever bought, a book about Leonardo da Vinci. What impressed me about Leonardo most was not the paintings but the notebooks. It was those codices. It was the way in which he used art as a process to learn about other things, you know? That impressed me. I also had a book on Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, the piece that's down in Philadelphia. [8] Duchamp said that the artist's studio should be like a laboratory. All that stuff matters. It meant a lot to me. My favorite art magazine back in the day was *Scientific American* [laughter]. I read an article on the creation of new elements—you know, synthetic elements. So if you take the periodic table, we know that there's [a] certain group of elements that occur naturally in the world. I'm going to give the wrong number, but it's just to make a

[8] Marcel Duchamp's mixed-media assemblage, *Étant donnés*, 1946-66. Philadelphia Museum of Art (Gift of the Cassandra Foundation, 1969, 1969-41-1). The work *Étant donnés* consists of a wooden door through which the viewer peers at a diorama-like scene of a faceless nude woman lying spread-eagle in a landscape.



[Fig. A] Kerry James Marshall,  
*A Portrait of the Artist as a  
Shadow of His Former Self, 1980.*

[Portraiture]  
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point—seventy, eighty-five, or ninety elements that occur naturally in the world. But on the periodic table now, there are about 115 elements. Those other twenty-five or thirty elements are synthetic elements that are synthesized by people who put together the atoms from the various elements that they understood the properties of, to create a new element that had the properties of both those things simultaneously. And the guy who was writing the article [quoted] some of the scientists in there as saying that the amount of energy that's required to produce some of those elements is tremendous. But the value that's achieved from having synthesized those things can't be calculated. It's worth it.

So, when I think about making artworks, there's no amount of time or energy that is too much to put into the work that you're doing in order to achieve the thing you're trying to get at. There's no amount of work or time that's too much. And so I started—all of those things sort of helped me approach the way I think about making art, the same way I thought a particle physicist would approach trying to synthesize a new element. It's like, okay, what do I know about the way these work, these molecules and these atoms? Now, what do I know about what I want? Can I smash two of those things together in a particle accelerator to make them give me the thing that I'm looking for? When I say that making art is unremarkable, part of it is that we've come to this moment now when that's the kind of approach, to me, that seems to be necessary in order to sustain the practice of making art and keep it going into the future. I mean, you've kind of got to treat it like it's particle physics [applause].

[Blackness]  
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HM I'm not sure if it's a really good segue into my third question, but speaking [Marshall laughs] of *Étant donnés*—Fred Moten, the great Los Angeles-based writer, poet,

and intellectual, recently said that he considered black studies, African American studies, to be, in its totality, a critique of Western civilization. [Blackness] I'd like to make an analogy now. Feminism—certain camps of feminism, because we know feminism is not a monolithic field—imagines itself, at its core, to be a critique of patriarchy. Your more recent bodies of work have found you painting the nude black female body. Certainly, when we walk through museums, we are all well aware that we don't see African American people, people of the African diaspora, well represented. But we do see a lot of pictures of naked white women—a lot [laughter]. [Portraiture] And there is a deep tradition of critique about the gaze, about power relations, and about who gets to be an object and who gets to be a subject. I'm curious what your thoughts are about this very joyous, voluptuous display of desire that is evidenced in the female nudes you've been painting recently.

KJM Well, if you really look at the body of nudes in my work, there are very few, actually. I don't do nakedness a lot.

HM No, you do not.

KJM And when I—

HM You almost never do—I mean, I can't believe I'm about to quote Kenneth Clark. But you almost never do nudity. You paint nakedness. [9]

[9] Kenneth Clark, in his 1956 essay "The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form," investigates the history of the nude in art and the difference between nakedness and nudity.

KJM Yeah.

HM The woman with the white bra [Fig. B], she's naked.

KJM Yeah.

HM The bra makes her naked, rather than a traditional idealized nude.

KJM Yeah. Well, so there's a long answer to some of that. Some of it does have to do with a kind of critique of the Western ideal of beauty and desire, and how—I mean, there has to be a point at which you can no longer tolerate a view of beauty and the projection of desire as a kind of singularly white-oriented ideal. [Portraiture] You can't keep doing that [applause]. Now, there's a way . . . As part of a critique, you could say, Well, they shouldn't have been doing that anyway, but that doesn't get you anywhere.

HM It hasn't stopped anybody yet [laughter].

KJM Or you can have something to say about it, by putting alongside it a kind of parallel objective that does something different. So often in some of the nudes, like the pinups that I do, there's a kind of refusal that goes along with the presentation of the body, in some of those works. It's a way of reversing what tends to happen in these kinds of pinup-girl models, where the objectification is an offering rather than a negotiation. And I think we first started to get a sense of this kind of negotiation [in Édouard Manet's *Olympia*]. If you take Manet's *Olympia* [Fig. C], you're in a negotiation with the subject in that picture. You're not just there to take your pleasure. So, in most of the paintings that I do, there's a kind of negotiation also. They're not just there to give you your pleasure;

they acknowledge that you want it, but there's also a kind of refusal to surrender completely. So that's part of it. That's why the show I did at David Zwirner Gallery in London was called *Look See*. [10] It was partly about this way in which we negotiate our relationship to the subject in a picture. Often, it's a subject in a picture who seems to have no independent psychology from the psychology of the spectator. What I wanted to do in a lot of those pictures was give back to the subject in the picture their own psychology, independent of the spectator's psychology. So that's something that I do, that I at least attempt to do with the work [applause]. A part of the way I think about this, too, has to do with what has become one of my favorite quotes from W. J. T. Mitchell, who teaches at the University of Chicago and was the editor of *Critical Inquiry* journal. In his book *What Do Pictures Want?* his answer is the most succinct way you could possibly say it, I think: "Pictures want to be kissed." He hits it even harder when he says, "Images don't only express our desires, they teach us how to desire in the first place." [11]

HM Right.

KJM You could take that back through some Lacanian sort of development from the mirror stage to the imaginary and all that. [12] I mean, you could take that through a psycho-

[10] *Look See*, featuring recent paintings by Marshall, was on view at David Zwirner Gallery in London from October 11 through November 22, 2014.

[11] W. J. T. Mitchell, preface to *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[12] Marshall is referring to the French psychiatrist Jacques Lacan. Lacan coined the term "mirror stage" to refer to the developmental phase when infants learn to recognize themselves in a mirror. He also described "the imaginary" as the field of images, imagination, and deception.



[Fig. B] Kerry James Marshall,  
*Untitled (Beach Towel)*, 2014.



[Fig. C] Édouard Manet,  
*Olympia*, 1863.

[Portraiture]

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[Freedom]

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75-76 82 86-87 92 94  
99 111 149 160 203  
214 222 252-253

[Blackness]

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analytical view and come to understand something about how we really do engage and interact with images. But I do believe that's completely true, that images teach us how to desire in the first place. This is why, when we come to the museum, all our concepts and ideas of beauty have everything to do with those Venuses and those three Graces and all of those images that got produced over the centuries. I mean, that's how we learned. Then it gets reinforced by every fashion magazine you see, by the actress as the ingenue in the movies we go to. That's how it's done, through images. Those images structure our relationship to these ideas and ideals, before we even know it. On the one hand, you could say, Well, the presence of black people in the Western Hemisphere is a critique of Western civilization in itself [applause] [Blackness]—just the presence of black people here. [Portraiture] But then, at a certain point, you've got to take some responsibility for it and not shame somebody into thinking that they're not supposed to really like the things they like to look at. That doesn't work. But what you do have to try to do is match the power and the presence and the authority of those things by producing images that do one better. I mean, that really is how I think it works.

HM     Alright, I can see the clock.

KJM    Ooh, we've got three minutes.

HM     I'm going to go for my bonus question [Marshall laughs]. One of the things your work has done is take the concept of beauty and put it under an extraordinary degree of compression and pressure. Your project shows us how much we believe in the idea of beauty; it is a timeless category with major truth claims attached to it. Most of us feel that we know beauty when we see it. However, your work over the last thirty years has shown us that beauty as a category,

and the truth claims that attend to it, are way more capacious than we had imagined. Hence, I want to ask you about another value that gets a lot of truth claims attached to it, the value we hold most dear—the value of freedom. I’m curious if, after thirty years of painting, after sixty years of living, after thinking deeply about the world in the way that you have, if freedom, for you, is a transhistorical value that doesn’t change over time, or whether freedom is a value that does change over time. And if it is a value that changes over time, or if it isn’t a value that changes over time, would you mind speaking a little bit about what you think it is now? [Freedom]

KJM     Whew [Laughs].

HM     I told you it was the bonus question.

KJM     I have no idea what you’re talking about [laughter].

HM     I know you know that’s not true. I don’t believe you. What does freedom mean to you now?

KJM     Well, see, you probably asked that question because lately, I have been pontificating on the idea of freedom quite a bit, because I’ve made the claim that I have finally become free. So, that must mean something specific to me. I’ll take it on three levels, and we’ll finish up on the third level with the real estate that you were talking about [laughter] at the very beginning of this presentation.

HM     I knew we could get there.

KJM     [Laughs] So, on the first level—what is freedom really? For me, freedom is the ability to make a choice, to choose one thing as opposed to another. [Freedom] That’s freedom.

[Freedom] 40-41 67 69 72-73  
 75-76 82 86-87 92 94  
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[Mastery/Mastry] 54 68 99 106 110-111  
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 204-205 207 210 212 221

So in the art world, for me, if you look at the things that are on the board behind me, that woman on my upper right, your left, that's my kindergarten teacher. Her name was Mary Hill, and she—I make the acknowledgment almost every time I speak—is in some ways directly responsible for me being as interested in art as I am today, from something that she didn't quite understand when she did it. When I was in kindergarten in Birmingham, at Holy Family School, she was the kindergarten teacher. She made a scrapbook of cards and Valentine's Day cards and images cut from *National Geographic* magazines and things like that. That book, looking at that scrapbook, made me the artist I am today. There's a piece that's not here in The Met show, but it will be back in California, called *Baobab Ensemble* [Fig. D]. It's a collection of clippings that I've been making from books and magazines and encyclopedias and things for a long time, a lot of art images and various other things.

But she made me—that scrapbook made me into a compulsive image collector. [Mastery/Mastry] And literally, I was doing it when I was in California, but when I got to Chicago it was a gold mine. There was a chain of second-hand stores in Chicago called Village Thrift. There were about, I don't know, ten, fifteen of them around the city. But you could go in there, Village Thrift, and you could buy . . . It's like books were only a nickel. Any book. So it was five for a quarter. It didn't matter whether it was big or whether it was a paperback. They were five for a quarter. I bought thousands [laughter]. But I bought them to cut them up—to cut them up. So I have this incredible image bank that I would simply look through. But while I was looking through it, I was also getting history, because all those images were accompanied by information. That was hugely important. So when I started school, I had gone to the library when I was first introduced to the library in the

third grade. I looked at every single art book that was in the library—every one, indiscriminately. And I was impressed by everything I saw. Because I was impressed by everything I saw, I wanted to know how to do everything that was there. So I spent time trying to learn how to do everything that I saw in a book. Then, I was in junior high school during the golden age, when they had industrial art shops. So I did plastics, I did electronics, I did woodworking, I did metalwork, I did auto body and fender. When I was in fifth grade, they let us go into the plastics shop during the summer. Any kid who lived in the neighborhood could go there. You didn't have to pay a dime for the material or anything. But I learned how to take a piece of raw material and turn it into something that somebody might want. And with that, I was never afraid of anything that existed on the planet, because I knew that everything there was made by somebody, and it came through that process. That process liberated me. That knowledge liberated me. Those experiences made me free. [Freedom] So in that regard, yes, what all of those things represent—this is even just a fraction of things. But those plastics, plastics, plastics, that vase that was made about the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. That's a vacuum-formed plastic vase that I made myself because I knew how to do it. And it's the same with every one of those other things. This was from techniques and craft that I learned when I was eleven years old, taught by the man, Mr. Acosta, who ran the plastics shop at Carver Junior High School. So it's like your imagination operates on fuel that had been put there a long time ago. When you know how things work, then you are capable of imagining how other things can work. That's what I think made me free. And there is nothing that happens in the art world that I can't do. Nothing. [applause] [Freedom]

In the other slide, you'll see there's a set of coins in an installation. Now, those are things that I had somebody



[Fig. D] Kerry James Marshall,  
*Baobab Ensemble*, 2003.



else make for me, because of the scale of them and the size and all of that stuff. So that right there, those coins—that’s a piece called *99 cent piece*. So it’s ninety-nine cents in change, but subtitled *One hundred thirty-six thousand dollars in change* [laughter]. And that’s because the discrepancy between the image and what it cost to produce it is the point of the piece itself. It cost \$136,000 to have somebody make that. Well, now, that’s another level of freedom. [Freedom] One of the things that you also have to negotiate in the art world is that it’s expensive to make stuff like that. And everybody can’t do it. Everybody can’t do it. When you’re in an art world that is attached to a market, where the production of things has to sometimes give you a return on the value of that investment, well, that also limits the kinds of things you are able to do. People don’t throw a whole lot of money at stuff that you can’t get nothing out of. But I have arrived [he chuckles; applause and cheers] at a moment in my life and career as an artist when I could make something like that simply because I wanted to see what it looked like, and not expect any kind of return on the expense. The payoff is that I know what it looks like now, because I’ve seen it. And I know what it can do. That’s the reason why I made it. But it also sort of engages with a certain way in which the commodified art object exists within the art world. So it answers a series of questions about the evolution of that kind of idea, too. If you begin with Pop art and you look at the way in which commodities, common commodities from the real world, have [been] elevated to the level of artworks—like a Campbell’s soup can, a Brillo box, and stuff like that—and then you come the next step from that, you look at Jeff Koons, who took some dollar-store objects and made them into stainless steel, high-end sort of products and stuff like that . . . Well then, you think, what’s the next step in the evolution of the artwork as a commodity? To me—[this was] a part

[Freedom]

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of the reason for that piece. The next step is not to take objects like plastic bottles and make them into high-end artworks. If it's about the money, do the money. Make the money into the artwork. That's the next step. And you can treat that the same way you would treat any kind of sculpture. So the idea initially was to make three versions of that, but to do them in all of the classic art materials. There was to be a marble version, this is the gilded version, and then there's a naturalistic version, where the quarters are silver and the pennies are copper and all that stuff. So you take those three things: there's naturalism, there's idealism, and then there's classicism in the way the materials [are] represented. But anyway, but that's another level of freedom. And then the last level of freedom—here we get to the real estate. [Freedom]

HM     Number three.

KJM     Number three. So when we moved back to Chicago in December of 1987—Cheryl and I left New York, went back to Chicago—we were as near [to] poor as you could possibly be. I had less than \$300 in my pocket. Before we settled in Chicago, after unloading the U-Haul, we went down to South Carolina with Julie Dash, Arthur Jafa, and a small crew of people who were beginning work on *Daughters of the Dust* [applause]. [13] We went down to do

[13] *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), directed by Dash and produced by Dash, Jafa, and Steven Jones, was the first feature-length film directed by an African American woman to be distributed theatrically in the United States. Marshall's wife, actor Cheryl Lynn Bruce, appeared in the film.

some setups and to shoot a few scenes that Julie could use for a trailer to raise the money to make the film.

After that, I dropped Cheryl off in Chicago, and I came back to New York so I could raise enough money for my own move to Chicago. While Cheryl was at her mother's house, I lived in the YMCA, in a room on 50th Street and Indiana, until we got married. Then we got an apartment in Hyde Park for a time. While Cheryl was still living at her mother's, I moved out of the Y and into the apartment. I turned that apartment into a studio space. With the work that I made in that apartment I had an exhibition at Koplin Gallery in L.A. I used that same work to apply for a National Endowment for the Arts grant, back when they were giving artists \$20,000 NEA grants. I got the grant. I used that money to get my first studio in Chicago. But I also used some of that money for the down payment on a house I had seen listed in a small local newspaper. When I rode over to see what it looked like, of course, it was a dump [laughter]. But I said, "I think we can do something with this." The house had a full basement, a first and second floor, and a full attic. Because I had learned how to do carpentry, plumbing [applause], roofing—I could do the work to make it habitable. I took out a twenty-foot section of the roof and put down a new roof. I made windows from scratch.

HM You blew the glass yourself.

KJM Nearly [laughter]. Cheryl and I did the demolition. The two of us did demolition on that place. I've got the pictures to prove it. But what that house did was provide us both with a base. The house was cheap—paid for in two years out of pocket. That house gave us a place to live with plenty of space and a yard, but we could do it debt-free. Debt-free. Debt-free. Can I say it again? [laughter]

[Freedom]

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Debt-free [applause]. And being debt-free is freedom

[applause and cheers]. [Freedom]

So we did all of that. After we gave up the apartment, we lived in my studio at the time, the one that I got with the NEA grant. [It] was a 350-square-foot office space on Wabash Avenue. We were in there—me and Cheryl and two cats [laughter]. But when my father was diagnosed with cancer, it was time to make a move. I brought him and my mother out to Chicago. I spent all night [working]. I worked overnight. I put in plumbing and put in a bathroom, put in a sink, put in a tub. And I brought my father and my mother out to Chicago to stay with us in that house, under construction. They were so pleased, and that meant so much. So the story gets better. When I got to Chicago, I stopped in at City Hall to see if Chicago had a sweat equity program like one I knew about in New York. They did not. What they did have was a thing called the Adjacent Neighbors Land Acquisition Program. At the time, if there was a vacant lot next to a house that you owned, and it was owned by the city, you could petition the city to put it up for sale. But the only people who could bid on it were houses that were directly adjacent to it. So, because we didn't have a house, we didn't have anything. But when we finally did buy that house and paid for it, I remembered that program. We went to our alderman, who was Bobby Rush, who had been the defense minister of the Black Panther Party in Chicago. He was our alderman. We went to Bobby Rush and said, "We've got this lot next door. We want to buy it." He said, "Okay, we can put it up for sale." We were the only people who could bid on it, because our house was the only house next to it—everything north of us was vacant. [The] minimum bid was \$300. So this is how, when you are free [chuckles]—this is how you build freedom, too, just like you build anything else [applause]. All I want to say is that freedom is not

conferred. Freedom is assumed. You assume you are free. You take it, you do it, you act it, you behave it, you implement it. That’s what freedom is [applause and cheers].

[Freedom]

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**Alondra Nelson**

**“The preservation of the soul, of the body, for honor and love becomes the work of activists and of artists like Marshall.”**



Alondra Nelson is an award-winning author and Dean of Social Science at Columbia University in New York City. She is an interdisciplinary social scientist, whose lectures, articles, and books explore the intersections of science, medicine, and social inequality.

## BLACK ANGELS

I am an interdisciplinary social scientist who writes about the intersections of science, technology, and social inequality. I have loved science all my life, but I realized in college that I was more interested in studying science from a vantage point other than the laboratory. In my work, I have written most recently about the political use of direct-to-consumer genetic ancestry testing and also about the Black Panther Party's activism around disparities in treatment of genetic disease. So, I was absolutely delighted to hear Kerry James Marshall say that one of his favorite art magazines was *Scientific American*. [1] Civil rights activists and Black Power activists figure repeatedly in Marshall's work; it's gone underappreciated that these activists are kinds of muses for his work. Marshall and I share overlapping, idiosyncratic interests in the intersections of science and race.

Kerry James Marshall is a conjurer of history. He asks us to remember, to remember the long fight for freedom. *Souvenir I* [Fig. A], from 1997, is one of his well-known works, likely familiar to most. Floating above a picture commemorating assassinated leaders President John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert, and Martin Luther King Jr., are civil rights martyrs: Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner, who were murdered during the Freedom Rides [2]; Freedom Fighters Medgar Evers and

[2] Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner, who were helping African Americans in Mississippi register to vote, were abducted and murdered in June 1964. The Freedom Rides were a series of political protests by civil rights activists dubbed "Freedom Riders," who traveled by bus through the American South in 1961 and subsequent years.

[1] See the conversation between Marshall and Molesworth, page 60.



[Fig. A] Kerry James Marshall,  
*Souvenir I*, 1997.



Malcolm X; Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins, and Denise McNair, the four girls killed in 1963 at the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church; and slain Black Panther Party members Mark Clark and Fred Hampton. They all dwell together with the large Black angel who might seem to be tending to heroes in heaven.

Like some of Marshall's other works, *Souvenir I* features one of his now iconic ebony figures—in this case, a Black angel with golden wings, whose deep, rich hues render tangible the fact of blackness and remind us of the fullness and depth of Black life, the full spectrum that Marshall uniquely and marvelously depicts, and that he propels into the art-historical canon. Part of what Marshall offers us in this full spectrum of Black life are images of how we deal with violence and death, of how we think about spirits stolen and lives taken too soon. Marshall's work is a meditation on, among other things, ghosts and angels, the alternate registers of Black life that often sadly accompany the battle for human rights and human freedom.

[Blackness] [Freedom]

This theme of death as the price of insisting on life lived freely carries over into another image that depicts the life of Fred Hampton and also marks a shift, I think, in Marshall's civil rights visual lexicon. That is *Black Painting* (2003) [Fig. B]. We're in a bedroom. There's the iconic flag of the Black Panther Party hanging in the upper right. Two people are in a bed, a man and a woman—or are these ghosts? It's December 4, 1969. We are with Fred Hampton, leader of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party, and his partner in life, Deborah Johnson, who's eight-and-a-half months pregnant with their child. Black Panther Party member Mark Clark, we will learn later, stood outside the room. Chicago police officers would burst through the door, killing Hampton. Although police would claim that Hampton's violence instigated this ambush-murder,

[Freedom]

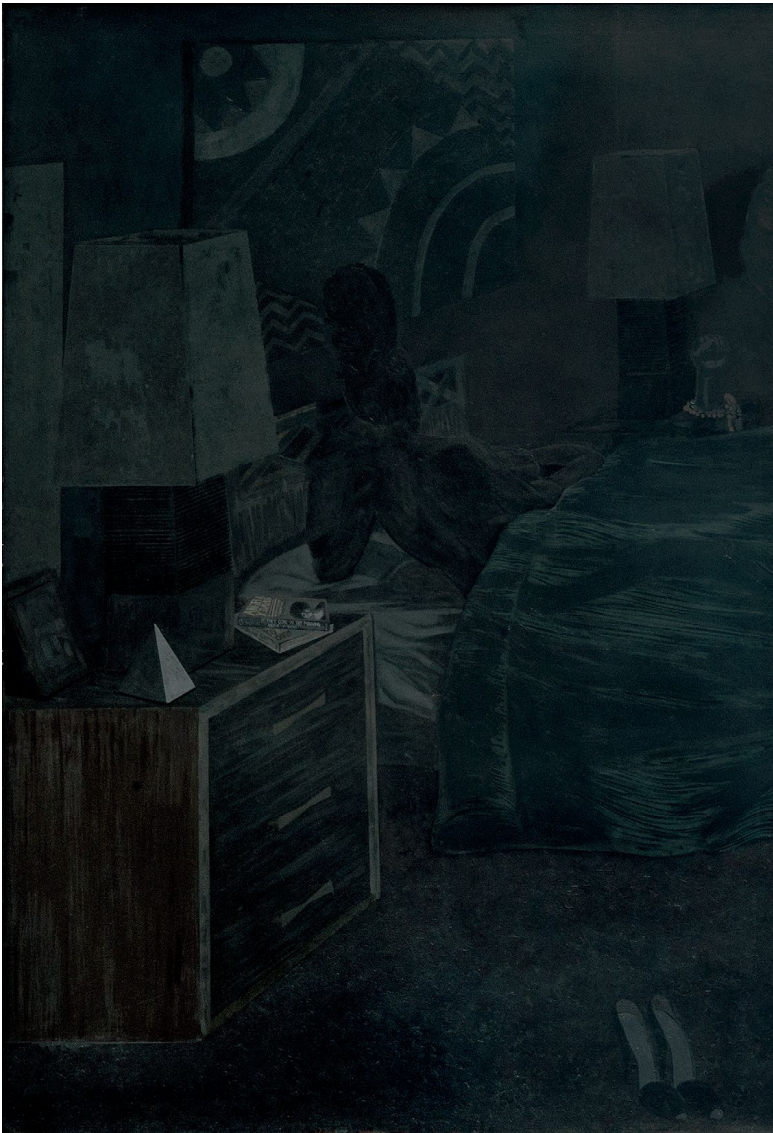
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[Blackness]

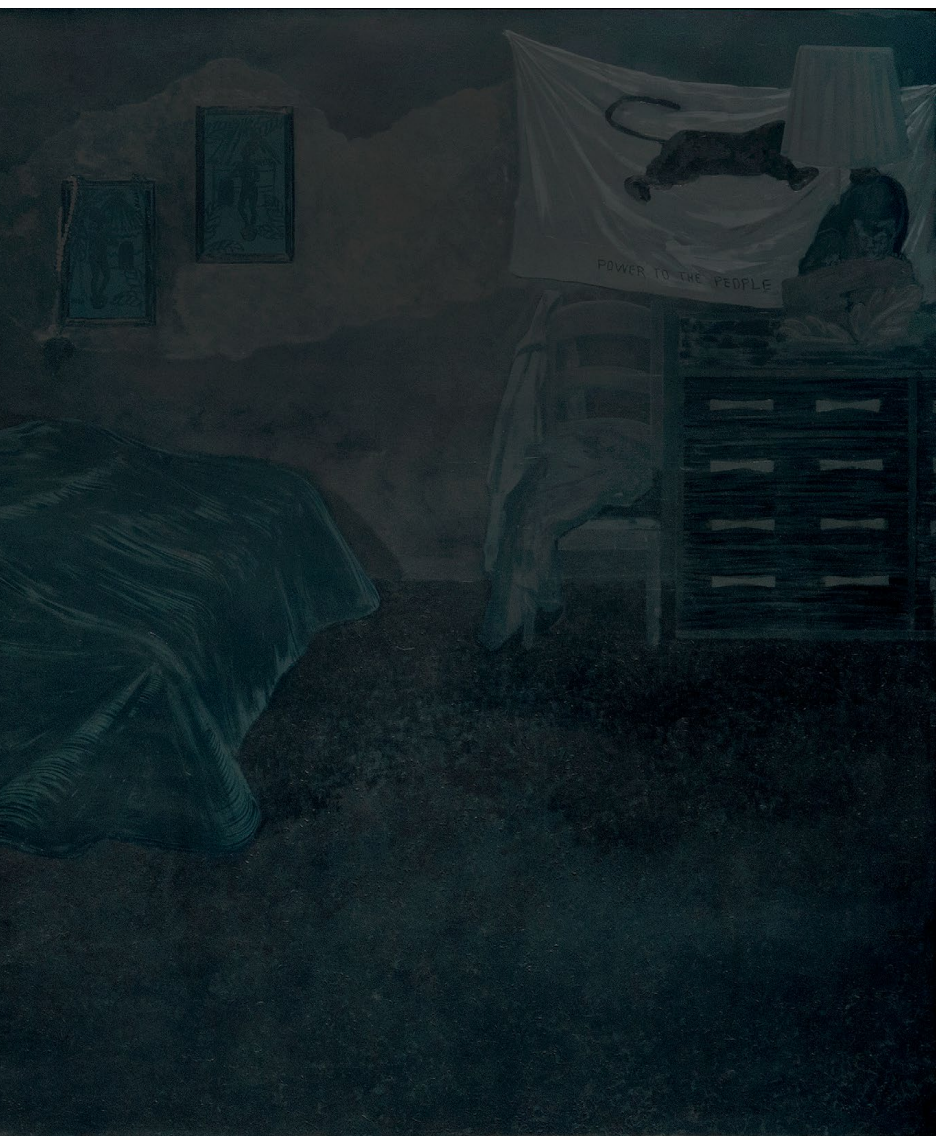
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he was killed at rest and in bed, having been slipped sleeping pills by an FBI informer who had infiltrated the Chicago Black Panther Party chapter. And Hampton was, therefore, completely disarmed. The FBI, under the orders of J. Edgar Hoover, used a concerted program of disinformation among the Panthers and other Civil Rights groups called COINTELPRO. This insidious state-sanctioned disinformation campaign quickened the demise of the Black Panther Party and precipitated the loss of some of its members. In later years, this disinformation campaign would obscure the breadth and complexity of the Party's work, making it hard to discern their full story. As we struggle today to measure the cost of fake news, of propaganda, it is important to take a lesson from the damage that has already been done. We know that African Americans are the canaries in the coal mine of U.S. society, the first to bear the brunt of social and economic injuries. This is true of disinformation campaigns as well. The Panthers taught us that. Kerry James Marshall's work teaches us that.

In *Black Painting*, blackness is more metaphorical and impressionistic than in some of Marshall's other works [Blackness], and certainly more so than in *Souvenir I*. Here Marshall makes somewhat of a departure from the style that we have become familiar with, a style that is notable for its clarity of representational resolution and its sometimes pictorial quality, as well as its persistent vividness. Here, those properties are veiled. This new technique, this shift in visual register, tells a different account of Black life that helps to complete or fill in the broad spectrum that he envisions and helps us to see. What we might see here in *Black Painting* is the veil as an aesthetic departure that resonates with the strategic innovation that marked the audacious activism of the Black Panther Party. Their activism insisted on Black humanity, over and against a culture of treatment of Blacks that journalists and sociologist



[Fig. B] Kerry James Marshall,  
*Black Painting*, 2003.



Ida B. Wells described as “dwarfing the soul and preserving the body.” [3] This culture preserved the Black body for labor and tedium, but not for love and honor. [Blackness]

The preservation of the soul, of the body, for honor and love becomes the work of activists and of artists like Marshall. [Freedom]

The Black Panther Party took up the urgent work of Black thriving and flourishing in October 1966 in Oakland, California, proclaiming to serve the people, body and soul. And we might think of this as a reworking of what Wells identifies as the relationship, the damaging paradox, between body and soul that was notable in chattel slavery. The Party responded to discrimination faced by Black communities that were surveilled and impaired by institutions and individuals that were supposed to protect and serve and heal. Citing the industrialization, poverty, stubborn segregation, racist law-and-order policing, and deficient services in Oakland, Chicago, and elsewhere, the Party addressed barriers to equality. A cornerstone of its work was policing the police, as well as creating community service programs. The Party’s array of innovative serve-the-people programs held transformative potential. This was a strategic innovation in their activism. And this was a perspective that was encapsulated in the words of Fred Hampton when he described the work of the Party, saying, “First you have free breakfasts, then you have free

[Freedom]  
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[Blackness]  
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[3] Ida B. Wells, *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings* (Chicago, 1895).

[4] Fred Hampton, quoted in Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 58.

medical care, then you have free bus rides, and soon you have freedom!” [4] [Freedom] As Hampton conveyed, the Party prized these community-based programs as essential elements of its wider social and human justice campaign. The Party’s activism extended a long struggle against forms of oppression that act quite literally on Black bodies with impunity, in such ways as to hamper flourishing, in the depths of night—as on that Chicago evening, December 4, 1969, when a veil descended. This is a battle that stretches back to the era of slavery, when people of African descent were deemed fractional beings, three-fifths of a human, and when the fitness of Black enslaved bodies for work took precedence over their livelihood [Blackness], a devaluation that faces a wall of refusal, that endeavors to cast beyond the boundary of the human. This is what Kerry James Marshall’s work, all of it, confronts. Full humanity is what his work insists upon.

W. E. B. Du Bois was reconciled to life behind the veil. You might recall this passage from *The Souls of Black Folk*: “Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows.” [5] Marshall powerfully shows what the costs of the veil are for visionaries who see and seek a better life. His work shows us what can happen to people like Hampton, who try to make a way out of no way, who refuse life behind the veil. Namely, what happens when

[5] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 2.

escaping the veil of racism may bring the veil of death closer still. The stakes are high and leave communities strewn with ghosts. And Kerry James Marshall shows us that our ancestors are angels, too [applause].

Joe Hall

**“Agency, like art, is not a static state of being but a continually emerging way of life.”**



Joe Hall is founder and president of Ghetto Film School (GFS), an award-winning nonprofit that educates, develops, and celebrates the next generation of great American storytellers. He's collaborated with 21st Century Fox, The Frick Collection, Google, the New York City Department of Education, Wieden + Kennedy, and many others to support GFS's diverse creative talent. Hundreds of graduates work throughout the film and creative industries.

Good afternoon. I'd like to take a moment to have us all rest our minds and think of a fifteen-year-old girl. We'll say she's in Crown Heights, [Brooklyn,] but we know this girl from a lot of places. She's that girl whose smile lights up a room, but who is also very serious. She's an old soul. Her kindergarten teacher thinks, "What am I going to do with this forty-five-year-old girl?"

She's just left the Kerry James Marshall retrospective this past Monday. After seeing Marshall's painting *Untitled*, 2009 [Fig. A], her creative soul is set on fire and, perhaps for the first time in her life, she has an idea of what she is meant to do—and that is to be an artist. So that young fifteen-year-old girl does her research, and she goes to a publicly funded program. Maybe we'll say it's on Flatbush Avenue, Eastern Parkway. It's a publicly funded program supported by government and foundation grants where, upon her first engagement with this organization, she will answer questions about her eating habits, her school attendance. Has she ever witnessed violence in her home or her neighborhood? This arts program is built on outcomes like lower obesity, lower teen-pregnancy rates, higher math scores, or less substance abuse for its participants. I'm not making this up. There will be very little attention, if any, on craft, brushstroke, techniques, or her worldview as an artist.

Since I have a somewhat tangential relationship to Hollywood, through the Ghetto Film School, I'll pause here for a tagline, because every pitch in Hollywood has a tagline. The tagline is, when the artists are young, black, and brown, we *must* not call it an arts program.

The untitled image behind me [Fig. A] that inspired our fifteen-year-old girl and others positions art making as an act of agency. There's no noise here. She's working very hard with purpose, intention, and pure motivation. Art making allows us to see the complicity of others in explicit and implicit contexts. Agency, like art, lets us have many

answers to a single question. At the Ghetto Film School, our teenage students are working hard in the South Bronx and MacArthur Park by engaging the art of storytelling through the moving image. As an act of agency, art making cannot stand still. Agency, like art, is not a static state of being but a continually emerging way of life. [Freedom]

Our nonprofit started with a mission to educate, develop, and celebrate the next generation of great American storytellers. It was this lofty goal that built our rigorous fellows program, supports our continuing organizational growth, and also supported our expansion to Los Angeles three years ago. But what do these great American storytellers do? They surprise us. They present the reality of being young, of being alive. And, along the way, they complicate all kinds of things for the rest of us.

Our curricular practices and support structures are derived from the core value of students' autonomous agency over content. We are diametrically opposed to the thousands of programs across the United States that falsely claim to introduce black and brown teens to art, using pre-determined content and focus as a means to highlight local community deficits and, more unfortunately, further establish the young participants as the at-risk, disadvantaged raw material for the social service industrial complex [applause]—the social service industrial complex that is running things in so-called burning and crime-infested inner cities. Content from this system, therefore, reinforces a reality as something that cannot be changed and remains inescapable. These interventions have acceptable labels—empowerment, community building, self-esteem, and the beloved social justice—because, remember the tagline, when the artists are young, black, and brown, we must not call it an arts program. Why? Because we might fuck around and make more artists, dangerous black and brown artists with full agency of their creativity, reimagining the

[Freedom]

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[Creativity]

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freedom of a world united in its individuality and a new historical narrative. [Creativity] Our teachers understand that they cannot control a narrative that has yet to be imagined. And so our students are defiantly making absurdist comedies, period pieces, foreign films, and horribly sappy love stories—I mean, horribly sappy love stories [laughter]. Yet these are radical acts, political and powerful, as they continuously confront the historical narrative. The students' agency over story is our organization's core activist practice.

In 2015 one of those students, sixteen-year-old Alexi Gonzalez, and her all-female crew—I was so happy, this was the first time it was an all-female group selected by the students—produced a short film called *Demon's Gate*. And I'd like to read you something from her script:

EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING.

The little girl stops at the stoop of an apartment building. She opens up the box with an out-of-breath smile. Just as she reaches for the food, her father pulls her by the hair and throws her to the pavement. The little girl scratches her lip and scrapes her knee. She curls up into a ball. Her father grabs the box and eats the sushi. He raises his hand to hit his daughter. She flinches. The daughter stops and laughs violently. He turns around to walk into the apartment. His body droops down to a slump as he coughs. He eventually crashes to his knees. He wheezes and gasps for air. His eyes are bulging red. His wheezing silences to death. The little girl looks at her father in shock. She realizes her father's prostitute Sakura, a tired but strikingly attractive woman in her late twenties, is standing, staring at her dead client. She has a bruise on her arm. Sakura goes through his pockets and finds some cash. She gives half to the little girl and puts the rest inside of the red box where the sushi was. She exits.

The finished work that is *Demon's Gate* is a sophisticated, stylish, highly accomplished MFA-level project. Before the premiere screening at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, I sent it to many advisors and supporters, proud that, again, it was an all-female crew for the first time. And the early responses to this film were “Are these girls okay?,” in reference to the violent story, complete with our

neo-heroine carving her victim tally each time into her thigh, which is actually an ancient samurai ritual, proof of Alexi's research and respect of cultural difference. Later, surprised by those responses, I sent the exact same link and said it was [written by] "Alex" and an all-boy crew. Responses were in the range of, "Dude, this is so David Fincher" to "Looks amazing. Great homage to Japan. Job well done." Where Alexi's film generated concerns for her and her team's mental health, "Alex" was celebrated for doing what boys do best. But Alexi's film cannot be ignored. It speaks with a voice that no one expected from a young woman, an activist young woman.

At the end of the day, I'm not so concerned if a private organization like the Academy [of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences] is giving more awards to filmmakers outside its circle of friends. What should concern all of us in this room today is what has been happening in the public realm, which is on fire—the public realm that shapes the opportunities of Alexi Gonzalez and her peers long before they start their creative careers, let alone think about awards.

As Philip Kennicott recently wrote in the *Washington Post*:

The public realm—as opposed to commercial entertainment, including politics as currently practiced—produces ideas, information, and emotional states that can't be predicted, or controlled. It fosters the research that challenges venerable assumptions about the world; it generates the data that can point to the failings and blindness of people in power, and the often invisible frailty of our world; and it offers us ideas about the well-lived and ethical life that can't be contained within the market's understanding that winning is everything and consumption is paradise. It also creates webs of dependency and connection, on each other, on books, on art, on knowledge, that are, paradoxically, the wellsprings of genuine freedom. [1] [Freedom]

[1] Philip Kennicott, "A Trump Attack on the Arts Would Be More Than Just Symbolic," *Washington Post*, January 19, 2017.



[Fig. A] Kerry James Marshall,  
*Untitled*, 2009.

The activist practice at Ghetto Film School is the creation of stories by more and more different people within the public realm. We develop the next generation of great American storytellers, with the hope that one day they tell a story that we—their teachers, parents, mentors, and larger community—have not yet dreamed. Their incredible gift to all of us is not slimmer waistlines or higher math scores, or whatever other nonsense is coming out of that social service industrial complex, but the magic in their imagination.

So let me say in closing, when you speak to that fifteen-year-old girl in Crown Heights, Harlem, South L.A., or Watts, and you find out that she loves movies and wants to learn filmmaking, the art of filmmaking, then you send her to Ghetto Film School. I promise you we will hold her close, train her, nurture her, and love her, not knowing where she will take us next. Thank you [applause and cheers].

**Michael Shadlen**

**“Art celebrates, in a sense,  
the very cognitive facul-  
ties that we use every day  
to deal with the world  
and with life.”**



Michael Shadlen is a neuroscientist, neurologist, and jazz guitarist. He studies the brain mechanisms that underlie decision making, visual perception, and timing. His research combines neurophysiological, behavioral, and computational techniques. He is professor, Department of Neuroscience, Zuckerman Mind Brain Behavior Institute, Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Columbia University, New York City, and a member of the National Academy of Medicine.

[Mastery/Mastery]

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[Freedom]

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It's such a pleasure to be here, to share this day with Kerry James Marshall and the other participants, and with all of you. Behold the painting *Untitled (Studio)*, 2014 [Fig. A]. In this rich depiction of Kerry's mastery, my eye is drawn to one thing, as I'm sure all of your eyes are—and that is this brain [laughter]. I'm going to share with you in the next few minutes some ideas about how the brain works: how it creates, how it thinks, and how mastery might be understood in this framework. And here is the basic idea: a thought is not a processing of information, as computer scientists would tend to render it, but rather an interrogation, a dialogue between the brain and the world, the brain and memory, the brain and the future. The interrogation involves questions about possible acts—things we do with our bodies—and the answers build on expectancy. Mastery expands the repertoire of interrogation, both the questions that we can learn to ask and the answers that build on them. [Mastery/Mastery]

You might wonder how to study this scientifically. The way to do that is to boil it down to something that even simpler animals can do, and that is, they make decisions. I view decision making as a window onto cognition. If you imagine trying to decide between two paths, left and right, it invites evaluation, prospection, probabilistic reasoning, strategizing, and planning—imagining yourself in the future and what the various values are for either choice, whether you will be better or worse off if you choose left or right.

Most animals make decisions that serve their basic instincts, like foraging and exploration—finding food, finding a mate—but for humans, the decisions we make extend beyond survival, to things like creativity and improvisation. Kerry touched on this when he said that the ability to make decisions was the first level of freedom. [1] [Freedom]

[1] See the conversation between Marshall and Molesworth, page 69.



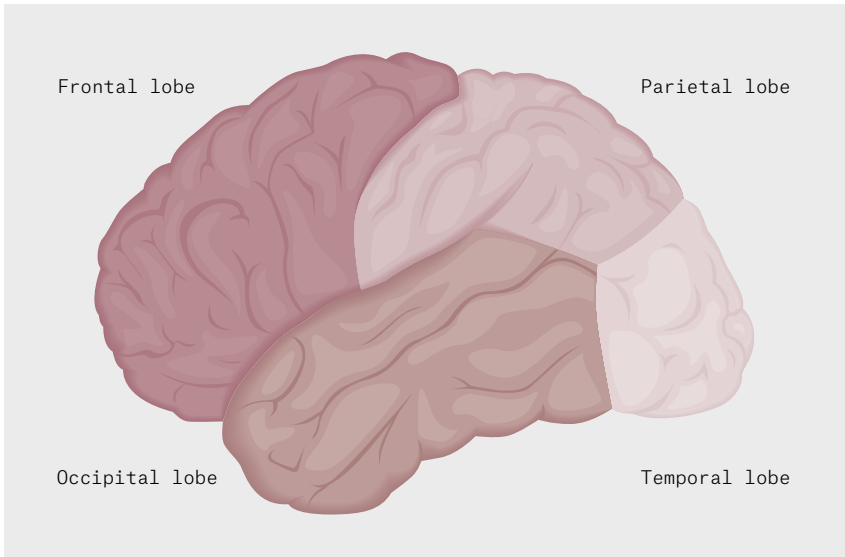
[Creativity]  
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[Fig. A] Kerry James Marshall,  
*Untitled (Studio)*, 2014.

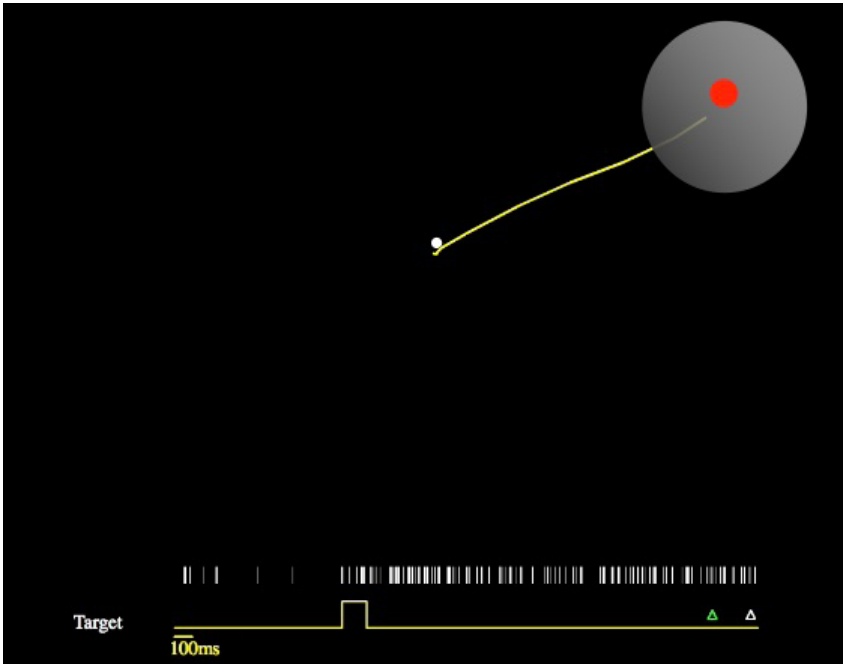
Creativity and improvisation are really a directed kind of exploration, an exploration that does not throw choice to chance but rather establishes the set of options and chooses among the better ones. [Creativity] Now, we study how this works in the brain, in part, because I'm ultimately interested in curing diseases that affect disorders of higher brain function, like schizophrenia or autism. We'll avoid the medical connection for the moment. But the way the brain performs decisions, I'm going to tell you, relies on two important things. The first involves a directed processing that's purposeful. By this I mean that the brain does not acquire data passively but instead interacts with information as if interrogating the environment for evidence bearing on a proposition or possible course of action. The second involves what I'll call *freedom from immediacy*, which I'll explain in a moment.

Decision making relies on the part of the brain called the parietal lobe. In an image of the human brain viewed from the side, you see the parietal lobe at the top center. [Fig. B] This area of the brain is kind of the "knowing" part. If you lose this part of the brain to a tumor or to a stroke, you do not lose the ability to see or move or feel but rather the ability to *make sense* of what you see or feel. The parietal lobe is responsible for making sense of what's around us and for making sense of ourselves (e.g., knowing if we are healthy or ill). The interesting thing is that the parietal lobe connects to parts of the brain that control what we do with our body. Each little piece of the parietal lobe directs other parts of the brain to possibly do things: provisional actions in the support of knowledge, knowledge being tied to those provisional actions.

The other thing we've learned from recording neurons in the brain is that they are free from the immediate demands of processing a sensory world that's changing moment by moment, or controlling a body that needs to satisfy



[Fig. B] Illustration showing major lobes of the human brain.



[Fig. C] Superposition of frames from a video demo of persistent neural activity associated with remembering a spot and making an eye movement to its remembered location. The gray circle marks the location where the red spot could be shown; this is called the response field of the neuron. The red spot is flashed about two seconds before the animal makes the eye movement, illustrated by the yellow streak. The tick marks at the bottom represent the electrical pulses from the neuron.

real-time engineering constraints. That is what *freedom from immediacy* means. It can be illustrated simply in this video [plays clip] [Fig. C]: an animal is looking at a spot in front of it; then, another spot is flashed in a different place, prompting the animal to move its eyes to the location of the flashed spot [shown by the red dot above and to right of the center point where the animal was originally looking]. And, you know, neurons don't make sounds, but they emit little electrical pulses that we can listen to over a loudspeaker, and hopefully you'll hear that now [sounds play]. You're listening to the sounds of a single neuron, or the electrical activity of a single neuron in the brain. And this persistent activity that's lasting, in this case, around two seconds is the glue. It's what fills the time between things that happen moment by moment. Now, you can imagine there are many populations of neurons that care about different parts of the world. And now we have the substrate for studying how decisions arise in the brain. It's a matter of assembling evidence that bears on one option and not another. And although in this very simple "make an eye movement to the remembered location" task there is no difficult choice, we can study these same kinds of neurons during more difficult decisions and see that they represent the evolving belief for and against an option. They deliberate—or, more accurately, they mediate the processes of deliberation. And, on top of that, I think that the type of operation that these neurons perform furnishes insight into the seeds of creativity and art—the nature of the aesthetic.

Now, let me explain that second point by choosing a particular example, which is the perception of time, the knowledge of time. So now we imagine a subject looking at a red spot. Then another larger spot appears elsewhere in the visual field. Ultimately, the subject will make an eye movement to the new spot, but only after waiting until told to "go" by the dimming of that first red spot. The amount

of time until the first red spot dims varies at random, but in general it comes from a set of possible times. For example, let's say the dimming of the red spot—the “go”—never comes at one second, but very often it comes either after a half a second or after two seconds. I'm going to show you a clip in which the animal is waiting to make an eye movement, waiting for that “go” signal. And he's going to wait over two seconds to do it. What we're going to listen for is what anticipation means—anticipation of time. That is, the animal might expect something to occur at about half a second and again at about two seconds, and then, finally, it occurred at about 2.5 seconds. When you listen to the electrical pulses from the neuron, the anticipation should sound to you like a rise, a fall, and a rise again in the frequency of these impulses. So, see if you can hear that in the electrical activity of this one neuron, recorded from the parietal lobe of the animal's brain [sounds play]. I hope you all heard the rise, the fall, and the rise. I kind of orchestrated it for you up here [laughter].

You might think that knowledge of time is like a clock. No! Knowledge of time in the brain is the anticipation of when something might occur. The brain approaches even something as simple as a “when” question by asking, When might such-and-such happen? When might I have to prepare such-and-such a movement? This way of thinking about knowledge as not “What is the thing before my eyes?” but “What might I do with my eyes and with my body in relation to the thing?”—this is the way to think about how knowledge works in the brain. And it's also a key to the aesthetic.

Obviously, in music, we care about time. And obviously, in dance, we care to produce time and do it well. But the critical thing is that the nature of art in general is to establish a set of expectations, to establish them perhaps in the beholder. If I'm the artist, for the moment, I might

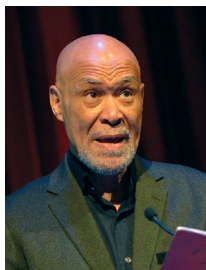
tease a bit before delivering—or not—before resolving to the key or pulse, before [long pause] finishing the sentence, or before completing the mathematical proof. To my way of thinking, art celebrates, in a sense, the very cognitive faculties that we use every day to deal with the world and with life. And timing, I think, is at the foundation of cognition but also the archetype of the aesthetic. We anticipate the pulse but swing or syncopate before delivering “on the one”—tension and release.

I’ll summarize now the argument I gave you earlier, but flesh it out just a little bit. I’m inviting you to think of thought as an interrogation process, not a processing process. It’s structured as a decision, in a way, because in some sense it evaluates evidence that bears on something I might do—a provisional action, one might say, a provisional use of the body. The questions are about possible acts, as I just said, and they’re established through exploration. Exploration holds the seeds of discovery, creativity, and improvisation. The answers build on expectancy and anticipation, as I showed you with the time example. And I think these are the seeds of artistic expression as well. Mastery expands on the repertoire of the questions and answers and, in doing so, alters the way we think, perceive, comprehend, and create. And with that, I will leave you with this thought: that thought itself is an interrogation, which is empowered through mastery. Or, as Kerry said just a moment ago, “When you know how things work, then you know how other things work.” [2] [Mastery/Mastry] So that’s what I mean by being empowered. Thank you very much [applause].

[2] See the conversation between Marshall and Molesworth, page 71.

Robert O'Meally

**“Woodshedding . . . is  
finding oneself, finding  
one’s direction, finding  
one’s soul, if you will.”**



Robert O'Meally is Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English, Department of English and Comparative Literature, and Director, Center for Jazz Studies, Columbia University. His books include *Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday* (2000), *The Craft of Ralph Ellison* (1980), and *Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey* (2008). In recent years, O'Meally has served as art curator for Jazz at Lincoln Center.

## JAZZ AND THE WOODSHED: LABOR OF LOVE

My talk today is about what the jazz musicians call *woodshedding*, something that goes well beyond the mechanics of technical practice, as indispensable as practice is, and enters the realm of the spiritual and the higher laws of politics as a matrix for how we treat one another. Woodshedding, as jazz musicians talk about it, is finding oneself, finding one's direction, finding one's soul, if you will. And then, as if that were not enough, woodshedding is finding ways to make music in concert with other people. You might say my subject is art to the power of Kerry James Marshall, art as a labor of love.

Let's look at the word *woodshed*—or, as the jazz musicians abbreviate it, the '*shed*. As a verb, it's the practice, apart from others, in private spaces that minimize distraction. *Webster's* tells us that in the woodcutter's woodshop, woodshedding (the verb) is working on one's wood-chopping or—now we are getting close to the jazz idiom—one's *chops*. Chops also means your mouth, of course—or, when it comes to wind instruments, one's embouchure. The verb 'shedding may imply eliminating unwanted practices in preparation for new growth, to shed in that other sense: to clip or prune. As a noun, the woodshed is a place where one is taken for disciplinary punishments. So when my father said, "Don't make me take you to the woodshed," he was not speaking metaphorically. On our way there (actually to my bedroom) we were all through talking, it was time for a lesson! In the lexicon of jazz, 'shedding is hard work, as I've said, either routine practice or a retreat into the 'shed to focus on a particular problem or project. And notice how often the word *work* comes up in the titles of jazz albums and compositions—*Work Time*, *Workplace*, *Birks' Works*, *Workin'*—over and over again. [1]

As our advisory group first convened here at The Met to discuss what today's session should be and do, the recorded performance by John Handy called "Hard Work" was repeatedly mentioned. [2] Someone played it from a laptop [plays the recording]. That's what my talk is about today, focusing on the jazz realm. What is the hard work—the very hardest work—that mastery in jazz most urgently calls for? Thus we arrive at my subject of woodshedding or the woodshed, the jazz artist's practice room. [Mastery/Mastry] Of course, all through the centuries there have been artists and scholars who've defined *work*, using the lenses of philosophy and psychology and other fields. [Sigmund] Freud makes the vital point that love and work are deeply entwined, that any work worth doing has to involve love, and that any love worth having has to involve hard work. [3] It's also significant that George Santayana says we can't be sure about living on beyond our bodily lives, but if we do work that's good enough to last, maybe that's one way to stay around after we're gone. Santayana goes on to say that if we love people deeply enough, maybe the beloved ones will remember us, maybe our values will be sustained beyond our own physical lives. So love and work are central to what I want to think about today: hard work.

Ralph Ellison is one of the people behind this talk, because Kerry James Marshall refers to his novel *Invisible Man* again and again in his paintings. Ellison posits technical mastery as a defining element of freedom. His novel's character defines freedom by saying, "First I think it's one thing, then I think it's another. It gits my head to spinning. I guess

[1] *Work Time* is a 1956 album by Sonny Rollins, *Birks' Works* is a 1957 album by Dizzy Gillespie, and *Workin' with the Miles Davis Quintet* is a 1956 album by Miles Davis.

[2] Jazz saxophonist Handy released the album *Hard Work* in 1976.

[3] Freud is widely credited as having said, "Love and work are the cornerstones of our humanness."

now it ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head." [4] [Mastery/Mastry] It's one thing, in other words, to see a beautiful image in one's imagination—"up in my head"—but quite another to have the technical know-how to communicate that image so that another person sees it, too. Here is freedom of speech with an Ellisonian twist. He connects the hard work of preparing oneself to make art with far broader freedoms and—as the novel unfolds—to the larger project of building a freer community. Such work, says Ellison, represents democracy at its best. He is someone who as early as the 1960s called the jazz band a near-perfect form of democracy in action, a gesture toward perfection. [Freedom]

Of course, vernacular Americanese defines the word *work* as having many meanings beyond labor as such, some of them contradictory. For example, *work* can refer to the hated drudgery of Bessie Smith's "Workhouse Blues" as well as a certain way to play. It can refer to meaningless labor or to the sweet exertions of sexual fun. People here who are old enough to remember Jackie [Wilson] telling you to get out on the floor and *work out* know that he wasn't talking only about jobs or even just dancing at that point [plays recording]. The same certainly is true of Hank Ballard's "Work with Me, Annie." Alberta Hunter's blues gives you three or four ways of looking at this [plays recording]. Hunter informs us that her handyman is a "handy man to have around." He knew how to work. He was good with his hands. The iceman is a nice man, she declares. Her woodman is a good man. Nina Simone has a love and work song about being married that she turns in a disturbing direction. "Be My Husband" is her chanted meditation on love in the form of a work song—in fact, it is a prison song

[4] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 11.

[plays recording]. She makes you wonder about a measure of pain—or a tidal wave of pain—and a deadly degree of confinement that can go with love. [This is] love not just as a work song but a forced-work song and prison song. [5] Here we could consider the case of Gayl Jones’s fictional character Ursa Corregidora and her search as a black woman artist (based substantially on aspects of the life of Billie Holiday) for ways to work that do not repeat the perverse patterns of “love” as slavery and rape that were Ursa’s foremother’s lot: ugly love for sale. [6]

Ellison said that jazz musicians wear their instruments as a priest wears a cross. Consider John Coltrane (also known simply as “Trane”) practicing in his front room at home in Philadelphia, not blowing to make a sound (except in his head) but just holding the horn and moving the keys so he would not disturb the household or the neighbors while woodshedding in near silence. Trane running scales during breaks at the club. Trane the composer of “A Love Supreme,” and in whose music one can hear the urgent clawing beyond the received musical limits, Trane *ascending*. Ellison helps us see how, for the jazz artist, love and work are spiritual. For again, here the elusive mission is to find not just a conventionally correct sound but a personal voice—to find one’s individuality, one’s self, one’s soul. To find a new way to make music. And with this comes the jazz artist’s imperative of making music along with others, of creating a sense of democratic community that is a labor of love. Democracy is our nation’s name for

[5] The songs referenced here are “Baby Workout” (1963) by Jackie Wilson; “Work with Me, Annie” (1954) by Hank Ballard and The Midnighters; “My Handy Man” (1980) by Alberta Hunter; and “Be My Husband” (1965) by Nina Simone.

[6] Blues singer Ursa Corregidora is the main character of Gayl Jones’s novel *Corregidora* (1975). Jones’s book anticipated a wave of novels exploring the enduring impact of slavery on the lives of modern-day African Americans.

love, says Ellison—something we're badly in search of these days, and of which the music is an urgent reminder.

In gospel music and the spirituals, too, the connections between work and love and spirituality are highly explicit. Listen to just the last chorus of *Working on a Building*, a 1951 record by the master gospel singer Joe May [plays recording]. This is spiritual work that he calls for, but he frames it in terms of physical labor in the world of here and now. He is working on a “good foundation,” he says. And check how he worries the lines of this song (as the master scholar Cheryl Wall has said musicians do) all the while, building up and up some more as he continues to “work-work-work” toward a crescendo. [7] These early gospel records had three minutes to make you see the light! The man is working on a building, you hear me?

So when Kerry James Marshall picks this painting by Romare Bearden called *The Woodshed* [Fig. A] as a key work for him, he has in mind this idea of hard work of the musician in this idiom. Among many other things, this painting expresses the idea that, at times, the artist has to separate herself or himself from the family. You don't go completely away, but you turn aside and you turn inside so you can concentrate on your craft. So, in that painting the woodshedding is performed in terms of this general social sphere,

[7] “Worrying the line” is the technique in blues music of changing pitch, repeating words, or adding interjections in order to break up a phrase or emphasize a moment in a piece of music. Cheryl Wall applies this idea of “worrying” to writing in her book *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).



[Fig. A] Romare Bearden,  
*The Woodshed*, 1969.



[Fig. B] Norman Lewis,  
*City Night*, 1949.

in the broad context of the family, but it also is a matter of spending private time in order to get yourself ready. For Marshall, as for Bearden and for Ellison, these are spiritual goals—these technical practices are spiritual and political workings toward a freedom paved by the will to practice.

[Mastery/Mastry]

Here's a painting called *City Night* [Fig. 8], by Norman Lewis, in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. I've been thinking about Norman Lewis in terms of hard work. When he was making these abstract paintings, Lewis said he wasn't sure exactly what they were. He was just painting the thing that he had up in his head and sticking with it. He said, "If you'll just work through the art, then you'll find your way through to a language that's all your own." The closer you look at this work, the more you see that Lewis was a master. In Bearden's book on black art, he says Lewis's first experimental abstract shapes and strokes were not immediately recognizable. What were they? And then listen to what Lewis says. "That's the thing you've got to get used to," he said. "It's like smelling yourself. After a while, you find you can stand it. Visually, these things are exciting. And I think you don't even know at the moment what you've done. In retrospect, you say, 'Gee, I did that.' You feel excited. That's how it happened to me." So some people look at this painting and see clotheslines in Harlem hung from one building to the next, others see flags or banners. In any case, these are the shapes that Lewis saw in his mind, and that he developed the technique to make us see, too. He said you just keep working, working, working them through. Woodshedding until you've got it.

Duke Ellington used the title "The Laborer" to designate the first section of *Symphony in Black* (1935), one of his first concert-length compositions. "The Laborer" is a beautiful movement that emphasizes the importance of the black worker, including the slave, as part of the creation of

American culture—and the work song as one of the founding blocks of much American music [plays a clip].

James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" features a character who plays and works at becoming a jazz musician by following the example of a master player, on record. "He'd play one record over and over again, all day long sometimes," the narrator tells us, "and he'd improvise along with it on the piano. Or he'd play one section of the record, one chord, one change, one progression, then he'd do it on the piano. Then back to the record. Then back to the piano. Well, I really don't know how they stood it. . . . It was as though Sonny were some sort of god, or monster."

[8] Stanley Crouch, writing about Charlie Parker, emphasized this same sort of endless practicing that Bird did. "The improvising artists experience time," says Crouch, "at the tempo of emergency." Parker in particular could make intricately beautiful music at astonishing rates of speed. But to get there took hard work. Here's a radio recording of Parker talking about his practice of practicing [plays recording].

PAUL DESMOND: Another thing that's a major factor in your playing is this fantastic technique that nobody's quite equaled. And I always wondered about that, too, whether that came behind practicing or whether that was just from playing, whether it evolved gradually.

CHARLIE PARKER: Well, you make it so hard for me to answer, you know? Because I can't see where there's anything fantastic about it at all. I've put quite a bit of study into the horn, that's true. In fact, the neighbors threatened to ask my mother to move once when we were living out West. She said I was driving them crazy with the horn. I used to put in at least eleven to fifteen hours a day.

[8] Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" was published in 1957. The narrator and main character is the brother of jazz musician Sonny.

DESMOND: Yes, that's what I wondered.

PARKER: Well, that's true, yes. I did that for over a period of three or four years.

DESMOND: Wow. Yeah. I guess that's the answer.

PARKER: Well, that's the facts, anyway.

DESMOND: I heard a record of yours a couple of months ago that somehow I'd missed up to date. I heard a little two-bar quote from the Kłosé book that was like an echo from home.

PARKER: Yeah, yeah. Well, that was all done with the books, you know, naturally. It wasn't done with mirrors this time, it was done with books.

DESMOND: Well, that's really very reassuring to hear because somehow I got the idea that you were just sort of born with that technique and you never had to worry too much about keeping it working.

JOHN McLELLAN: You know, I'm very glad that he's bringing out this point, because I think a lot of young musicians tend to think that... it isn't necessary to do this.

DESMOND: They go out and make those sessions and live the life, but they don't put in that eleven hours a day with any of the books.

PARKER: Oh, definitely, study is absolutely necessary, in all forms. It's just like any talent that's born within somebody. It's just like a good pair of shoes when you put a shine on it, you know? Like schooling, this brings out the polish, you know, of any talent that happens anywhere in the world. Einstein had schooling. [9]

**Like Bird's, the flute and reed master Eric Dolphy's virtuosic musical skill came from the woodshed. Dolphy also annoyed his neighbors with incessant playing. "Let that boy blow!" one imagines certain neighbors saying**

[9] Charlie Parker, interview by Paul Desmond and John McLellan, WHDH radio, Boston, 1954.

(as they did to fledgling trumpeter Ralph Ellison). “He’s got to talk baby talk on that horn before he can preach on it!” Also like Bird, Dolphy would retreat into local parks and play along with the birds’ songs and other nighttime and early morning sounds. Tenor man Ernie Watts compares woodshedding every day to perpetually preparing for the Olympics. “As a saxophone player,” he said, “you’re just in training all the time,” practicing as if your life depended on it—practicing, practicing, practicing. Watts also has observed that, for him, practicing has been a form of meditation: “So you’re putting everything else aside and working for hours at a stretch, on your playing.”

It’s Ellison again who—high school varsity football player and college music major that he was—writes not only about jazz but about sports as a model for his work as a writer. In a letter to his friend the novelist Albert Murray, he said:

With writing, I learned from Joe [Louis], from Sugar Ray [Robinson], though that old dancing master, wit, and bull-balled stud Jack Johnson is really my mentor, because he knew that if you operated with skill and style, you could rise above all that “being a credit to your race” crap, because he was a credit to the *human* race, and because if he could make that much body and bone move with such precision to his command, all other men had a chance to beat the laws of probability in anything else that stuck up its head. [10]

So as an individual artist you’re working with your examples—in Ellison’s case it was Dostoyevsky, Hemingway, Richard Wright—thinking about them, trying to find your own voice in the midst of those you admire. In his scrapbooks, Louis Armstrong celebrates the great New Orleans

[10] Ralph Ellison, letter to Albert Murray, in *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 132.

trumpet master King Oliver again and again. On one scrap-book page he pastes a photo of Oliver inside one of his own head while he's playing! But the trick there is that you can't just outright copy the master; you have to learn from him or her and then speak in your own way. The master music teacher Clark Terry was known for telling students *how to speak* but never telling them *what to say*. Maybe it helps to do as Kerry James Marshall and some of these others have done: to use examples from your own art form and its traditions, but also to learn from the musicians and the writers and even the athletes. To remember, as the sculptor Richard Hunt recently told me, that in Chicago's black neighborhoods (a generation before Kerry James Marshall, though the point still holds), even the barbers and beauticians were doing a sculpture, six and sometimes seven days a week!

So you learned your art form through the hard work of wide-angle observation and careful apprenticeship. Billie Holiday is sometimes called self-trained, which is absurd. What does that mean—that she had no degree from music schools? Well, instead she was just singing all the time, in Baltimore and then in the Harlem of her youth. She was always in touch with musicians who were full of imagination and style, including her father, who was the guitarist with Fletcher Henderson's band, and then Lester Young and (via recordings) Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, Ethel Waters, and many others. And so it's like the training never let up, and the teachers were the most demanding on the planet. The drummer Eddie Locke studied under the master Jo Jones, whom Locke called Papa Jo. Locke recalled that Jones insisted on constant work. "Papa said, 'I want you to practice, man—practice, practice, practice, practice!'" But Locke recalled that on one occasion he said to his great teacher, "Papa, I never see *you* practice. When do you practice?" And Jo just stepped close to Locke's face and looked straight at him as he said, "Maan, I'm practicing

right now.” So some of this is about physical labor as tough as a heavyweight prizefighter’s sparring session, and some of it is a mental thing. “I’m practicing right now,” he said.

Tenor saxophone colossus Sonny Rollins is famous as one of those hard workers who sometimes refused to work in the usual way—who surprised his admirers by turning away from the fame he had worked so hard to achieve. He was at the top of the jazz world, winning international polls and awards and the reviews of a lifetime. But then he decided he needed to get away and to improve his own playing. He said he wasn’t as good, he didn’t feel as people were saying; he wasn’t as good as he wanted to be. He was famous for one sabbatical in ’59 and another in ’69—famous for refusing to work so he could have work time in the woodshed. Here’s Sonny Rollins saying a word about all of that [plays video clip].

I just have that in me, and when I find something that I want to do, I block out everything else and I would do it. It’s the sense of right and wrong, so it doesn’t matter to me that people were saying, “How can you leave the music? Because they won’t accept you back if you go away. You’ll lose your edge,” and all. This was inconsequential to me, because I had an idea that I wanted to improve myself, my musical arsenal, if you will. So I do what I want to do and that’s that. I’m very strong about that, and this has held me in good stead, just listening to the inner voice. This is what I do, and I’m happy about it, that I have that much determination, if you want to call it that.

My point is that hard work sometimes means turning away from the grind of the commercial world. Rollins didn’t want to annoy his neighbors on the Lower East Side, so he went out and played on the Manhattanville Bridge for ten, twelve hours a day, just playing, playing, playing, trying to find a new way. So as I work toward completing what I want to say, I want to talk about this quiet place that one finds in the woodshed, playing in solitude, searching, trying to find one’s own voice, trying to get ready to rejoin other players and make music that’s a model for community

at its finest. Behind it all is the spiritual thing I keep trying to define, and which is so strongly suggested in Kerry James Marshall's work, as I see it: the reach for something better, for something beyond oneself.

I'll conclude with a few words about antagonistic cooperation, by which I mean, yes, you're playing with and for other people, but you're sometimes also playing *against* them. Sometimes you're playing with, for, and against! Here is the virtuoso Harold Ashby in a film clip in which the Duke Ellington Orchestra plays a section from the album *The Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* [plays a clip]. [11] Ash has the pressure of knowing that two of his saxophone role models—Ben Webster and Paul Gonsalves—were seated on the bandstand directly behind him, looking right at him, listening intently. Webster is a particular hero. But he's also got Duke Ellington right up in his face saying, "You know I want more. You've got to play more." And this is my example of playing very well but also playing against somebody else. Watch Ellington get up from the piano and go over and say, "Man, I want you to play more than this. This is good, but it's not enough. You've got to dig and dig deep." Imagine you've got the composer in your face, egging you on: "I want you to play harder, man. Dig in." Ellington is seventy, and he's rocking. "Get in there and play. You've got to play more. More." Ash plays with and for and against Duke himself. He plays with and for and against Webster and Gonsalves. "Can you top this?" he seems to say. "More," says Duke, "More!" Playing with and for and against, from

[11] *The Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* is a studio album by pianist, composer, and bandleader Duke Ellington recorded in 1971 and released in 1975.

the woodshed to the bandstand. Hard work is a hard-won labor of love in the jazz world and in the world of art as well. Thank you very much [applause].

## SESSION 2

[Mastery/Mastry]  
 54 68 99 106 110-111  
 116 125 132 177 188  
 204-205 207 210 212 221

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen! I'm Sheena Wagstaff, The Met's Leonard A. Lauder Chairman of Modern and Contemporary Art. And I'm here not only for the great honor of welcoming you to the second session of our convening in honor of Kerry James Marshall but also to assure you that if any of you feel tempted to succumb to postprandial dozing after a hearty lunch break, this danger will be instantly dispelled by this afternoon's absolutely stellar lineup of speakers. This is the brainchild of my brilliant colleague Sandra Jackson-Dumont [applause and cheers], who, with her equally dynamic team, has devised today's wonderful chorus of voices being brought to bear on the work of this singularly important artist.

As Kerry mentioned in his revelatory talk at The Met last month, in December, the avalanche of positive eulogies he's received—from the community, the media, and the many publics we serve—is the dream and aspiration of any artist. However, he's pointed out that the most meaningful, essential response is the critical acknowledgment of the work. As Kerry has said on several occasions, including this morning, "You need to find out where the truth is." I can't do an American accent [laughter]. "You need to find out where the truth is. There is nothing else but the work. *The work is the Work.*"

Many of you know that Kerry is the first living artist featured in the inaugural year of The Met Breuer's program. The reason for this is perfectly simple. The astonishing strength of Kerry's epic achievement as an artist can be fully seen in the context of the great collections of The Met, including the 900-year history of Western painting, radically redefining and simultaneously reinvigorating the tradition of the Old Masters with his "Modern Mastery".

[Mastery/Mastry] There is no more powerful a statement to make for any young museum than to open its doors with the work of a man—by his own admission, the "artistic particle

accelerator” of our time [1] —who has singlehandedly altered the course of art history, and whose work is also so emphatically relevant to our present, *right here, right now*.

As Darren [Walker] said in his introduction this morning, this moment is for making a powerful statement about the importance of the social role of great art, and the museum as a civic place—the “metropolitan” part of the Metropolitan Museum—in which to demonstrate this. It’s a gathering space in which the upholding of civil liberties and fundamental human rights is embedded in our programs. And it testifies to our commitment to an open, critical assessment as well as to a deep respect for cultural difference in this country and across the world. This morning is evidence of just this commitment! Thank you [applause].

## Sheena Wagstaff

Leonard A. Lauder Chairman  
Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, The Met

[1] See the conversation between Marshall and Molesworth, page 62.

Ian Alteveer

“With work as strong and as powerful and as moving as Kerry’s is, the challenge is all the more . . . to make sure that the stories that Kerry finds so meaningful to tell are there for you, as the public, to find as well.”



Ian Alteveer is Curator in The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Department of Modern and Contemporary Art. He is a cocurator of *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry*.

What is the work of a curator? I think one might suppose that if an artist is extra, extra special and extra good, like Kerry is, it might make my work a little easier. But in fact, I think it might be the opposite, because with work as strong and as powerful and as moving as Kerry's is, the challenge is all the more to make sure that it sings off the walls, and to make sure that the stories that Kerry finds so meaningful to tell are there for you, as the public, to find as well.

So, as I've been walking people through the show over these months and as I've been thinking about the work—I start the show [and my tour] with a fabulous work from 1993, one that's very pivotal in Kerry's career. It was the first purchased by a museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the very first museum that Kerry ever went to as a child. It is that fabulous barbershop scene called *De Style* [Fig. A], with all of its references to Modernist painting, to a space of community and self-transformation, to Old Master painting and the group portrait in the Netherlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There are so many amazing layers in that work. And I always tell whomever I'm walking through with that *De Style* is one of my favorite pictures in this show.

Then I almost always end the walkthrough with my other favorite [*Untitled (Studio)*] [Fig. B], which it should be—you're probably almost tired of seeing it by now because we have it reproduced everywhere—because it is owned by The Met, and it is a work that I brought into the collection last year. It is a work that I first saw in Kerry's studio, which is amazing because it is a picture about visiting a studio, in a sense. When I went to Chicago in the fall of 2014 to meet my cocurators, Helen Molesworth and Dieter Roelstraete, there, to go visit Kerry and to see the works that he was working on for his exhibition in London the next month—we wanted to catch them before they got all packed up and sent off—this painting was almost



[Fig. A] Kerry James Marshall,  
*De Style*, 1993.



[Mastery/Mastry]  
 54 68 99 106 110-111  
 116 125 132 177 188  
 204-205 207 210 212 221

finished. The little yellow dog wasn't in there yet, but already, I could tell. And all three of us, I think, took a breath, a gasp maybe, and looked at each other and said, "This is a masterwork." And it is a masterwork about painting, in one sense. [Mastery/Mastry] It is a veritable catalogue of all of the possibilities one has in paint. So there is portraiture; there is a still life, in that vase of flowers; there is a vanitas, a reminder of death's ever-presence, with the skull sitting on the table; there is a trompe l'oeil, with the pushpin holding those colorful swatches to the corner of the work table; there is an animal; there is a male nude in the back; there is a landscape through the window; there are even references to photography, with that photo light, that floodlight on the right; and then, of course, there is also abstraction, in the splatters and splotches on the tabletop.

But it was also a picture that reminded me right away of something that Kerry often speaks about, which was his own first visit to an artist's studio. It is a story he tells about that first visit, which happened at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, in the summer after seventh grade, when Kerry had won a scholarship to take his first drawing class. And because it was the summer and a lot of the art faculty was away, it gave the instructor a chance to bring the students to see a real artist's studio without actually bothering the artist. It just so happens that the studio he saw was that of his childhood idol, Charles White. He says he had done a book report on Charles White already in the third grade, using the biography that is published in the 1963 children's encyclopedia *Great Negroes, Past and Present*. He had idolized this great artist, who was a fantastic painter, muralist, draftsman, and printmaker. But little did he know that White was alive and well, living in Los Angeles and working at Otis, at the very school he was attending. So I think that the surprise at realizing he was looking at the space in which his



[Fig. B] Kerry James Marshall,  
*Untitled (Studio)*, 2014.

idol worked and the excitement of seeing what a real artist's workspace looks like, with all of its tools of the trade—all the paintbrushes and paint pots and unfinished things leaning against the wall—combined in this young, budding artist's mind to make him realize that he, too, could see himself in this role, in this space of work and labor and creativity and deep thinking. [Creativity] That possibility is something that carries through, too, into *Untitled (Studio)*: that perhaps a picture like this one could possibly spark in a young person the thought that they, too, could live a life like this, in this space of wonderful creativity and innovation, and that this presents that option as a possibility. That is one of the great powers of so many of Kerry's works [applause].

[Creativity]  
46 50-51 93 101 134 148  
183 212-214 221 237

# Fred Eversley

**“I became intrigued with energy as a subject that made people happy . . . I decided that this would be the underlying theme of all of my works.”**



Fred Eversley is a Brooklyn native and engineer by training who moved to Los Angeles in 1963 to work in the aerospace industry. Four years later, inspired by the bohemian culture of Venice Beach, he decided to shift careers and become an artist. Since that time, Eversley has pushed the boundaries of sculpture, bringing his technical expertise and keen aesthetic sensibility to bear on the remarkable objects he produces.

I'd like to say that it all started with my mother. My mother refused to allow my father to have a TV in the house my entire childhood. And thus, while other kids watched TV when it was snowing or raining or nighttime, I was forced to either read or go down into my workshop. We had a workshop in the basement, and I worked in the workshop on what I called, in those days, my experiments. I was buoyed by the fact that my father was a renowned aerospace research engineering director, and my grandfather an accomplished experimenter in electronics and photography. I spent a lot of time in the workshop. I came up with all kinds of things. I went through all kinds of old magazines and cut out interesting articles, which I'd [make into] little experiments with windmills, with this, with that. With electronics, I became a licensed amateur radio operator when I was eight, talking to all kinds of folks around the world using Morse code. This led to my going to Brooklyn Technical High School, a wonderful high school. And then [I went] to Carnegie Mellon University, and then to a very intense, three-and-half year career designing high-intensity acoustic labs for NASA and facilities for the Air Force and the Navy, and advising the French atomic energy commission and German aerospace testing facility.

When I started making art, I was living in Venice, California. When I first moved to California, in 1963, it was the only beach community a black person could move to in those days. Luckily, it was filled with a lot of artists, a lot of poets, a lot of writers, a lot of musicians. There were jazz musicians and Janis Joplin. Jim Morrison was my next-door neighbor. And it was filled with an enormous amount of energy. I don't know how much you know about spending time on the beach or living on the beach. I had a beach-front apartment. It's all about energy. The beach is energy—people swimming and laughing and working. In any case, I became intrigued with energy as a subject that made people

happy. When I started making sculptures, I dealt with the subject of energy. I decided that this would be the underlying theme of all of my works. And over the years, fifty years now, I've been dealing with that. The early works were experimental, exploring cast plastics in combination with photography.

On the screen is an article that I read when I was a kid, about postulating making parabolas by spinning a liquid in a container around a vertical axis. It was postulated by Sir Isaac Newton, way back in the sixteenth century, and then published in that magazine article I saw, as a teenager. [1] I started using that as a means of making lenses, the parabola being the only shape that perfectly concentrates all forms of energy to a single focal point. And as I experimented—casting multiple colors, letting the colors float, controlling it tightly, having high ones, narrow ones, and fatter ones, making bigger ones—I got commissioned to make an eight-foot piece for Atlanta. I had to put together the machinery to cast and polish such a big sculpture. I have invented all my own machines, or modified them. In this case, it was a turntable lying on the ground, with a forty-inch-diameter mold on it. [Fig. B] That turntable was previously used for machining the casings of the atomic bombs that fell on Japan. I got both of them. I got them for fifty bucks each, in a scrap metal auction. And using these turntables, I've made all of my large parabolic pieces. That piece was in the show at the Whitney Sculpture Annual in 1971. My first

[1] The article was published in *Popular Mechanics* (May 1911). Newton noted that the free surface of a rotating liquid forms a circular paraboloid and can therefore be used as a telescope. However, he could not actually build one because he had no way to stabilize the speed of rotation.



[Fig. A] Fred Eversley, *Parabolic Flight*, 2016.



[Fig. B] Centrifugal vertical spin-casting mold tool (diam. 40 in.), 1971. Eversley reused a 1936 turntable to create this tool to produce his parabolic sculptures.



[Fig. C] Fred Eversley at the National Air and Space Museum, Washington D.C., 1977.

one-man show was a one-man show at the Breuer building, at the Whitney, in 1970.

I've gone from transparent dyes to opaque pigments and making reflectors, as opposed to lenses. Here are some of the lenses and the various shapes. The red one on top is a big forty-inch lens that's in the collection of and shown here at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas.

Another article I read as a kid [described] a wind-turbine invention made by Savonius in 1922, and I later got his book about it. [2] I used this concept to design an outdoor entrance sculpture for the Miami airport. It was the biggest commission ever given out in America south of Washington, D.C., at that time, in 1977. I heard about the competition the day before the deadline in L.A. and recalled the wind-turbine concept, which seemed like the perfect approach for this context. I made a quick, small concept model. I jumped on a plane that night and I hand-flew it to Miami. I presented it the next morning, and became a semifinalist. I got the commission after the second round with an improved larger model. [applause] I won the competition against a range of well-known artists, like [Louise] Nevelson, [Claes] Oldenburg, [Richard] Serra, etc., so this was very exciting for me.

What happened after standing there for thirty-three years, it got damaged when it was taken down to put in the new metro station to the [Miami] airport, and I recently had to refabricate the piece to meet current wind codes and install it in a new location, at the airport exit [Fig. A].

[2] Sigurd J. Savonius, *The Wing-Rotor in Theory and Practice* (1925). The book demonstrates the vertical-axis wind turbine invented by Savonius, a Finnish engineer, architect, and inventor.

In 1977, I was appointed the first artist in residence in the history of the National Air and Space Museum. [Fig. C] But I could not cast plastic, because of the fumes, so I started working in acrylic and had to invent a totally new visual vocabulary. The biggest work I made was for the San Francisco airport. It's twenty-four feet tall, hanging from the skylight in the United Airlines terminal building. The prismatic elements refract the sunlight, causing ever-changing rainbows to be cast onto the environs. I have also made suspended spirals that rotate with the wind. That, again, is an expression of wind and solar energy.

In the piece I made for the national IRS headquarters entrance, I combined steel elements and transparent plastic prisms; each of the acrylic elements creates rainbows thrown on the environs. The innovation here was that I defined the piece as one piece with the reflecting pool [around it], which meant that the water had to stay in the pool. It's against the law in America for a governmental pool to not be drained in the wintertime. But my piece is the one exception, because I made it contractually necessary for the water to stay year round. So the pool is heated by a water heater, like a swimming pool. And then in the evening, or in the winter, you get the mist coming off the water, so the piece essentially emerges from a cloud of mist.

Again, not having a tv; being creative in my parents' experimental environment; collecting advanced knowledge early on, at home and from great schools surrounded by inspiring people; the positive energy and stimulating time in California; being naturally challenged by my boss Frank Wyle, and given great trust and demanding responsibility, under pressure yet with the freedom to explore and be me, were all key conditions to later be able to imagine and play with curiosity and confidence, to become an innovative artist. Thank you [applause].

**Monique W. Morris**

**“What does it look like to have schools as a location for healing, rather than for problematizing the black figure?”**



Monique W. Morris is an author, educator, and social justice scholar with nearly twenty-five years of experience in the areas of education, civil rights, and juvenile and social justice. Her most recent book is *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (2016).

Good afternoon. My work, my hard work, is at the intersections of race, gender, justice, and education. I'm going to offer some thoughts on the conditions that make it possible for the manifestation of mastery in our learning environments. This image [Fig. A] is from Kerry James Marshall's *Rythm Mastr* comic series, a presentation of superheroism as mythical and tangible, as substantial and ancient, as African and as African American. [1] Our ancestors knew the power of the drum, the rhythmic interrogation of life, of love, of learning, of healing. They hummed it in spirituals, they moaned it in the rhythm and the blues, they played it out through jazz trumpets and on ragtime piano. In the sweaty walls created by funk and hip-hop, the master lives. Sometimes the Grand Master lives. The healing power of rhythms lives. The black figure lives. Yet many of our learning spaces have abandoned this truth. And as a result, in more than twenty-two states and local jurisdictions, there are disturbing school laws that lead to children being literally thrown around and out of classrooms for being "annoying" or too inquisitive. In schools across the country, children are struggling to realize their true identity as scholars. This facilitates pathways to young people being pushed out of schools and into participation in underground economies, and into contact with the juvenile and criminal legal systems.

Black children make up 19 percent of preschool enrollment but 47 percent of preschool children who receive one or more out-of-school suspensions. Black boys are 19 percent of preschoolers but 45 percent of boys suspended in preschool; black girls are 20 percent of girls in that age group and 54 percent of girls suspended in preschool.

[1] Marshall's *Rythm Mastr* series, which he began in 1999, places black superheroes in comic books.



[Fig. A] Kerry James Marshall, from *Rythm Mastr* series, 1999-ongoing.



Across the spectrum of kindergarten through twelfth grade, black students are 3.8 times more likely than their white counterparts to be suspended one or more times. Black boys, who receive 19 percent of school suspensions, experience this form of exclusionary discipline in most states in greater numbers than anyone else—and the rates are even higher for black boys with disabilities. Black girls, who receive 13 percent of all suspensions, are 7 times more likely than white girls to be suspended from school, and they are the only group of girls disproportionately over-represented along the discipline continuum nationwide. At 2.2 times more likely to receive a referral to law enforcement, and more likely than their counterparts to experience restraints and seclusion, black students are more likely to be criminalized in schools. Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and gender-fluid youth also experience disproportionate pushout in schools, where their mere existence is problematized (problematically) in too many of our learning spaces. The same is true for black children with disabilities.

Together, too many of our children are experiencing conditions in their learning environment that are more about facilitating their ability to conform to social norms than about an activation of their radical imagination, critical thinking, and human development as they construct their scholarly identities.

But in our bodies, in our memories, and in our spirits lives an alternate scenario. What needs to be in place in our learning spaces for the cultivation of creativity as a practice of social justice? [Creativity] First, there must be an understanding that social justice is the art of practicing meaningful relationships, not necessarily with those we're taught and groomed to love but with those beings and entities and conditions we were not. We need to bring our whole selves to learning. We're taught early on to abandon

[Freedom]  
40-41 67 69 72-73  
75-76 82 86-87 92 94  
99 111 149 160 203  
214 222 252-253

[Creativity]  
46 50-51 93 101 134 148  
183 212-214 221 237

[Blackness]  
9 57 61 66 82-83 86-87  
149 159 191 203-207  
213 221 229-230 236  
240 246 249 256 258

who we are in order to be tolerated in learning spaces. But the cultivation of creativity as a practice of social justice requires that we engage our full identities, as many of them as we can conjure, to generate new foundations for speaking up and practicing an outward structural expression of love. We need integrated learning. Education that integrates the arts—that engages a full learning community and interrogates not just *what* we learn but *how* we learn—is critically important. What needs to be in place? Healing as a social justice practice, as a learning practice. Our current open inquiry is really, What does it look like to have schools as a location for healing, rather than for problematizing the black figure? Healing is facilitated by activism, especially if, as Kerry reminded us this morning, we see freedom as assumed rather than as conferred. [Freedom]

Children experience criminalization in our schools. Those kids are not disposable. They're sacred. They're the creators of our most rigorous responses to injustice. The practice of empathy in schools, in the classroom, build[s] relationships between young people and educators in ways that cannot only reduce the use of exclusionary discipline but also honor our most sacred experiences of learning. The presence of the black figure in schools in this way can be wonderfully disruptive—not in the way that we've been conditioned to understand, but as a demonstration of resistance. [Freedom]

There's been a lot of talk about resistance recently. Our challenge is to resist the idea that black children cannot be scholars. [Blackness] They are brilliant [applause]. We must resist the practice of removing them from learning spaces; they belong in school. Children who are living with historical trauma, who have lived with adverse childhood experiences and toxic stress, must understand that acquiring their education is, in itself, an act of social justice. Those who are growing up with these experiences, like

exploitation and abuse and neglect, for example, those who are experiencing the toxic stress that I just mentioned and transgenerational trauma, are not doomed to a life of pain; they're resilient.

But resilience requires relationships, relationships that resist injustice. We must make activism and advocacy a requirement for reclaiming and mastering one's own learning experience. This is how we reclaim the rhythm, the funk, the blues, the hip-hop, and all of the magical healing powers they possess. This is how we create the conditions for educational excellence as a practice of social justice. This is how we awaken the rhythm master in our children—and in ourselves. Thank you [applause and cheers].

# Michelle Carter

**“Through self-awareness, integrity, and perseverance, I was able to master the art of me.”**



Michelle Carter is the American Shot Put Record Holder. A three-time Olympian, she is the 2016 Olympic Gold Medalist as well as the 2016 IAAF World Indoor Champion, 2016 Brussels Grand Prix Winner, and 2015 World Championships, Bronze Medalist. Carter is a 2007 graduate of the University of Texas at Austin and daughter of former San Francisco 49er, Pro Bowl, Michael Carter.

Good afternoon. My dad has always told me to master my craft, to be so good at throwing the shot that when people want to learn how to throw, they pull up my film to learn, because my technique is the best [applause].

So what does it mean to master something? To master something means to have or to gain control of it, to dominate something, to be skilled at a particular activity. I have a great skill that has taken me all over the world. I had been able to set records and climb to new heights. But something was missing. I had done all these things, but I knew I had more to give.

How could I give more, when I've already given so much? In 2009 through 2014, I could not make it to the top of the podium. I was finishing in fourth or fifth place at all of my competitions, and I was just thinking to myself, what's holding me back? Why can't I make it to the top? So I came up with this idea to get involved in something that was going to take me totally outside of my comfort zone. I entered a pageant [laughter]. What's more uncomfortable than walking onstage, being judged at how you present yourself? Deep down inside, I knew that I wasn't 100 percent confident in who I was. Things happened in my life that made me second-guess who I was and if I had what it took to take it to the next level. I even thought that maybe the next level wasn't for me. But for some reason, I just could not believe that the next level wasn't for me. I needed to prove to myself that I had what it takes.

So here's this world-class athlete, who throws a heavy metal ball into some dirt while wearing lashes and lipstick, who enters herself into a pageant. No one understood why I was doing the pageant. My parent didn't quite understand. But the only person who needed to understand was me. I knew that I didn't believe in myself like people believed I did. I was looking to break down the barriers that I put up against myself. I knew that if I could overcome my own

personal barriers, I could make it to the top. I had to make people believe that I believed in Michelle. So I had to push through what was uncomfortable for me.

2016 was the year I was supposed to shine. I was training hard, doing everything I needed to do to make the Olympic team and to have my shot at winning gold. I opened my season with my best start and also, a week later, set an indoor American record and won the indoor world championships. And then, two weeks later, I woke up with a pain in my back. I went to the doctor, only to find out I had a bulging disc in my back. And so I'm like, Okay, you know, it's bulging . . . that's not too bad [laughter]. And a week later, I caught a really bad cold and had a really bad cough, so the disc went from bulging to herniated.

But in that moment, I had to make a decision. Was I going to feel sorry for myself and take myself out of the game? Or was I going to be willing to put the work in to still have my chance to accomplish my goal? So I trained. I went to rehab three to four days a week. I was getting treatment three to four days a week, still throwing five to six days a week, and lifting weights three days a week. I had to do what I needed to do to come back.

In life, things happen. We have obstacles that will try to keep us down. But they should not stop us from being our best selves. I could have given up easily and complained about how everything is stacked up against me. But I didn't. I chose to do what I could with what I had and hope for the best. I finished 2016 with two national championships, one world and Olympic championship [Fig. A], and two American records [applause and cheers].

During all the pain, trials, and disappointment, there were three things that kept popping up to show me how to be my best. Number one is self-awareness—being conscious and knowing your character, motives, feelings, and desires. I knew that I had more to give. I knew that something was



[Fig. A] Michelle Carter with her gold medal for shot put at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.

blocking me. All I wanted to do was be my best. I was able to be honest with myself and acknowledge where I needed work, where I needed help, or where I needed to be pushed.

Number two, integrity. Who are you when no one's looking? Are you cheating yourself and others? Do you act one way in front of people and then act differently when no one's there? For me, it was, Am I willing to do the work when I'm by myself, when my coach isn't there? If I have to do five sets of something but I'm tired, am I only going to do four? I had to learn to push through those times.

Third is perseverance. Can you continue the course when it's too hard or when it looks like success is not near? This is my third Olympic Games. Through many injuries and illnesses, I stayed the course because I had not given it my all. I knew that what I'd done was not my best, and I knew I had more to give. To master something is to dominate, control, be skilled at, and/or acquire knowledge of. I was able to dominate my negative thoughts and moments of laziness, and control my emotions and reactions when times were hard and no one could help me. I became skilled at embracing what made me unique and different from everyone else. Over time, I acquired the knowledge of what worked and didn't work for me. Through self-awareness, integrity, and perseverance, I was able to master the art of me, being the best version of me when the odds were stacked against me and nothing else was working. There are challenges that can keep us from reaching to the top. But no one but you can stop you from being the master of you. Thank you [applause].

# Rashida Bumbray

**“I think about not only the moral obligation to show Black suffering but the moral obligation to attend to Black healing.”**



Rashida Bumbray's choreography draws from traditional African American vernacular and folk forms, including ring shouts, hoofing, and blues improvisation, in order to interrogate society and initiate healing. Bumbray was nominated for a Bessie Award in 2014 for Outstanding Emerging Choreographer. She is a recipient of the Harlem Stage Fund for New Work, and her work has been presented by Harlem Stage, the New Museum, Project Row Houses, SummerStage, Tate Modern, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Dance, ankle bells, tambourine  
RASHIDA BUMBRAY

Vocals  
CECILY BUMBRAY

Piano  
AXEL TOSCA LAUGART

## CYCLES

CECILY BUMBRAY [Singing] *I surrendered my beliefs  
and found myself at the tree of life,  
injecting my stories into the veins of leaves.*

*I surrendered my beliefs  
and found myself at the tree of life,  
injecting my stories into the veins of leaves.*

*Only to find that stories, like forests,  
are subject to seasons. [1]*

RASHIDA BUMBRAY In thinking about Kerry James Marshall's work, through the lens of the conditions necessary for proficiency and mastery, I am reminded of the value of Black spaces, Black incubation spaces, like my childhood dancing studio, which was located in the basement of our church—so literally an underground space. This was in a pregentrified Washington, D.C., which was still then known as Chocolate City. I want to think about the value of these Black incubation spaces, in contrast to the contemporary realities of gentrification, displacement, erasure, and social forgetting.

It was within this space, this underground space, that I was given access to a chain of transmission and the genius of Black repetition. [Blackness] Our teachers, Black women and Black queer men, emphasized the importance of repetition in our efforts toward the ultimate goal of dancing “full out.” And we understood that this “full out” was not only a physical state but also a spiritual state, where we could access a heightened experience reserved for those who had been given access to this transfer of knowledge.

[1] Music and lyrics for *Cycles* by Samora Pinderhughes.

We had access to a spiritual and psychic technology, technologies so ancient that they seem new, like the ring shout, like tap dance. They were technologies that the poet Kamau Brathwaite has called Magical Realism, which African people developed in the New World as an alternative to insanity. [2] And these forms acted as a path to levity and freedom, the same freedom that Kerry James Marshall speaks about as the aim of proficiency. [Freedom]

As we navigate the terrifying context of our political reality, we desperately need to tap into these technologies. Our African American cultural traditions are our Timbuktu. We can preserve and make these technologies active and accessible by tapping into the rich continuum of our ancestors, the forms that were developed by our ancestors. And they developed these forms during times that were not unlike what may be ahead of us under this current administration. When I think about the kinds of injustices that are rearing their heads, it's hard for me to avoid thinking that the alt-right is also tapping into and invoking an ancestral lineage of white supremacy.

So when I look at the beauty, and also the feeling of loss, in *The Lost Boys* series [Fig. A]—[which evokes] boys who were killed at a young age, like Tamir Rice, like Trayvon Martin, like my brother George's best friend, Trip, also killed as a teenager—I think about not only the moral obligation to show Black suffering but the moral obligation to attend to Black healing. [3] Kerry James Marshall does so here, placing the tree of life into the landscape with our boys [music begins].

[2] Kamau Brathwaite, *Magical Realism*, 2 vols. (New York and Kingston: Savacou North, 2002). Brathwaite, a poet and academic from Barbados, is a prominent voice in the Caribbean literary canon.

[3] William H. Williams III, known as Trip, was killed as a teenager in Washington, D.C., in 1985.

YOU GOT A RIGHT TO THE TREE OF LIFE

CECILY BUMBRAY [Singing] *I surrendered my beliefs  
and found myself at the tree of life,  
injecting my stories into the veins of leaves.  
Only to find that stories are subject to seasons.  
Ooh-oooh, ooh.*

*Run, Mary, run.  
Run, Martha, run.  
Tell Mary run, I say.  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
You got a right, you got a right.  
You got a right to the tree of life.*

*You got a right, you got a right.  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
You got a right to the tree of life.*

*Run, Mary, run.  
Run, Martha, run.  
Tell Mary run, I say.  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
You got a right, you got a right.  
You got a right to the tree of life.*

*You got a right, you got a right.  
You got a right to the tree of life.*

*Come to tell you, you got a right.  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
You got a right, you got a right.  
You got a right to the tree of life.*



[Fig. A] Kerry James Marshall,  
*The Lost Boys*, 1993.

*Children are gone, but you got a right.  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
You got a right, you got a right.  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
Right.*

*I surrendered my beliefs  
and found myself at the tree of life,  
injecting my stories into the veins of leaves.*

*I surrendered my beliefs  
and found myself at the tree of life,  
injecting my stories into the veins of leaves.*

*Only to find that stories, like forests,  
are subject to seasons.*

*Ooh-ooh, ooh [4]*

[Applause and cheers]

[4] You Got a Right to the Tree of  
Life (traditional spiritual)

## SESSION 3

# Kimberly Bryant

**“We weren’t just teaching these girls to code—we were teaching them how to get free.”**



Kimberly Bryant is the Founder and Executive Director of Black Girls CODE, a nonprofit organization dedicated to “changing the face of technology” by introducing girls of color (ages seven to seventeen) to the field of technology and computer science with a focus on entrepreneurship.

Good afternoon. Today, if you'll allow me, I wanted to have a conversation about the "code to freedom." I grew up in the late sixties and the early seventies, in an inner-city neighborhood in Memphis, Tennessee. I always feel, when I look back on my childhood, that it was a long shot for a young black girl growing up in those city streets, who had never seen an engineer, or hardly even knew what an engineer was, to select a career in engineering and put on a hard hat and steel-toed shoes and go to work every day. I call that "defying the odds." I also believe that my Memphis heritage adds a bit of grit and righteous defiance to the mix. I consider myself one of those whom author Malcolm Gladwell calls an "outlier," or someone who happens to enter the world at a juncture in time ripe for disruption. [1]

In my case, although I encountered many obstacles along my journey, I was able to defy the odds and push through many of the barriers I encountered as a little black girl trying to enter a field that was and still is primarily male and white. This ability to "push through" is distinct from "leaning in." Sometimes, as a black girl or woman, while we are "leaning in" these male dominated spaces, we have to ramp it up a bit—find some internal motivation—and push through.

When I began my college career a little up the road from Memphis, in Nashville, Tennessee, it was a peak moment for women receiving degrees in computer science. When I graduated from Vanderbilt in the late 1980s with a degree in electrical engineering, women earned approximately 30 percent of bachelor's degrees in computer science. The rate is currently less than 18 percent for women overall. But for women of color, that number drops off a virtual

[1] See Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008).

cliff. African American women receive less than 3 percent of the bachelor's degrees in computer science. And our Latina and Native American sisters receive less than one percent. It was these statistics, honestly, that were a wake-up call for me, back in 2011. [2] And these dire numbers are what turned me—a nerdy mom at the time, who was raising this little geeky daughter who wanted to spend all of her time playing video games—into an accidental social entrepreneur. As a black woman in engineering, I was determined to create a better, a more ideal, and perhaps an easier pathway for my daughter and girls like her. Because while she had unparalleled access to technology, she was still very much a consumer, not a creator. And that's what I wanted to change with Black Girls Code.

Our mission is to empower these young girls, ages seven to seventeen, to embrace the current tech marketplace as builders and creators. Our goal is to teach one million girls to code by the year 2040, and to become the de facto Girl Scouts of technology [applause and cheers].

Now, since we started, there are many organizations that teach girls to code, but we remain the only organization with a singular and pointed focus on girls of color. And while we started with only six students in a small basement computer lab in San Francisco, our program has grown into an international movement, teaching girls to build robots and mobile apps, develop games, and more, in thirteen cities across the U.S., and in Johannesburg, South Africa [applause]. Thank you.

[2] Statistics from the National Science Foundation, [nsf.gov/statistics/2017/nsf17310/digest/fod-wmreg/black-women-by-field.cfm](https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2017/nsf17310/digest/fod-wmreg/black-women-by-field.cfm), and the American Association of University Women, [aauw.org/2016/11/17/the-future-guardians-of-the-web/](https://www.aauw.org/2016/11/17/the-future-guardians-of-the-web/).

We've reached almost five thousand students to date, and our numbers continue to rise. Yet I believe that Black Girls Code is about much more than just coding. We focus our praxis on teaching not just coding but self-efficacy. By giving our girls the tools not just to code but to imagine, we empower them to create their futures using technology as a tool. With this notion, we harness technology as a catalyst for transformative social change and justice. When we teach these little black and brown girls, these new "outliers," to code, we enable them to problem-solve. We enable them to navigate the pivot points and the obstacles that they may encounter in their environments, and we reveal the creative genius gene that lives in each and every one of them. Within Black Girls Code, we are intentional with these young women. We are really looking through the lens that they use to see the world—these girls, who live under the constant weight of an intersectional social reality of being both black and a woman, and all the requisite consequences and disenfranchisements that accompany these personas—and we transform them with the role of protagonist in the game of life. We shift the focus of their narratives from the pains of the past or present into the very real focus of what they can become. I think Shakespeare said it no better than in this line from *Hamlet*, in which Ophelia says, "Lord, we know what we are, but we know not what we may be." I also refer to Kerry James Marshall's admonition that we must come to a certain peace with the past, and then be singularly focused on the future. [3]

[3] Ian Forster, "Change from Within: Kerry James Marshall Corrects the Canon," *Art21 Artist to Artist*, October 28, 2016, [magazine.art21.org/2016/10/28/change-from-within-kerry-james-marshall-corrects-the-canon/#.WwcinVp971J](http://magazine.art21.org/2016/10/28/change-from-within-kerry-james-marshall-corrects-the-canon/#.WwcinVp971J).

So with each and every class we teach, with every lesson we give, with each line of code these girls write, and in each affirmation we share, our prayer is to help them fearlessly embrace their true future realities as brilliant, bold, and empowered creators. I think there's no time that this was more evident than it was one day five or so years ago, in the very first class that we had of Black Girls Code. I remember it vividly, sitting in the basement of this little dusty computer lab in Bayview-Hunters Point, San Francisco, one of the only remaining predominantly African American communities in the city, and waiting to see if girls were going to show up for this thing called coding, because we didn't really know. And one by one, each of those girls trickled in. Many of them lived in the neighborhood, so they walked to the center. As we sat them around the table, around a computer in the middle, the very first thing we asked was if any of them knew how to code. Did they know what that was? They looked at us with this bewildered amusement, like, I don't know what this lady is talking about, but my mama said to be here today [laughter]. But as they looked at the computer and we continued on with the lesson, we slowly introduced them to the fact that this little box that they use every day, that they encounter in their everyday lives, we're going to show them how to make it work. We're going to put them in the driver's seat. We're going to make them the creators, and not the ones that are being coded. And at that moment, I remember seeing a light bulb go off, just like you see in cartoons, in each one of their eyes. I knew they got it. And we got it. Because in that moment, we realized we weren't just teaching these girls to code—we were teaching them how to get free. Thank you. [applause and cheers].

imani uzuri

**“A slow dance is not a jig;  
it’s about the sway and  
the grind and the sweat  
and the feelings of  
this tension of intimacy  
building.”**



imani uzuri is a vocalist, composer, and cultural worker who was a 2015-2016 Park Avenue Armory Artist-in-Residence. She is a recent MAP Fund grantee for her contemporary opera *Hush Arbor*. In 2016, uzuri made her Lincoln Center American Songbook debut and was also a featured performer on BET for Black Girls Rock. She is currently a 2016-2017 Jerome Foundation Composer/Sound Artist Fellow.

Vocals

IMANI UZURI

Guitar

MARVIN SEWELL

First, giving honor unto Sandra Jackson-Dumont, pastors, saints, and friends [applause], I'm happy to be here today in the house of the spirit and of creativity [applause]. It's a blessing to be here today to respond to Kerry James Marshall's masterful work *Slow Dance* [Fig. A], which was created from 1992 to 1993. When I first saw the piece, it struck me deeply and emotionally because I am a woman in my own personal process of allowing partnership and intimacy into my life. And so when I saw the piece, I immediately thought of the scene in Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, when Stan was dancing with his wife. [1] The nakedness, the vulnerability, the intimacy was a sanctuary despite what was happening in the world. And so immediately, when I saw this work, I thought of that scene. When I did a little more research on this work, I learned that Mr. Marshall actually was inspired by that scene in the film to create this piece.

Another thing I noticed that made me really drawn to this piece as a vocalist and composer is that I saw the musical notes, which let me know that the couple were dancing to sound, and that for Mr. Marshall, sound and sonics are important in relationship to intimacy and vulnerability. And then, when you look right along where the musical notes are placed, you'll see the words "Baby, I'm for Real," referencing a song made popular by the music group The Originals. The Originals recorded the song in 1969, and it was actually written by Marvin Gaye and Anna Gordy Gaye, his wife at the time. Then, upon further research, I found out that in 1992, the same year that Mr. Marshall began painting this piece *Slow Dance*, the R&B group After 7 recorded and released a version of "Baby, I'm for Real."

[1] *Killer of Sheep* (1978) depicts life for African Americans living in Los Angeles's Watts district; Stan is the film's protagonist.



[Fig. A] Kerry James Marshall,  
*Slow Dance*, 1992-93.



[Fig. B] Romare Bearden, *Patchwork Quilt*, 1970.

Backstage today, I asked Mr. Marshall if these time frames were connected—the time frame when he began creating the piece and the release of After 7’s version of “Baby, I’m for Real”—and he was like, “No” [laughs]. So then I asked, “While working on the piece, were you also listening to the After 7 version when you were listening to The Originals’ version?” I’m trying to get all deep, and he’s like, “No” [laughter]. I was like, “Oh.” He’s like, “I didn’t even know that After 7 had done the song.” I was like, “Oh, okay.” So anyway, that was wrong [laughter].

But as I was preparing this presentation, the idea of “Baby, I’m for Real” really struck me because I feel like that concept inspired my title for this talk, “Towards a Spiritual Mastery of Intimacy, Labor, and Love.” I was thinking about what it means to surrender yourself—the work of vulnerability, the work of intimacy, the work of allowing yourself to be naked or seen. And in the painting, we see the woman looking at us. So I thought about that blue couch; I thought about those pillows; I thought about that candelabra that has some sacred etchings, I think from Haitian Vodou; I thought about those two plates that are semi-empty; I thought about what looks like an *Ebony* magazine; I thought about how the woman has that sliver of a yellow dress; I thought about the man’s tank top, and that they are dancing to a slow dance. A slow dance is a slow build; a slow dance is about intimacy, it is about vulnerability. A slow dance is not a jig; it’s about the sway and the grind and the sweat and the feelings of this tension of intimacy building. And it also reminded me of Romare Bearden’s piece *Patchwork Quilt* from 1970 [Fig. B], where the woman is lounging on the couch. So I wanted to respond a little bit by talking, but I really want to make my main response be music. So I’m going to invite Marvin Sewell, guitarist, onto the stage [applause], and we will sing a song. We collaborated on the music and I wrote the lyrics;

it's called "Love Story." And it's my own way of thinking about what "Baby, I'm for Real" means. What is my responsibility toward spiritual mastery of my own ability to be intimate and vulnerable and laboring in love? [Mastery/Mastry]

[Applause and cheers] [Guitar music; she sings:]

## LOVE STORY

*Should I come to you trusting?  
My heart opening itself?  
I will breathe in the air of life, hoping.  
Hoping, but uncertain of this feeling.  
Can this love last?  
I am ready to uncover these false prophecies of my past,  
of my past.  
I am ready to claim true vision.  
Can this love last?  
Is this just another feeling?  
Is it real?  
Or is it just another love story?  
Is this just another feeling?  
Is it real?  
Or is it just another love story?  
My heart is beating fast, like a rapid river.  
Flowing, flowing like a rapid river.  
My heart is running fast, like a rapid river.  
Flowing, flowing like a rapid river.  
Is this just another feeling?  
Is it real?  
Or is it just another love story?  
Is this just another feeling?  
Is it real?  
Or is it just another love story?  
Let it be real.  
Let it be real.*

*Let it be real.*

*Let it be real.*

*Let it be real.*

*Let it be real.*

*Let it be real.*

*Let it be real.*

*Let it be real.*

*Let it be real.*

*Let it be real.*

*Real, hey, hey, hey*

*yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah* [audience claps]

*For me. For me. For me. For me* [applause and cheers]. [2]

Thank you, Kerry James Marshall. We love you.

*Slow Dance.* Marvin Sewell. My name's imani uzuri.

Love you [applause continues].

[2] Music for *Love Story* by imani uzuri and Marvin Sewell. Lyrics by imani uzuri.

# Hank Thomas

**“An innovation creates a fundamental change in the way an activity is carried out; an innovation creates a new normal.”**



Hank Thomas is a community activist, musician, and scientist. As a physicist, Thomas worked in research at Bell Labs. A member of the NAACP Youth Corps, and later the Philadelphia chapter of the Black Panther Party, he helped organize the Mark Clark Free Medical Clinic in the early 1970s. Most recently he contributed to the book *All Power: Visual Legacies of the Black Panther Party* (2016), edited by Michelle Dunn Marsh.

In 2015 my wife, Deborah Willis, and I visited Venice, Italy, to attend the Biennale. One afternoon we decided to take a water taxi from Piazza San Marco, near the mouth of the Grand Canal, across the San Marco Basin to attend a reception hosted by Thelma Golden and the Studio Museum in Harlem.

At the reception, I met Kerry James Marshall. We engaged in a riveting conversation that was one of the most interesting I'd had in a long time. We talked about theories of cosmology and ventured into a discussion of the most extreme parameters in space and time that define our concept of the universe. I was fascinated not only by the level of his curiosity but also by the range of his intuition. Kerry, I want to thank you for a great initial discussion in 2015, and for inviting me here today to present this talk. I hope that we can, one day, continue the conversation.

My talk today will address the question "What is necessary for innovation?" That is, what conditions are necessary to allow innovation to take place?

An innovation creates a fundamental change in the way an activity is carried out; an innovation creates a new normal. For two hundred years, the horse-drawn carriage was the way that we traveled across the United States. And then, of course, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the automobile was invented and everything changed.

As a boy growing up in my hometown, Florence, South Carolina, I knew, as did most of the rest of the world, that space travel was a fiction. But a few years later, I was working with the computer group at the General Electric Missile and Space Division in Philadelphia that wrote computer programs that did the mathematical calculations to determine the necessary trajectory for an intercontinental ballistic missile carrying multiple warheads to re-enter the Earth's atmosphere and target individual cities, each with a specific warhead! It was amazing. And it

worked! As a child, *had I imagined it*, I would have thought that impossible, but a major group of innovations had taken place in the design of ballistic rockets. And, of course, we now know [that] these innovations led to the first man landing on the moon in 1969.

In his *Bibliographical History of Electricity and Magnetism*, author Paul Fleury Mottelay shows that 4,458 years passed between the time when Emperor Hoang-ti first used magnetism in ancient China to guide his army and the time when Michael Faraday first showed that electricity could be generated by rotating a conductor in a magnetic field. [1] Both of these were unimaginably important discoveries that led to equally important innovations that changed the course of human history.

In 1831 Faraday discovered the process through which human beings could reliably produce electricity. Thomas Edison made use of the information; as one of his employees described Edison after his death:

[1] Mottelay published his *Bibliographical History of Electricity and Magnetism* in 1922. The legendary Chinese sovereign Hoang-ti (who lived around 2700-2600 B.C.) developed the south-pointing chariot, which had a figure on top that always pointed south no matter how the chariot was turned. Thousands of years later, Faraday (1791-1867) established the basis for the concept of the electromagnetic field, making him one of the most influential scientists in history.

He led no armies into battle, he conquered no countries, and he enslaved no peoples . . . Nonetheless, he exerted a degree of power the magnitude of which no warrior ever dreamed. His name still commands a respect as sweeping in scope and as world-wide as that of any other mortal—a devotion rooted deep in human gratitude and untainted by the bias that is often associated with race, color, politics, and religion. [2]

Using the information that he learned from Faraday, Edison singlehandedly changed the course of human history. From his first inventions in 1877, and for the rest of his life, Edison produced innovative devices like the light bulb, the phonograph, electric power stations, motion picture cameras, etc. He produced many other devices and patents.

Thousands of other scientists and scholars, over thousands of years, have similarly absorbed and contributed to the information base of the world. Innovations such as these are possible because of the accumulation of that knowledge, the collection of that knowledge into an information base, and the availability of that information base throughout the world.

I believe that the fundamental requirements for innovation are:

1. The availability of information. You've got to have the basic information to begin with.
2. The ability to focus intensely on the development of an idea based on that information and to see it through to fruition (i.e., success or failure), no matter how farfetched and ridiculous that initial idea seems to be. [Creativity]

[2] The text is taken from a eulogy for Edison upon the inventor's death in 1931. It was written by Arthur Palmer, an employee of Edison Industries.

3. The willingness to embrace failure. Hundreds and thousands of failures are sometimes necessary—although [to Marshall] you and I are going to have to talk about this failure business [laughter]. But fear of failure prevents so many people from excelling or even succeeding. So you’ve got to be prepared for failure[s], hundreds and thousands of them. Sometimes your initial assumptions are wrong. Sometimes you’re asking the wrong question. But at the end of the day, you’re the one who has to make the decision, “Okay, this is a dead end, I’m done with this. Let me start from another direction.”

While Edison was the undisputed leader in the development of electricity as an industry, a lot of other very talented and determined people contributed to his effort and to the ultimate development and distribution of electricity throughout the United States. One of them was Lewis Latimer. He started as a teenager working as an “office boy” in a Massachusetts law firm that specialized in getting patents for inventors. Over time he taught himself to draft engineering documents by studying in the library and watching the draftsmen who worked for the law firm. He was soon promoted by the law firm and became the chief draftsman. When Alexander Graham Bell, who happened to be a client of the firm, needed drawings in a great hurry to file first, ahead of a competitor, to get a patent for the first telephone, he chose Lewis Latimer, who drafted the invention and got the patent for Bell’s telephone in 1876. He became an “overnight” success in the engineering world and was hired in 1884 by Edison to work at Edison’s laboratory as a draftsman, making and submitting drawings to the patent office for the approval of patents for new inventions. In the process, he became intimately familiar with the details of many of Edison’s inventions. As a result of his talent for drafting new ideas and his experience

paying extreme attention to detail, Latimer, a black man, was hired to lead the planning teams and help to install the first electric power plants in Philadelphia and New York City.

I'm a jazz musician and a physicist. I play saxophone. During the late 1960s I led a jazz band. I led my band through Western Europe—from Paris to Germany, from Copenhagen to Marbella, Spain—and had an incredible time doing it. In 1969 I made the decision to move back to the United States.

In January 1970 I arrived in Philadelphia as a first-year student, a physics major, at Temple University. Shortly after that, I met the woman who became my road mate, soul mate, and wife, Deborah Willis. She was a young photographer, and I had a darkroom in the physics laboratory.

Deb and I traveled extensively as undergraduates, in our Volkswagen Beetle (which I brought back to the U.S. from the music tour in Germany) at first, and later in our MGB, up and down the coast and into the interior of the U.S. as Deb did cultural and photo studies and I just enjoyed the ride.

I've been a social activist my entire life. I started work during those undergraduate years with the Black Panther Party in North Philadelphia. At that time, I was intent on going to medical school and becoming a physician. One of the many things I did with the Black Panther Party was help set up a free medical clinic in the black community in North Philadelphia. As Alondra Nelson mentioned earlier during her talk, Mark Clark was a young man in Chicago—he was maybe twenty-two years old—who was killed when he answered the door in Fred Hampton's apartment the night the cops came in and killed Fred. So we named the medical clinic in Philadelphia the Mark Clark Free Medical Clinic in Mark's memory.

At Temple, I did well academically, and one of my physics professors, Dr. Leonard Muldawer, introduced me

to Peter Eisenberger, who was a scientist at Bell Laboratories in Murray Hill, New Jersey, at that time. I was later recruited by Bell Laboratories, awarded a PhD fellowship to attend Columbia University, and given the opportunity to do physics research at Bell Laboratories. Bell Laboratories, with over a thousand of the most gifted scientists in the world, was a huge physics think tank. The place was truly otherworldly! I was fascinated my first day there when Eisenberger, who was my advisor at Columbia University, and who also became my mentor at Bell Laboratories, led me down a hallway that was at least a mile long. I couldn't see the other end of it. On either side were large, fully equipped research laboratories. Individual scientists in each laboratory were working on every conceivable kind of physics problem. People were building giant lasers, and other people were listening to radio waves from outer space. Some people were doing experiments looking for superconductivity at very low temperatures; other people were scattering high-energy photons off of atoms to study atomic and molecular structures. It was an absolutely fascinating place to work.

One of the most enlightening things about the experience was the impact of the diversity of people with whom I became associated. Many different languages were spoken. The people came from all over the world. They came from every walk of life and all kinds of different lifestyles. Some were from poor families. Others were from super-rich backgrounds. We were all working on different problems in physics, mathematics, or chemistry.

On either side of my lab there were Nobel Laureates, people who had already earned Nobel Prizes in physics and other sciences. At the end of the day, though, we were all colleagues. We spent a lot of time together on weekends with our families in each other's homes or backyards for cookouts, during which there were the usual philosophical

arguments on any topic you could name. My son, Hank, was a baby during those years. But it was a wonderful, fantastic time and place to work, and it was the diversity among the people that made the Labs so great an institution. We shared our information and worked together as a team, and it made Bell Laboratories one of the most fabulous places to be in the world. Among many scientific accomplishments at Bell Labs was the invention and development of the transistor.

Several black research scientists worked at the Labs during this period. I didn't know that other black scientists existed until I got to Bell Labs. They were wonderful, wonderful human beings and very, very talented scientists. Among the ones that I knew were Earl Shaw, who was doing pioneering research in the development of lasers, and Jim West, a world authority on acoustics and sound who had already invented several microphones. West is the coinventor of the electret microphone, which is used in most telephones. He had also been a consultant in the acoustic design of Avery Fisher Hall [now David Geffen Hall] in New York City. Jim Mitchell and Joe Reed were both chemists who were doing research in the development of new materials.

It is now possible to collect and store all of the information that's ever been gathered by human beings since the appearance of human beings on this planet. We can gather that information now, we can store it, and we can make it available to people all over the world. It's this basic information that is needed for future innovations. The pace of innovation throughout the world right now is literally staggering, largely due to the work done at Bell Laboratories.

What we've learned today is that Kerry James Marshall is a master innovator. For that to come about, thousands and thousands of other innovators would've

had to lay the groundwork, and now Kerry has made the leap. [Mastery/Mastry]

The question for us now is, what's next?

From my experience as an activist; as someone growing up in the segregated South; as a soldier in the war; as a jazz musician; as a person working with the Black Panther Party; as an undergraduate physics major; as a physicist; as a filmmaker; as a real estate developer; as the father of one of the most prolific young artists in the country, who has singlehandedly built a business around the production of his own art; and as the husband of a fabulously talented MacArthur Fellow who has written more than a dozen books, produced award-winning motion pictures, and leads her field in the world of art and the history of art in the black community, I've seen many different worlds in my life and been very fortunate to survive and benefit from the encounters. [3] But there are a few things that have been steadfast and constant over the years. Among them are curiosity, research, improvisation, and mastery. All the people whom I've described here are people who've made every effort, and continue to make the effort, to actually master their discipline, whatever that discipline happens to be. [Mastery/Mastry]

I want to thank Sandra Jackson-Dumont again for the opportunity to speak, and I especially want to thank Kerry James Marshall; my wife, Deborah Willis; my son, Hank Willis Thomas; and Thelma Golden for inviting me to that party [laughter]. Thank you very much [applause].

[3] Deborah Willis is a photographer and professor at New York University. Hank Willis Thomas is a conceptual artist working with themes of identity, history, and popular culture, often incorporating iconography from advertising and branding into his work.

# Mario Gooden

**“I’d like to take a deeper look underneath Kerry’s work and look at its relationship to the architectural historical canon and the cultural spatial structure that informs his work.”**



Mario Gooden is a principal of Huff + Gooden Architects and a Professor of Practice at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation (GSAPP) of Columbia University, where he is also the Codirector of the Global Africa Lab (GAL). His most recent publication is *Dark Space: Architecture, Representation, Black Identity*.

[Blackness]  
9 57 61 66 82-83 86-87  
149 159 191 203-207  
213 221 229-230 236  
240 246 249 256 258

I'd like to thank Kerry for the gift of his magnificent body of work and for the exhibition at The Met Breuer, and I'd also like to thank The Met for the gift of this amazing event today [applause]. I'd like to take a deeper look underneath Kerry's work and look at its relationship to the architectural historical canon and the cultural spatial structure that informs his work. In 1937 the United States Congress enacted the Wagner-Steagall Act, also known as the United States Housing Act of 1937, which provided subsidies to the state and local housing authorities for the elimination of unsafe and unsanitary housing conditions; for the eradication of slums; for the provision of decent, safe, and sanitary dwellings for families of low income; for the reduction of unemployment and the stimulation of business activity to create a United States Housing Authority; and for other purposes. The act builds upon the National Housing Act of 1934, which established the Federal Housing Administration, or FHA, now part of the cabinet department that neurosurgeon Dr. Ben Carson was recently nominated to lead [laughter]. Two months before the United States Housing Act, architect Paul Revere Williams penned an essay in a 1937 issue of *American Magazine* and wrote:

I am an architect. Today I sketched the preliminary plans for a large country house, which will be erected in one of the most beautiful residential districts in the world, a district of roomy estates, entrancing vistas, and stately mansions. Sometimes I have dreamed of living there. I could afford such a home. But this evening, leaving my office, I will return to my own small, inexpensive home in an unrestricted, comparatively undesirable section of Los Angeles, because I am a Negro. [1]  
[Blackness]

[1] Paul Revere Williams, "I Am a Negro," *The American Magazine* 124 (July 1937), 161-63.

Paul Revere Williams was born in Los Angeles to African American parents who migrated to L.A. from Tennessee in the early 1890s, and both of them died when Williams was very young. He attended the Polytechnic High School and graduated in 1912. Then he attended the Los Angeles School of Art and Design while simultaneously studying at the L.A. component of the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design from 1913 to 1916. Williams became a licensed architect in 1921 and opened his own office in 1922, with his first residential commission. He went on to become known as the architect to wealthy Angelenos—such as Jay Paley, Jack P. Atkin, and Fred Price—and an architect to the stars of the 1920s and 1930s, designing houses for Lon Chaney, Charles Correll of *Amos 'n' Andy*, and, in later decades, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Tyrone Power, Barbara Stanwyck, and Frank Sinatra. As Williams's practice grew, he went [on] to establish himself as a prominent designer not only of commercial architecture but also of housing, having been appointed a commissioner of the National Board of Municipal Housing as well as a member of the Los Angeles Housing Commission from 1933 to 1941. He was a prolific architect whose career extended to the early 1970s. In May of 2017, some thirty-seven years after his death in 1980, he will be posthumously presented the American Institute of Architects Gold Medal, the highest honor in American architecture to ever be bestowed upon an African American architect [applause]. Yet here to date, his work has been excluded from the architectural historical canon. Continuing in the aforementioned 1937 essay, "I Am a Negro," he writes, "As associate architect for the Federal Negro Housing Project, I maintain an office in Washington, D.C. At frequent intervals, I make hurried trips to supervise the work which is being done there. Should I travel through the South, I must ride in the Jim Crow car, because I am a Negro."

Not only does Williams acknowledge the ironies of his professional and social life and the racial restrictions pertaining to housing for African Americans, he also acknowledges the desire and dreams and entrancing vistas of the Southern California lifestyle. As his career progressed, his work would transform from the traditional styles of that early body of work to the promises of cultural transformation and new ways of living promoted by European modernism. His first housing project was Langston Terrace in Washington, D.C., in 1936, code-signed with black architect Hilyard Robinson. Langston Terrace was one of the first federally funded public housing projects in the country. Writing in the *Harvard Design Magazine*, the late J. Max Bond described the architecture of Langston Terrace as asserting modernism's faith in the capacity of buildings to enhance human experience. [2]

The same methods employed by European and Euro-American architects of similar faith are found in Langston. A few years following the construction of Langston Terrace, Williams was the chief architect for the Pueblo Del Rio housing project in Los Angeles, which was built between 1941 and 1942. [3] The project was designed for 1,350 people, and it was the only housing project of the fifteen housing projects in Los Angeles built until that time that was open for African Americans. He worked with a team of architects comprising Adrian Wilson, Gordon B. Kaufmann, Wurdeman and Becket, and the famous

[2] J. Max Bond, "Still Here," *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 2 (Summer 1997).

[3] Karen E. Hudson, *Paul R. Williams, Architect: A Legacy of Style* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1993), 25.

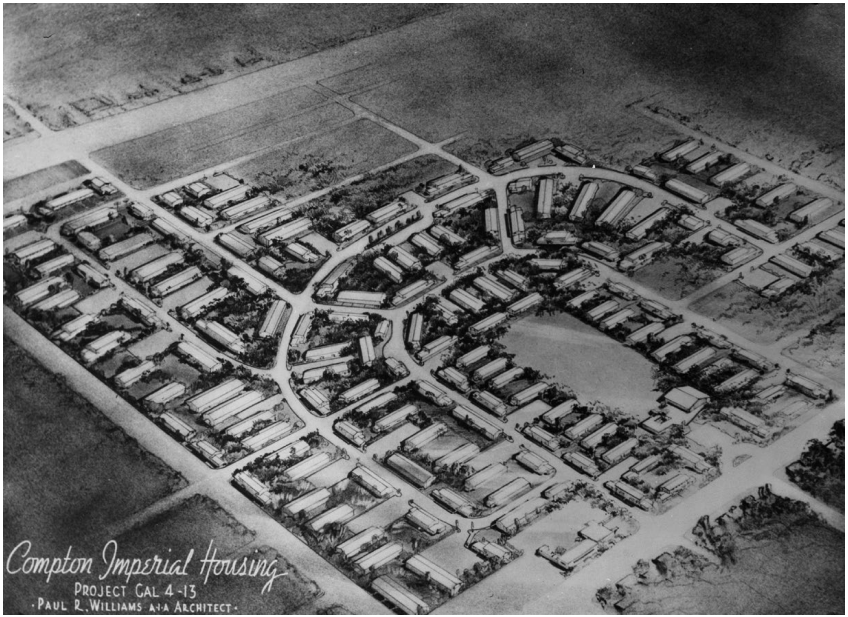
architect Richard Neutra. The design for Pueblo Del Rio reflects the urban aspirations of Southern California modernism. It was planned after the European garden city model and originally included 390 apartments. [4]

It was built for low-income defense industry workers, and the mostly two-story masonry and reinforced duplex apartments recall the German social housing projects of the 1920s. The design is simple and utilitarian, and it was conceptualized by the team of architects as a laboratory for new construction methods and ideas. In 1954 Williams completed the construction of the Compton Imperial Courts housing project in Watts. [5] [Fig. A] It was later renamed Nickerson Gardens, in honor of William Nickerson Jr., the founder of the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company. Williams's design is again based upon the European garden city model, yet the overall planning for the project, which comprises 1,110 units covering more than fifty acres, is organized along curving streets radiating from the center that allow a visitor to see only six or eight buildings at any one time, thus creating the impression of small neighborhoods. In 1954 an article in the *Journal of Housing* described Nickerson Gardens as typically Californian, with flat roofs and wide overhangs that protect against the summer sun but admit low winter rays. [6] It's built with concrete block and stucco construction; light colors, both inside and outside; wide windows; and open floor plans for the dwellings.

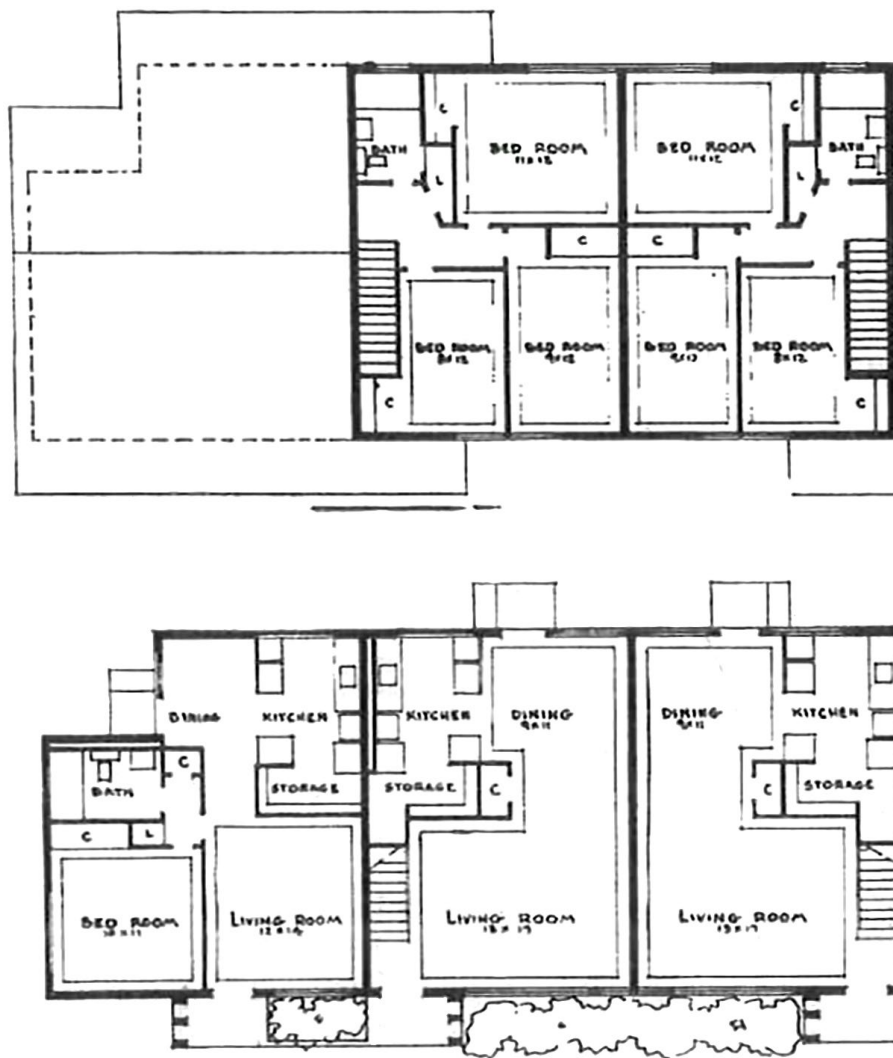
[4] The garden city model was created by the British architect Ebenezer Howard. Howard proposed the model of a self-contained town—with public parks, open spaces, and wide boulevards—circled by a proportionate amount of agricultural land.

[5] Architectural Resources Group. *Garden Apartments of Los Angeles: Historic Context Statement*. 1st ed. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Conservancy, 2012), 52.

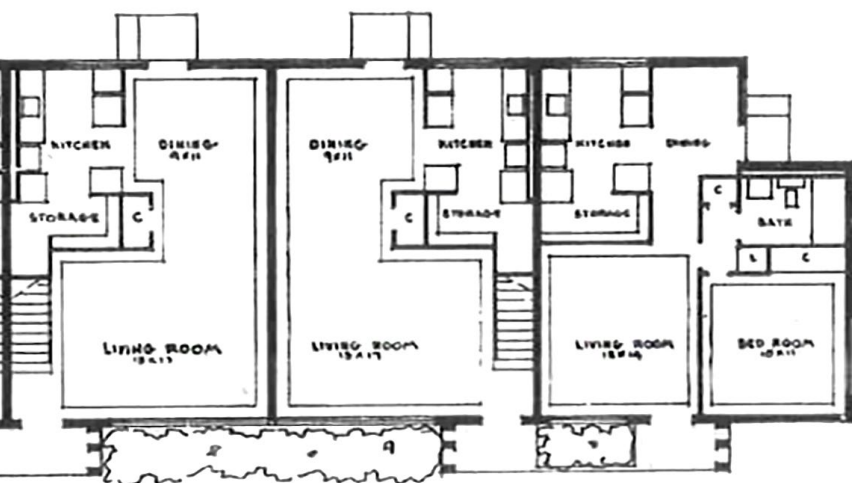
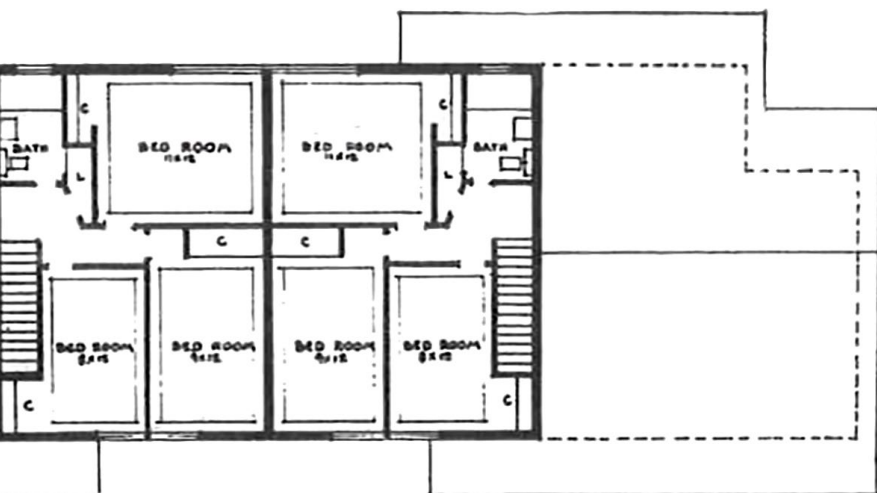
[6] "Nickerson Gardens: Big Project of Small Neighborhoods Built by Los Angeles Housing Authority," *Journal of Housing*, (December 1954), 426.



[Fig. A] Rendering of an aerial view of the proposed Compton Imperial Housing project/Nickerson Gardens, Los Angeles, California, 1952. Paul R. Williams, architect.



[Fig. B] Floor plans for Compton Imperial Housing/Nickerson Gardens, Los Angeles, California, 1954. Paul R. Williams, architect.



As illustrated in the floor plans, all the units are two stories, except for the one-bedroom units, which are added to the end of some units. [Fig. B] The downstairs floor is typical of midcentury modern residential design, including residences that Williams designed for wealthy clients in Palm Springs and other Hollywood enclaves. An interior photo from 1954 captures the modernist architectural spirit, with its efficient design of the kitchen and interior surfaces. Finally, a rendering by Williams illustrates the community center building at the center of the development, set in a parklike setting adjacent to play fields, including a baseball diamond, open green spaces, and an outdoor stage. The community building includes a large assembly hall for five hundred people that functions as a gymnasium and can also host community plays and parties.

Now, Kerry James Marshall's family lived at Nickerson Gardens for their first year in Los Angeles, [Figs. C and D] arriving eight years after its construction. In an oral history interview for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art, Kerry recalled:

We had just come to California. It was so unfamiliar. You know, we had never seen a palm tree, like those palm trees before. So that was all kind of strange. And the light was different. It's like we come to California; our eyes hurt, you know? And we thought it was because the sun was too bright. . . . it was interesting. When we came to California, my aunt, the one who my father had come out to, she and her husband had split up. So when we moved into the apartment we had in Nickerson Gardens, she and her daughter, my cousin Pam, they moved in with us. So it was two families, basically, living in that place. It was split-level. You had an upstairs and a downstairs. My aunt Florence and my cousin Pam, and then it was me and my brother and my sister. So there were only three kids who came out from Birmingham. So it was all us there. Our house was right next to the field, the playing field, and the gymnasium. We were just right there. And at the time, it was really a kind of a golden age for public housing, I think, because a lot of people were—I mean, these were desirable places to go. . . . They were all brand new. They were all brand new. [7]

Thank you [applause].



[7] Kerry James Marshall, interview with Kathy Goncharov, August 8, 2008, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, [aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-kerry-james-marshall-13706](http://aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-kerry-james-marshall-13706).

[Fig. C] Kerry James Marshall, *Watts* 1963, 1995.



[Fig. D] Leaders of the Residents  
Advisory Council, Nickerson  
Gardens, Watts, California, 1984.

# Thelma Golden, Arthur Jafa & Greg Tate

**“We know that to create  
black space also means  
to create freedom.”**

—THELMA GOLDEN



Thelma Golden is Director and Chief Curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, where she began her career in 1987 before joining the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1988. She returned to the Studio Museum in 2000 as Deputy Director for Exhibitions and Programs, and was named Director in 2005. Golden's many achievements include the 2016 Audrey Irmis Award for Curatorial Excellence.



Arthur Jafa is best known for his work as a director and cinematographer, having worked on such films as *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993), and *Crooklyn* (1994). Jafa directed the films *Slowly This* (1995), *Tree* (1999), and *Deshotten 1.0* (2009). He has also published essays on black cultural politics and speaks frequently on the complexities of a black aesthetic as well as the potentialities of black cinema.



Greg Tate is a writer and musician who lives in Harlem. He was a staff writer at *The Village Voice* from 1987 to 2003, and his writings on culture and politics have also appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Artforum*, and *Rolling Stone*. In 1999 he formed Burnt Sugar with Jared Nickerson. His most recent book is *Flyboy 2: The Greg Tate Reader* (2016).

THELMA GOLDEN Good afternoon, everyone. It is a pleasure to be here. Today, we will hear from two colleagues and friends, Greg Tate and Arthur Jafa, who have been in conversation with each other and with Kerry James Marshall's work, and the many things that inform it, for a very long time. Kerry spoke so beautifully about freedom. We know that to create black space also means to create freedom.

[Freedom] [Blackness] I wanted to start by asking both of you to talk about creating black space, and blackness, as it relates to Kerry James Marshall's work artistically, politically, and spiritually.

GREG TATE I think of Kerry's project *Mastry* in relation to something somebody once said about black music representing the supreme Africanization of the Western tonal system. I think about Kerry's work in reference to the Ralph Ellison quote that says something like, "If you want to slip the yoke of slavery, you have to change the joke." [1]

I think about it in relation to Frederick Douglass, an autodidact who becomes someone whom Mary Todd Lincoln drafts into service to do the eulogy, at the last minute, for Abraham Lincoln. Douglass was capable of amazing improvisational prowess and was called the greatest orator of the nineteenth century. So I think about this work in relation to that of others who have expanded the space in which the liberated black consciousness, the liberated black body, has had to operate within America. I think about it in relationship to Jack Johnson, who, when he decided he was going to become heavyweight boxing

[1] Tate refers to the title of an essay by Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in the collection *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1964), 45.

champion of the world, the mythology was, black men can't be prizefighters because they don't have the stomach to take the punches. [2] [Blackness] There are always artificial limits that are set up, which only inspire people to make warp-speed quantum leaps beyond just becoming the first black thing; they do it with so much superheroic bravura and just swagadociousness [laughter] and Negrocity that they become the standard. [Blackness]

TG Yes. This is relevant especially in regard to the institution, where creating black space is still a challenge in the twenty-first century.

GT To bring it closer to our moment, you have to talk about Kerry's work in relation to [Duke] Ellington's mastery, that expansion of the space on multiple levels. [Mastery/Mastry] Think about it in terms of all these people who looked at these institutions that said, "You don't belong here." They said, "I'm [going to] come in the house, wreck the joint. I'm coming to take this. I'm about to territorialize this in the name of Blacknuss"—with an N-U-S-S—as Rahsaan Roland Kirk spelled it for us. [3] [Romare] Bearden's in this conversation; [Jean-Michel] Basquiat's in this conversation; Jimi Hendrix, Prince, and the Bad Brains are in this conversation; Michael Jackson is in this

[2] In 1908 Jack Johnson (1878-1946) became the first African American world heavyweight boxing champion.

[3] Rahsaan Roland Kirk (1935-1977) was an American jazz musician who played numerous instruments. "Blacknuss" was the title of a 1972 album by Kirk, as well as the name of the final track on the album.

[Mastery/Mastry]  
54 68 99 106 110-111  
116 125 132 177 188  
204-205 207 210 212 221

[Blackness]  
9 57 61 66 82-83 86-87  
149 159 191 203-207  
213 221 229-230 236  
240 246 249 256 258

conversation, because these are people for whom excellence was a given. But to move into those spaces with the kind of intention and the sense of mission that they did is the only way you end up pulling out of those spaces what you need to expand people's vision and people's sense of belonging. Kerry's work has all of that going on.

Kerry is addressing the whole question of presence in the face of absence, of erasure—the blackness on blackness of the figure in the work. [Blackness] He's given us a representational presence on museum walls, of the places where we live and of the people we know. What's beautiful about walking through the show is taking that journey with Kerry from the subliminal to the liminal. He's taking these aspects of the culture that one could call quotidian blackness—black folks in the Boy Scouts or black folks in juke joints or black people in the beauty parlor—and bringing a certain futurity, a transcendentalist quality, to it. [Blackness] What you also have to appreciate is the mastery of an eight-hundred-year tradition of Western painting. [Mastery/Mastry]

ARTHUR JAFa Golly, man! You took all the air out of the room [laughter]. It's supposed to be a jazz thing, not a monologue [laughter]. I've known that dude Kerry Marshall for a long time—over thirty years now. [It was] very momentous meeting him; I literally called him up cold on the phone, because there was a little blurb in the *L.A. Weekly* around '85 and it was just funny as hell. I started asking everybody around, "Hey, you know this guy Kerry James Marshall?" A good friend of mine, Benny Collins, said, "I know Kerry. I can get his number." I called Kerry. I think we talked for about two hours, cold on the phone. He finally said, "Yo, man, I've got to get off this phone and get some work done, but you should come by this weekend." I came by that Sunday and I think we talked for about eleven hours. I'm not exaggerating. You have these meetings with people

[Portraiture]

57 61 62 66 207

[Mastery/Mastery]

54 68 99 106 110-111  
116 125 132 177 188  
204-205 207 210 212 221

that are momentous meetings, that end up defining your trajectory, to a certain degree.

I could say a lot about Kerry. I'll say, "God, he's the hardest-working cat I have ever met in my life." I mean, that should be apparent. I always think of it in relation to what they said about John Coltrane; he worked himself into a genius. [4] Kerry was talented when I met him, extremely brilliant, rhetorically brilliant. I literally have seen him go from what I felt was supertalented to a genius, by any sort of normative metric of what a genius is.

There are obvious things you could say about the work, like the way he centers the black figure. It seems like a small, simple gesture, but it's such a complicated, radical gesture to put a black figure in the center of everything. I think this is true of Kerry's work; he decided early on, I want to make the blackest thing I can conceivably make. Not just in the centering of the figure—I want to make the blackest thing I can conceivably make, and still force you to deal with my humanity. It's not a split. It's a refusal to not be black and still force you to deal with the humanity.

[Blackness]

I think there's a tendency to think of these works primarily as figurative paintings. I would challenge that a little bit. As much as they are paintings, they are things. It's complicated to make a pictorial thing. It looks like a painting, but it's this thing that generates a hyper-complex discursive and rhetorical field around itself. When you enter into it, when you encounter it, it forces you to second-guess a whole lot of assumptions you have about what it is you're actually standing in front of. Mastery.

[Blackness]

9 57 61 66 82-83 86-87  
149 159 191 203-207  
213 221 229-230 236  
240 246 249 256 258

[4] For more on John Coltrane, see the presentation by Robert O'Meally, page 114.

In the last intense conversation Kerry and I had, I said, “I’ve been thinking about this idea of the difference between photographs and paintings. You know, what do paintings do that photographs don’t do?” He just said, “Discrepancy.” Photographs don’t have discrepancy the way paintings have discrepancy, meaning that a lot of the energy is operating in the space between the rendering and the thing that is supposedly being rendered.

TG     What does that space represent for you as a black artist?

AJ     That gap is a complicated thing for black folks, because we live in the space of discrepancy all the time. We came here; they said we were not human. We were forced on a visceral, complex, violent level to deal with that discrepancy. Picasso talked about *Les Femmes d’Alger* as the first Modernist painting, which is figurative, but he always said these are fetishes designed to fight off figures. I feel like, on a really profound level, these paintings, which pretend to be and actually can function as figurative portraits [Portraiture], are really about wrestling with these misbegotten notions of who we are in our humanity and our complexity. [Blackness]

TG     What Kerry proposes in this exhibition is this idea of mastery. To talk about that, we do have to talk about an idea of genius [Mastery/Mastry]—of how genius can be understood in the face of the exclusions of black subjectivity. How do black genius and this work open up these spaces that reinvent an idea of authority?

GT     The work is addressing the mythology or the stigma of nothingness. After certain work arrives, you can’t ever imagine the world without it. These things break space,



Kerry James Marshall,  
*Untitled (Blot)*, 2014.



and then authorize and create portals for other people to enter, and continue to displace this idea of nothingness. This notion of entropy exists around black presence, certainly within the context of America. If you think about Basquiat, his work might sell for \$45 million. The next day, there will be an article in the *New York Times* saying, “Is this painting worth \$45 million?” There’s an argument against black people always arriving at these places where they’re not supposed to exist, fully and complexly.

And there’s the pushback, which we’re living inside of now. It is a critical moment to think about what it means for the authorizing power of the White House to be used to create a wall that walls whiteness in, away from the world. Like all of us, I wake up every morning thinking about how to address this shift. The agency and power that’s reverberating from Kerry’s work—from all the work that you’ve ever claimed as representational of your radical, emancipatory stance on what a certain core of America is—makes you realize that it’s the presence of that work in the face of brutal repression that is the weaponry that’s going to dissolve it. Work at the battlements, work at the barricades, work at the front lines.

TG In relation to the work, this authority also comes out of an understanding of a history of images. Kerry spoke to this idea of that early engagement with the collecting of images. [Mastery/Mastry] This is something that’s been deeply important to your work, A. J. Is the impulse toward archiving and collecting images part of making an art that positions a new kind of art history?

AJ The first time I heard somebody say something super, super complicated, something that challenged assumptions I had—this was in the early eighties—was the first time I ever read Cornel West. It was an interview with him. It was

brilliant, just startled me, even. He was talking about music and then someone said, “Well, what about visual art?” Cornel responded with something like, “Well, far as I can tell, black visual culture’s not that apparent.” It was a deep statement. It set off a shit-storm in the community of African American artists. Particularly, I remember Howardena Pindell was critical of that. But Cornel said something else in the interview that really struck me. He said the reason that black visual culture was underdeveloped was because it never found a place of subsidy in the black church—that the black church was the only institution black people had that could provide a ground in which black artists could flourish. You could see that with song, with dance, with language, language prowess. Cornel pointed out that because black churches were Protestant churches, they had that antagonistic relationship to the pictorial that you don’t see in Catholic churches.

I think Cornel was right, to a certain degree, but he was wrong in his terms. It wasn’t black visual underdevelopment; it was black pictorial underdevelopment. The distinction I’m making is critical because the way black people dress, dance, move—that’s visual. Nothing is more complicated or more developed than that. Visually, our shit was always off the chain [applause]. The pictorial underdevelopment was tied to some very basic things. It was tied to the fact that we were enslaved and we were brought here. One of my favorite quotes is from Nam June Paik, when he said, “The culture that’s going to survive in the future is the culture that you can carry around in your head.” When you envision black people on slave ships, the things that we’re rich and developed in—music, dance, oratorical prowess—we can carry those in our nervous systems. There is no contemporary modern art without African art. And we know that modern art is a subset of African art and aesthetics, but those things—sculpture,

architecture, all that stuff—we couldn’t carry that on the slave ship with us.

I think it’s very clear—and I’ve had this conversation with Kerry—that when you enter into the space of how to address not only performance in this area, but relative underdevelopment, it gets to be a really complicated endeavor. It’s not just making a painting or being masterful, per se. I think the reason why he consciously misspells “mastery” is that as black people we enter into this complicated relationship, the binary opposition. [Mastery/Mastry] We get to this country; they’re humans over there, and we’re not humans. They’re masters and we’re slaves. We don’t want to be slaves; we want to assert ourselves and put ourselves into the space of mastery. But we don’t want to be them. We don’t want to be masters like they are masters. If that’s the definition of human, we don’t want to be it. This is what I mean by the rhetorical complexity of the work. He understands black work has got to perform. Like my dad always said, “They don’t pay black people to sit on the bench.” His work is, first and foremost, performing on a level at which you cannot question his choices and his intent. And inside of that, he’s doing all this other funky, crazy voodoo shit. [Creativity]

GT It’s been, what, about twenty-five years since Cornel’s response to that question? But that comes before we knew about Thornton Dial. [5] When you look at the body of it, you realize that some black people were not traditional Christians. Their church was a church that took place in nature. That’s why that work is in front of the

[5] The African American artist Thornton Dial (1928-2016) created monumental assemblages that address themes in history and politics.

house, in the house, to the side of the house, way out back beyond the house. In terms of just that subsidy question, people answered that with self-defined authority.

AJ Exactly. Dial is operating in the space of the yard sculpture, but in the context, or in the frame, of what looks like a painting. And it does do the job of being a painting. You can hang it on the wall. It has currency—there's a reason people pay for paintings. You can move that work around in a certain kind of way, in your interiors. Inside of that, I would still insist that those works are doing way more complicated things than just representing us.

TG The representing of us, however, is powerful. That's what we understand about the reactions to this exhibition. The way these paintings change the space of the museum creates a profound experience for the people who see them—all of the people. I think that really addresses this idea of self-determination, as it relates to black creativity.

[Blackness] [Creativity]

GT When you talk about self-determination, I think of what Kerry said about wanting to make work in which his cousins and nephews and family members could also see themselves represented inside of this powerful, authorizing space. These spaces, whether we like it or not, perform the same work that literature programs at the Ivies perform. They define, with the conversation, the discourse of American culture—who's civilized and who's savage, who belongs and who doesn't, who's excluded and who's erased.

AJ To encapsulate that, these works are more conversation pieces than they are masterpieces. They're much more preoccupied with being things that create complex

relationships when black people, first and foremost, stand in front of them, but hopefully when everybody else stands in front of them, too.

GT Let me throw your own coinage back on you, because the way you've expressed that to me is even more direct: we don't need any more masterpieces, only conversation pieces.

AJ I think that's true. I went to Chicago a few years ago—three years ago, actually—to Theaster Gates's retreat. [6] He has a black artists' retreat, where artists gather and exchange ideas. I went; Kerry came the first night, to the dinner, and then I didn't see him again [laughter]. I remember going to Kerry afterward, and I said, "Kerry, I got into a big argument with some people there. They seem to be operating under the understanding that art had any inherent value, which I don't believe. It's not like a piece of coal that you can burn and you get some heat. It's assigned value." Kerry just looked at me and laughed. He said, "Art is about making value. It doesn't have an inherent value. It's a value that you assert." It's just like he said earlier: you assert your freedom. It's not something anybody gives you.

[Freedom]

TG Kerry has said, "I don't believe in hope—I believe in action." What is the most important action for radical creativity in this moment? [Creativity]

[6] Theaster Gates (born 1973) is an installation artist whose work centers on urban planning and community spaces. He has hosted the annual Black Artists Retreat (B.A.R.) in Chicago, Illinois.

GT Yeah, I think not everybody is going to approach this kind of wrecking and claiming the institution with the same kind of sense of mission. But what I think this moment is occasioning is the kind of action that's based in profound reflection, and it's very interesting. If I think about three major works that the political furor of the moment has produced—Black Lives Matter, that militant articulation as a confrontational address, a means to address white supremacy—then yeah, I think of D'Angelo's *Black Messiah*, Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*, and Solange's *A Seat at the Table*. [7] Now, all of those artists, to me, met this challenge that historically has always been demanded of artists when the people are in the street. You know, what have you got to say? How are you making a contribution through the way you marshal your talents and energies in this meta space, this meta inspirational space? Those artists went in deep. Those records just have layers of complexity to them; you have to spend time with them. You have to spend time with the text; you have to spend time with the structural strangeness and almost esoteric qualities, the way that they create a certain amount of friction between your expectations of pleasure and the way they deliver pleasure. So I think [they are] complicating that whole notion of just being an artist and creating spectacle and performing, but not making it something that can

[7] D'Angelo's album *Black Messiah* (2014), Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015), and Solange's *A Seat at the Table* (2016) all engage with the African American experience and grapple with issues affecting the African American community, such as the controversial cases of Michael Brown and Eric Garner.

just be relegated to the space of entertainment. With all of those projects, they made the musically critical community have to do homework they never thought they'd have to do. They thought they knew hip-hop. They had Rap Genius to go to, you know. Beyoncé's visual album is in there, too. It's like the text of all of that music demanded that you had to get your ass to a library; you had to open a book. Maybe about twenty, you know, if you actually wanted to understand the intellectual and introspective spaces where these powerful works were originating. That's the tradition, how you complicate what goes on in the cypher.

AJ     Just a quick response to the hope thing—I don't believe everything that Kerry James Marshall says [laughter]. Because Kerry is a very strange combination of things. He's what J. Wright called a serious, strict brother. He's a super-severe cat, on one hand, but also a trickster. So when he says, "I don't believe in hope," I don't believe that at all. I think he doesn't believe in sitting around moaning about hope and keep[ing] hope alive [laughter]. I think he has a kind of, "I hope you can keep up" attitude, you know?  
[Laughter and applause]

TG     I know that everyone here sits in gratitude for the space that Kerry James Marshall's work has created. It has generated a wide field for us all to operate in, in ways that are profound and complex. I think what this day has felt like is a combination of school and church at the same time—what I believe museums should be. What's important about this moment, and what you two have done to help, is acknowledging the power of the space that art can make, and particularly the power of Kerry James Marshall's work. Thank you Tate, thank you A. J.

GT     **Thank you, Kerry James Marshall.**

AJ     **Thank you, Kerry James Marshall** [applause and cheers].

## CLOSING REMARKS

SANDRA JACKSON-DUMONT So Kerry, as we close out this day, can you say a few words? [sustained applause]

KERRY JAMES MARSHALL You know what? I don't even know where to begin. This has been just an incredible, an incredible afternoon. [applause] It's almost impossible to put into words. I mean, from the moment Toshi Reagon hit that first chord on the guitar, [applause, cheers] I thought, well, it's *on* today. [laughter] This is *on*. And as far as keeping up, A. J. , you know, my feeling was that I wasn't going to be able to keep up, because this thing was so dynamic. [1] I mean, everybody, the presentations were so pointed, so succinct, so to-the-point, and electric, really. I've done my thank-yous before, to everybody who needed to be thanked, from Helen Molesworth, whose idea this first was, to do the retrospective . . . [applause] to Madeleine Grynsztejn at the MCA [Museum of Contemporary Art]. Where is Madeleine? Get up. Right there. [applause] I mean . . . the first show I was in at the Art Institute of Chicago was a show she curated. And it was a show that I made those paintings, the Garden Project paintings, for. And so, I've been more than blessed by having known the people that I do know, and having met some of the people that I've met today, who remind me, and I guess remind us all, that the world is populated with just the most amazing people you ever wanted to meet. And if you ever get a chance to talk to them, take it! Take it [applause and cheers].

[1] See Arthur Jafa's comment on page 218.

DECEMBER 15, 2016

# **An Evening with Kerry James Marshall**

THE GRACE RAINEY ROGERS AUDITORIUM  
THE MET FIFTH AVENUE



I am so deeply honored to be here at The Met, this majestic institution that elevates exceptional art and culture across all time and culture in order to connect people to creativity, knowledge, ideas, and, of course, we can never forget, beauty. [Creativity]

Like many of us here, perhaps, I first came to this museum as a child, with my grandmother, Wenonah Bond Logan. She would always insist that we dress properly to come to The Met, to enter this grand place where maximum-propulsion beauty manifests in so many different forms across the timeline of history. We honored the gravitas and elegance of what we saw with our countenances. This was and is a wonderland where all can enter and visit objects, and those objects became friends—Egyptian earrings and sarcophagi, the *Elephant Clock* folio, El Greco's *View of Toledo*.

Nothing could be more resonant for me than to be called here to introduce this evening of conversation with the first living artist to receive a monographic exhibition at The Met Breuer, Kerry James Marshall. Kerry's understanding of art history and the museum, as well as his mission and dedication over his diligent, inspired painting career, characterizes the import of this moment. His bottomless exploration of blackness and black beauty is the way that he—for us as his viewers, as the lovers of his paintings—creates awe. [Blackness] Kerry has taught us through his work that what you see matters, while exemplifying the work that we value so much at the Ford Foundation: elevating shimmering voices that are underappreciated, and shifting traditional notions of beauty. We celebrate perfection in all of its forms, and we want to say that we are here in spaces where voices have been marginalized or excluded.

And I wanted to just throw everything away when I heard those extraordinary words from Kerry himself: "Mastery means self-determination." [Mastery/Mastry]

[Mastery/Mastry]  
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“I am working in a culture.” “The goal is ultimately to be free .” [Freedom] He is making work that helps us understand what it means to be a complete human being.

Kerry has been my beloved friend and fellow traveler since we met in Chicago many years ago. Some of his paintings that are on the walls at The Met Breuer I remember as nascent sketches on tacked-up canvas in his tiny State Street studio, where I had the true honor to spend many, many hours looking and talking and thinking and laughing and looking some more. As much of a purist as he is about many aspects of painting, Kerry has always been an artist who revels in cross-creative collaboration. Think, for example, of his set design for Julie Dash’s film *Daughters of the Dust*, his engagement with comics, and his engagement with poets, scholars, thinkers, and makers of all kinds.

And so, in that alchemical vein, this dialogue offers an opportunity to share some very interesting angles of Kerry’s ideas, as we witness the sharing of thoughts and discourse between two champions, Bill Rhoden and Kerry James Marshall.

Elizabeth Alexander

Director of Creativity and Free Expression  
Ford Foundation

# Kerry James Marshall & William C. Rhoden

**“The way you level the  
playing field is you buy  
your own field.”**

—WILLIAM C. RHODEN



William C. Rhoden is an award-winning journalist and author. The former *New York Times* sports columnist and author of *Forty Million Dollar Slaves* is currently writer-at-large for ESPN's *The Undefeated*. During his more than four-decade career, he has also been a jazz critic and a social commentator. His work is distinguished by its clear-eyed commentary on the issue of racism in sports and society.

For a biography for Kerry James Marshall, see page 44.

[Kerry James Marshall and Bill Rhoden enter stage right and the audience erupts and rises to their feet in a rousing standing ovation.]

KERRY JAMES MARSHALL Thank you all for coming. You know, with expectations set so high [laughter], it's hard to know where to begin. But you know, what I want to do is lay a kind of foundation for the conversation. So I did jot down some notes and a brief introduction that would launch us into the conversation. I want this underneath the conversation as some ground that we can trod upon, because I think it says something, in a way, about what this all means and how I perceive what this all means for me. And so I'm going back to 1965, between 1965 and 1968, because we had the pleasure last night of having dinner with Dodie Kazanjian and Calvin Tomkins. [1]

Tomkins gave me a copy of his book *The Bride and the Bachelors*, which, when I was at school at Otis [College of Art and Design, formerly Otis Art Institute], really was one of those foundational books that helped define what it meant to be part of the contemporary art world. And for the people who don't know the book, it is essentially a series of interviews Tomkins had done with Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jean Tinguely. I was reading through it last night, and I came across a passage that I thought would really be appropriate for the way we would start out tonight. And so I'm going to start with that, and then I'm going to go into my own little introduction, and then we can get underway.

[1] Dodie Kazanjian is an arts writer and author of numerous books, and Calvin Tomkins is a longtime art critic for the *New Yorker*.

So in the introduction to *The Bride and the Bachelors*, speaking about Duchamp and Rauschenberg and the New York of the late fifties and sixties, Tomkins wrote, “There is some evidence that the climate of New York may now have become almost too favorable for heresies and radical experiments. The appearance of a large and militantly avant-garde audience, a shockproof public that accepts whatever is offered it in the name of art so long as it is certifiably new and in, has impressed Duchamp, among others, that the long decline of Western art has finally reached its nadir.” [2] It is all too easy for young artists to succumb to the asphyxiating embrace of this art-fashion audience. And since his triumph at the 1964 Venice Biennale, Rauschenberg’s response to this sudden and spectacular elevation to the status of a modern master from an enfant terrible had been more or less to withdraw from painting, into a period of doing simply experimentation.

And on some level, as I was listening to the introduction out there, I understood perfectly well what Rauschenberg must’ve felt. There is something a little bit unsettling about wild praise [he chuckles], especially for people who are in the arts, and in particular now in painting, where we are used to a certain kind of obscurity. And I have to say, for me as an African American artist, even with the ambitions that I had to end up in a place like the Metropolitan—I mean, we all know there’s no guarantee that you will achieve the things you set out to achieve—to finally have arrived, in a way, here, and to have had the work received as well as it has been received, is a bit daunting, because what the praise does not alleviate is the doubt.

[2] Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant Garde* (New York: Penguin, 1976), 5–6.

BILL RHODEN **Right.**

KJM We are riddled with doubt. And sometimes that doubt can only be allayed by a certain kind of critical acknowledgment. And I'm pretty sure that that was the same kind of critical acknowledgment that Rauschenberg was looking for, and the reason why he continued. It's like once you become so successful or so well known and recognized for a particular thing, you almost immediately want to stop doing that and go on to something else, because you need to find out whether—well, you need to find out where the truth was in the assessment of whatever it was you were doing. And so here I am [he chuckles], sitting here on this stage, after having enjoyed the trifecta of the *New York Times* [laughter] in terms of acknowledgment: a feature article about the show in advance of its opening; an image on the cover of *T Magazine* and an interview inside; and then I think, in a way, a spectacular review by Holland Cotter once the show was ready to open. [3] So that's the trifecta. I mean, you can't do more than that in New York [laughter]. But as a part of that whole process, I did sixteen hours of interviews with *New York Times* writers. Sixteen hours. And then they wanted more—

BR They always want more.

[3] Randy Kennedy, "Kerry James Marshall, Boldly Repainting Art History," *New York Times*, September 9, 2016; Wyatt Mason, "Kerry James Marshall Is Shifting the Color of Art History," *T Magazine*, October 17, 2016; Holland Cotter, "Kerry James Marshall's Paintings Show What It Means to Be Black in America," *New York Times*, October 20, 2016.

KJM So I ended up having to do a video interview with Theaster Gates, who is a friend of mine in Chicago. [4] And the first question Theaster asked me was what I wanted to talk about. And I said, “I don’t want to talk about nothing—I’m done” [laughter]. But I was already committed to doing this presentation here at The Met, so now I must carry on. But in thinking about how to do it, it’s really hard to figure out what to talk about in a venue like this, in an environment like this. And so I thought, well, nothing could be further from my specialty than sports. That is not to say I don’t watch a lot of sports; I do, and I’m interested in the dynamics of the enterprise and the games and the players. But I couldn’t think of anybody else I would’ve wanted to engage in a conversation about sports and art than Bill Rhoden. This is in part because of the book he wrote, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, which dovetails, I think, with a lot of the dynamics that are implicated in my arrival here at the Metropolitan. [5] That book was not really about whether or not athletes were good athletes or whether or not they were paid well or anything like that; it was about whether or not the pay they got for the performance they gave amounted to real power. And so that’s some of what I think we will end up talking about in the conversation we have, among other things. But this is how this all came about.

BR Where can I start? So I’m in Atlanta. I just got finished giving a talk about Georgia State, about the typical

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[4] See also the conversation between Golden, Jafa, and Tate, page 216.

[5] Rhoden’s *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete* was published by Penguin Random House in 2007.

thing—you know, racism, empowerment, stuff like that. So I get this letter from The Met, and it starts off with “Kerry James Marshall.” I said, “Wow, really?” So as I’m reading it, Kerry, you said that you wanted to have a conversation and bridge this gap [between the art world and the issues expressed in] *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*. And I said, “Wow, this is very interesting,” because you’re the first person that got it. I’ve been a jazz critic and a sportswriter for almost forty years, but what you got is that *Forty Million Dollar Slaves* really could have been written about any place where black people are—black people at the *New York Times*, black people working here at The Met, black people on Wall Street, black people in big real estate firms. It’s about being excluded and, when you get power, being afraid to use it. Who defines you? And that’s been our dilemma for the last four hundred years: always being defined. [Blackness]

I’m familiar with your work. And, by the way, this is such an honor, I must tell you. I am totally honored to share this stage with you, to be here with you to share this kind of space and put ourselves in a position to tell some truth. We’ve had a lot of very blunt conversations about my world and your world, and, on the face of it, we’re really different. I mean, we’ve had some—not knock-down, drag-out [fights], but some debates about our two worlds and how they coalesce. And on the surface, I’m very fluent in the music, in jazz, because I work with [it] a lot. And I could’ve easily written *Forty Million Dollar Slaves* about music, with all these great black innovators who are not owning anything, basically having the music and that’s it. You don’t own the music production, you don’t own the clubs that you play in, you know? But to get into the art world, I said, “Wow, that’s a whole dimension that I hadn’t really thought about.” I saw your exhibition twice, just solo. Nothing could have prepared me for the power of this

exhibit—frame after frame, floor after floor. And I realized what we have in common. I love art. I’m clearly not an art critic, but I love art. But what we have in common is this love of black people and this burning desire, almost a need, to define ourselves. That’s sort of the common ground, this need to define ourselves, to insert ourselves in a place like this [The Met], where we did not exist. [Blackness] I work in a world, primarily, of football, basketball, what I call the blood sports. There are a lot of young African American men and women, but primarily men, in the blood sport of football or the blood sport of basketball. And even there, this idea of who defines you is something that’s very, very elusive. Here [in the art world] you deal with critics. In our realm [of sports], if you ever walk into a press box during any game—and I invite anybody to do it—it holds about 200 people, and on any given day, I’m the only black person there. I’m not talking about persons of color, I’m not talking about diversity—I’m talking about a black person. And it kind of gets back to who defines us. Who says who we are, what we represent? [Blackness] So the idea of us engaging in this conversation represents a very unique challenge, but it gets to the same point about who defines us.

KJM Yeah, yeah. Well, the other place, I think, where there’s overlap between what happens in the art world and what happens in the sports world is that I’m obsessed with winning.

BR Yes.

KJM In football and basketball and baseball, those operations are also obsessed with winning. Now, I live in Chicago, and we just got a taste of winning [laughter and applause] when the Cubs won the World Series after 108 years. It was 108 years since they last went to the World

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Series. So now, there's something that has to be examined about a fan base that supports a team like the Cubs that were perennial losers, yet their fan base never diminished. They stayed with them all the time. At least they browbeat the owners, tried to make them make better decisions about who they recruited, who they traded for, who they held on to. There's no valor in losing.

The thing is, if you think about this whole idea of winning and losing and its relationship to the arts, well, I don't see that there's a whole lot of difference between the way we define winning and losing in the arts and the way winning and losing is achieved in a sports franchise. Everything we do as human beings, I think, is hierarchical in its structural organization. There are people at the top, there are people in the middle, and then there are people at the bottom. The vast number of people we know are almost all located somewhere down near the bottom. And in the art world, there's been this assumption that if you are not somehow already positioned at the top, then there's no way, no mechanism for you to put into play that will allow you to get there. The decisions about who arrives at a place like the Metropolitan have not only already been determined but are being determined by some secret cabal of people who have a certain kind of knowledge and critical acumen and good eye, who know what good art is supposed to look like. And if you don't know that, then there's no way for you to get in. So when I started out being interested in art and going to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, going to the Metropolitan Museum, going to the Museum of Modern Art, going to the Whitney and all those places where I thought I would never be, my goal was always to figure out, is there a way to win? I mean, can you win? Can you play this game called "art" in such a way that it gave you a better chance of winning than not? Because if you didn't win, then the consequences of not

being a part of this were—for me—intolerable. And besides that, the whole notion that you somehow have to surrender your potential to be a part of these things to some group of anonymous people, or even people whom you think you may know about, and that you don't have anything to say about it—this is also intolerable.

I think about the way we understand art history and I can lay it out in the same way that you would lay out the prospects for the first-round draft picks coming out of college in the football draft. There's always going to be the guy who got the Heisman Trophy—you know, everybody wants him. There's always going to be those people whose production on the field seemed high enough so that everybody thought they would go really early in the draft. But then, once those people are picked, if you look at the structure of any professional sports team, there are the starters, those people who are the highest paid, who get the most money in their salaries; there are the people who are bench players, who come off the bench and are utility players, who have a particular job to perform, especially when one of the elite players gets hurt or somebody gets in foul trouble, if you're talking basketball; and then there's a whole group of players who are on these teams as pawns, holding space so teams can negotiate their salary caps. Some of those people will be on a team for three, four, five, maybe ten years and never get to touch the ball, never get to get out on the court. Now, is it satisfactory for anybody to be in that position? I mean, is it enough just to say, "I've got a Knicks jersey on" or "I've got a Chicago Bulls jersey on"?

But I'm looking at the art world like that, too. I mean, is it really enough for us to have gone to school and gotten the degree and gotten in a few group shows somewhere, or be shown at some not-for-profit place, and never get a chance, never get invited to the Whitney Biennial? Even though, just like some of the top draft picks, people will get

invited to the Whitney Biennial and you may never hear from them again either. In my perception, there has to be some way of thinking about what's happening to all those people that you can avoid. There has to be something you can know, because if there isn't, then you are at the mercy of what? I mean, yes, there's a certain amount of luck involved. But I don't think people who are writing the critical examination of artists, who are writing the exhibition catalogues, who are writing for art history [publications], I don't think they're throwing things up in the air and sort of seeing how they fall. This is not a matter of chance, because there's just way too much agreement on which kinds of things constitute the works that belong in a place like this for that to be accidental. And if it's not accidental, then there must be something you can know, and then there must also be something you might be able to do in order to make sure that your chances of being in this place are better than fifty-fifty.

BR     So, Kerry, let me say this. You mentioned winning. Now, I come from a world—and particularly, I want to re-emphasize that I'm talking about the blood sports of football, the NFL, football at a major college, and basketball, the NBA, basketball at a major college—where young black men dominate. In other words, the industry runs on them. [The people who run this industry] don't necessarily like black people, young black [people], but they need them. They need them. It's how this industry developed.

I guess one of the things I always like about [winning] is that it's finite. In the blood sports, there's not a lot left to the imagination, which is why we dominate so much. It's not a lot of, "Well, I kind of like this, I kind of like that." No. You jump high, you run fast, you train, you're strong. And so remember, one of the first conversations we had was, whose path to—let's say, if you consider The Met and

the Super Bowl or Wimbledon—whose path is the clearest? I think we talked about the fifteen-year-old. The young fifteen-year-old black kid growing up in Chicago, who wants to either get into the league or get into the NFL, or the young fifteen-year-old who really has these art skills and one day would love to be here, in a gallery—what’s the route? I’m thinking that the route for the young black person in sports is much clearer. It’s much clearer.

KJM For the athlete, you mean.

BR For the athlete, yeah, for the athlete. But specifically, in the blood sports of football, basketball, tennis, gymnastics, things like that, the more you deal with judgment, the worse off black people tend to be. That’s why you go to an Alabama football game or a Clemson football game or an Oklahoma football game and the team is almost like 97 percent black. It’s not like they like black people. It’s that this is America, and we need them. We need this. This is how the industry is. It’s a billion-dollar industry, and we need these people. The same people, the same young people who might be getting murdered had they not had the uniforms on, have adult men begging them to come to their schools. Now, in art, they don’t necessarily need black kids to be artists. You know, we’ve got plenty of white artists; you know, we’ve got that covered [Marshall chuckles]. You know, I mean—

KJM I know.

BR Really. You know? That’s not what we need. We’ve got plenty of the ballet people. What we don’t have—and how the hell this happened, I don’t know—are people to play for University of Alabama. We need people to play for Clemson. That’s what we need you guys to do, what you’ve been doing for four hundred years.

KJM Mm-hm.

BR Tote the barge, lift the bale. And guess what? We still have the power. I just thought that in your field, the route for a young black person to get to this point is so much more difficult and hazy, because A, they don't necessarily need you to do this, and B, there's no clear-cut standard. I mean, what is winning [in art], you know? And I'm sure maybe you've been through that. People look at the work and say, "Well, I don't know. I don't know, you don't seem to have . . ." So, I see what you're saying about the teams and all that, but I just think that it's much more difficult, particularly in the fine arts. You could argue that maybe in music, and in jazz particularly, it may be a little easier. But even now, it's becoming more difficult for young black people because they've finally managed, over the past thirty years, to move the music into the conservatory. And any time you put a price tag on things, the mass of black people are out. That's just the reality. When you slap a price tag on things, we tend to be out, because it's money, you know.

KJM I'm going with you part of the way. I'm going to go with you part of the way, because it's true. The economics of the art world have never favored the participation of black folks, because black folks have never had the kind of disposable capital to invest in these things like art. In the first place, I mean, nobody really needs this art that we're making, any of it—any of it, by anybody [laughter]. The art world has evolved to a place where it's completely disconnected from any use value that it has for the culture that it's embedded in. I mean, we already know the history of its relationship—and this is across cultures in general, where you have the production of not only objects and images but also literature and performance that was done in the service of some other useful need that the community of

people had. So either it performed some spiritual function, it performed some magical function, or it performed some judicial function. People made artworks and made objects because they did things that helped to keep the community of people knitted together.

In Europe, the church was the primary patron of the arts, once they became power institutions. Then, from there, other institutions of power [did the same]—you know, principalities, all the people who were commissioning artists to make work that told their story. You could even go back to the pyramids. When you see a lot of pictures of [the pharaoh] Ramses, it's because Ramses is the man of power, and the story that's being told is his story. Everybody who's working is working to help amplify Ramses's story. But in the West, the production of artwork was also designed, on some level, to amplify the power of the Western world. [Blackness] I mean, during the Renaissance, where did that money come from to pay for all of that stuff? In the fifteenth century, Columbus, the Age of Exploration, the Age of Conquest, the Age of Discovery, the Age of Colonization, the Age of Imperialism, all of that stuff—that's where the money to pay for a lot of that stuff came from. And when there was no money to pay for it, they stopped making stuff. They went to work for somebody else who had the money.

So institutions like the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, those things don't happen without a lot of money, or without a lot of people who had a lot of money and a lot of people who had artwork that they accumulated over time. That's how these museums got to be what they are. So you can probably date within my lifetime the first time—if there was any time—that a work that entered the collection of the Metropolitan Museum or the Louvre or the Tate in London or any other museum was bought by and given to that museum by a

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black person who had the resources to acquire that kind of work. These museums achieved the status and the standing they have without us as supporters. They could've gone on for another 150 years or two [hundred], or even longer, without us. That's all true. All that's true. But the notion of the path to the Metropolitan or the path to the Super Bowl—yes, [the artist's path] may, in fact, be a little foggier than the path of some superstar athlete to the championship. But I don't think it's much less clear. Because if you think about athletes, there are some people who have what they call a natural or innate talent, who were born with a little bit more ability—you know, run a little faster, jump a little higher, just because of things they can't identify. Likewise, there are people who make art who are born with the kind of ability to perceive and translate almost directly from the things they perceive into another language. They can do that easily. But there is nothing that artists do that is incomprehensible, that is not also learnable. Not a single thing.

And if you are interested in being in a place like the Metropolitan, it's not all that hard to track the evolution of thought that leads to the decisions that bring things that are in the Metropolitan into the museum. That's not hard to figure out, because I think that's pretty clearly outlined as well. And you can do that by taking an overview of the collected historical narratives of art and what people have said was important over the last three hundred, four hundred, five hundred years. You could even start with [Giorgio] Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, and you can track from there that there hasn't been a whole lot of difference in the way people's understanding of what was valuable in art has been organized. [Creativity] And at any of those moments, when something that appeared to be a radical transformation took place, well, you can see why that was assumed to be the case, too. There was an interesting thing I had heard

about the Age of Conquest and the Age of Exploration, that one of the reasons why so many companies or people or princes and barons were financing the ships of the conquistadors was because when Columbus made his way to the New World, he took notes. They wrote down stuff. And what they wrote down became a roadmap for anybody else who wanted to try the same thing. [Hernán] Cortés read those notes and he said, “Well, I can do that, too.” So they go down to Mexico or South America and they understand something about the social structure of the places where they went, something about their vulnerabilities. In Howard Zinn’s *People’s History of the United States*, he references sentences from Columbus’s journal that seem to be the key to the whole thing: “These people we’ve encountered here have no tempered steel, they have no swords, they have no things like that. Fifty men can come down here and make them do anything we want them to do.”

BR     Right.

KJM     They were following a roadmap. And so in the art world, that history, the criticality, the differences, the arguments—there were people who were having arguments about every stage of the development of what we call art, all the way up to what we know of as modern and contemporary art. There’ve been people arguing about this thing. None of that stuff was automatically settled. It was all being argued about. Now, at some point, you can decide whether you can get in the argument or not. And if you want to get in the argument, you’ve got to pay the price of the ticket. And the price of the ticket is knowing what they said, knowing how somebody else said this was supposed to be, and then saying to yourself, “Well, I think I’ve got something to say about that, and then I’m going to say it

this way.” And then once you get in the mix like that, it’s not a whole lot different from going out on the basketball court. Now, there are people who are good at shooting three-point shots early on, but I think a lot of people work on the three-point shot to make sure they are better at it. You have some players who seem dominant in one area of a sport. Let’s take Shaquille O’Neal, for example. Couldn’t shoot a free throw to save his life [laughter]. Sometimes winning or losing a game is determined by whether or not you make those free throws when you get a chance to do it. So when people saw that Shaquille O’Neal could be dominant inside but he couldn’t make a free throw, they developed a strategy they call the “Hack-a-Shaq.” You know, if you’re getting in trouble, put Shaquille O’Neal on the line, because we know he ain’t going to make [the shot]. I mean, he may make one out of ten of those. So that becomes a strategy. And they use it on other players, too, who have the same inability to make free throws that Shaquille O’Neal has. When you look at the art world, you’ve got to treat it the same way. I mean, as long as you allow the certain kind of mystification of what’s going on in the art world to reign, then it will always be cloudy.

BR      Right.

KJM      Then you will have more and more people with a desire to participate, but who have no idea how to construct a pathway to getting there. And, as I said earlier, since I’m all about winning, I’m also all about sort of figuring out strategically what it takes to get from where you are to what you want. It really comes down to, what do you really want? Do you want to be there? Do you want to be at the top? If you want to be at the top, then you’ve got to figure out how to get there. And it can’t be dependent on somebody else’s legitimizing.

BR But oftentimes it is. And particularly in this world, it is, I'd say, more so than in the field of sports. It is based on, here, somebody deciding—this is almost at the essence of your whole art, inserting blackness into your art in a very concrete, very forceful way. [Blackness]

KJM But you have to force the issue, you really do. You have to force the issue. But you know what? It's like we were watching the 2016 NBA Playoffs—you know, the Golden State Warriors against Oklahoma, that disaster for Oklahoma. And then there was the game with the Cleveland Cavaliers. From where I was sitting in my living room watching the games, you could see a pattern repeating itself over and over and over again. It's like, you've got Steph Curry and you've got—

BR Durant?

KJM No, before Durant. The other three-point shooter. Klay. Klay Thompson. So you've got Steph Curry and Klay Thompson. You could see the movements around the court and say, when he's passing that ball, I know he's going to end up right there. They were doing it like clockwork. The three-point shots, at one point, were just sort of raining down on the opponents. And they would do the same thing every time. And it's like [the other team] couldn't figure out . . .

BR Right.

KJM . . . how to stop that, when the only way you can win, really, is to figure out how to stop that.

BR Right. The interesting thing, talking about that this afternoon, and this is such a major difference in the two

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worlds . . . Your world of art is completely unregulated, by the way—completely unregulated. But that’s another conversation for another day. Anyway, what happened is that Kevin Durant dealt with that devastation by saying, “Well, you know what? I’m going to another team.”

KJM Well, that’s just the “if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em” strategy.

BR Exactly. Again, in your world—well, you did say that an artist can actually play for three teams simultaneously.

KJM You can [laughs].

BR And have no loyalty, no loyalty at all.

KJM No, I didn’t say no loyalty at all.

BR Well, you said, well—loyalty could take a backseat.

KJM No, I didn’t say that, either.

BR I said, “Have there been artists who have, before anybody knew them, had a house that was associated with them? And then after they got big and exploded, they left, like Kevin Durant left Oklahoma?”

KJM Right.

BR They left and went to another house.

KJM Right.

BR I said, “Has that happened?” And you said it’s kind of common.

KJM Oh, yeah. Artists do that all the time, go from one gallery to another. Sometimes it's determined by how well they think they're being treated at one place or how well they think they're being served, in terms of their market, at one place or another. I mean, artists move around because they think they're not being supported sometimes by the gallery they're working with. But those same artists are not just moving from one gallery; some of those same artists—

BR They want to win.

KJM Well, they want to win. They want to win, they need to win. They have big studio programs to support. You've got to make some money to support that stuff. But, at the same time, some of those artists are being represented and shown by five or six or seven galleries . . . and you could see their work showing up. So it's not uncommon for artists to be represented by more than one gallery; I am myself [laughter].

BR There we go [laughs].

KJM There was no way Oklahoma should've lost that series. They shouldn't have lost that series. There was a collapse within the relationship between those players on that team. There had to have been. But instead of resolving whatever that inadequacy was, strategizing how they might have a better chance of beating Golden State the next time they faced off, they fell apart. Personally, the most satisfying challenge is to solve the problem with the team that you're with, not to jump to the team that beats you. I just think for me, it's more interesting to try and do that than it is to do what Kevin Durant did. That's not interesting to me. That's an admission of weakness, joining

up with the team that kicked your butt. That's one of the reasons we ended up enslaved for more than three centuries.

BR Well—

KJM So in the art world—

BR Everybody wants to get to The Met. Everybody wants to get—

KJM Yeah.

BR You get there however you can get there. I mean, like I said, it's two different worlds, but everybody wants to get to The Met.

KJM Yeah, but the challenge of getting to The Met then is, can you solve the problem of the lack of access to an institution of the stature of the Metropolitan? What's the solution to the problem? So on one hand, the solution for the problem could be, well, let's build another museum that competes with The Met.

BR Well, see, now, that—

KJM That's a solution . . .

BR Right.

KJM . . . to a problem.

BR Right.

KJM It's the reason why a lot of museums of contemporary art exist in the first place [laughter].

BR     **Right.**

KJM     The Art Institute of Chicago is a powerful, well-respected, well-regarded museum. It has a fantastic collection. There were people who weren't invited to be on the board at the Art Institute of Chicago, so their answer to that was the Museum of Contemporary Art. Now the Museum of Contemporary Art is as powerful as the Art Institute of Chicago, in the domain that they are operating in. And you've got the Art Institute of Chicago playing catch-up to some dimensions of what the Museum of Contemporary Art is doing. That's one way of doing it. That's one way, for people who've just got to have a place of their own. Or, if you're Eli Broad, you say, "I'll build myself a big museum, and I've got more money than they do. I'll build a museum, and I'll put all this stuff in it, and I'll open it up."

BR     That's one thing I wondered about, too—[now we're] kind of switching gears. But it's in that same vein, because we started the conversation talking about self-determination and self-definition, which is one of my obsessions when it comes to black folks in the United States. You know, I think we talked about, how do you level the playing field? The way you level the playing field is you buy your own field.

KJM     That's one way.

BR     Yeah. But during one of our conversations, we were talking about the Studio Museum in Harlem and black folks and building institutions, institutions that maybe once existed, but because of the whole integration thing [don't]. We're kind of getting to Jackie Robinson and how that, at the end of the day, was not really good for our

community. It really was not good for our community, that kind of desegregation, really. [6] So one of the things you said—and I thought it was compelling—you said if you want the Studio Museum to be as important and as powerful as major museums, if you have \$2 million, give it to the Studio Museum. That gives these museums opportunities that they would not have without that money. For black people to have millions of dollars to give away, it's a mistake to give it to one of these major museums . . .

KJM     Or the Museum of Modern Art.

BR     . . . and not to the Studio Museum. The goal is for the Studio Museum to be on par with MoMA, and to not have to beg for money. The goal is to be independent. And I thought about the same thing in my book, with the whole idea of the Negro Leagues back in 1919, when Major League Baseball said, “You know what? You all can’t play baseball.” [Rube] Foster said, “Well, you know what? Yes. We’re going to establish our own league. We’ve got plenty of baseball players, we’ve got plenty of banks. We’ll do our own. We’ll start our own.” His long-term goal was to build a team, an institution so powerful that they would come to Major League Baseball as a whole unit. [7] But what Major

[6] Jackie Robinson was the first African American to play in Major League Baseball in the modern era.

[7] The Negro leagues, made up of African Americans and some Latin Americans, were a series of professional baseball leagues that formed because nonwhite individuals were barred from playing in Major League Baseball. The first recognized Negro league was established in

1887. Andrew “Rube” Foster—known as the “father of black baseball”—organized the Negro National League, the first long-lasting Negro League; it was established in 1920 and disbanded in 1931. In 1945 white baseball executives signed Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers in the major leagues, signaling the beginning of integration but also the effective destruction of the Negro leagues.

League Baseball said was, “Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. We’ll take Jackie Robinson, we’ll take this, we’ll take this. We’re going to destroy your institution.” So basically, what they said is, “We will destroy your institutions to make our institutions better.”

So you were getting back to the idea of the Studio Museum and others. If you’re a black person, and you’ve got \$2 million, why not enrich our own institutions, which are self-defining? When I’m in my field, we have all these young, fairly wealthy black people. I’m saying, with the money that you’re making—and, by the way, they’re not going to be letting you make this money for too much longer, seriously—why don’t you begin to build black institutions? So I thought that was really compelling, when you were talking about somebody they didn’t let into the Art Institute of Chicago. Well, you know what? We’ll do our own thing. But I guess in your field, that hasn’t happened—I mean, you’ve got the Studio Museum, but I don’t know if that’s realistic. But, you see, it’s realistic for it seemingly to happen, if there’s a consciousness.

KJM Yeah. One of the things I think people have to understand—I’ll go back to something you said earlier about the status of black people in the United States—the basic problem with black folks in the United States is that we are under-capitalized as a population. [Blackness] Under-capitalized. When black people were brought in, they were capital. We were brought here as capital assets to do work, to not be paid for it, to generate wealth for somebody else. That’s what we were brought here for. And so, as a population after Emancipation, the population was generally under-capitalized, which meant that they have less of an ability to compete, as any institution or any business would have to compete in a capitalist environment. And the United States didn’t just become a capitalist

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country; it was a corporate entity when it started out. These were corporate investments that made those colonies. Those colonies were established so that they could make money for the investors who financed them. That's how this whole enterprise got started. In any kind of business environment the competition is, can you grow your business in such a way that you can fund research and development and sustain your existence over the long haul? And so it happens in all kinds of other entities. There are mergers and acquisitions. This is how business works. But if you can't compete in that business environment, then you're left on the margins, always asking somebody to be generous enough to allow you to operate or to exist. That position of having to always ask for permission to be present is a weak position to occupy. What you want to do is erase that position of weakness, to the degree that you can. So I didn't just learn that the United States was a capitalist country. Once I really understood that that's what it was, it changed my behavior about everything [laughter]. But this is the world in which you live. It's the environment in which you have to operate.

Look, what we are talking about a lot now is sustainability, for business. We live on the South Side of Chicago. A lot of people believe it would be great for black businesses to operate in black neighborhoods, but black businesses don't survive because it's good for them to, or because it's the right thing, you know. They survive because they produce a product or they provide a service or they sell something that people want and that people will always want. And then when the market changes and people don't want that anymore, you can't keep opening your door and selling that same stuff, if people aren't buying it anymore. It just doesn't work like that. You've got to change. Everything has to be thought of strategically. Life is strategic. Living is strategic. You do the best you can to guarantee

that you have the most longevity you can squeeze out of it. You know, we're not all lucky enough to have it just naturally. I have a great-aunt who is 104 years old, will be 105 in January. Her daughter just died, what, two months ago, three months ago? Her sister had died at ninety years old, almost ten years ago. They had all bought a house together. And she said to me, "You know, I never thought I would be the one left in this house alone." So you have no idea. But what you do have to do is, if you mean to have a certain kind of life, you have to take charge of it. If you mean to have a certain kind of career or existence in a field that you're operating in, you need to take charge of that. You know, if you want to get to the top, you have to have some idea of where the top is. And then you have to find a way to get there. I mean, there's no guarantee that you will, but there's something about the activity of the process or the practice of trying to figure out how it can happen. There's something about that that has a value that's independent of whether you actually succeed or not. It's just that there's something about the process. And I love competition. I love it. I was telling Bill once, you look at the art world, it's like, yes, there are those first-string artists. They're the ones who end up in the history book, like Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, Jasper Johns. Those people will always be in the book. There's no circumstance in which those people will be excised from those history books, not a chance. Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko—they will always be there. Their position is secure and not negotiable. And there's no alternate history that will erase them from it, either. You just can't, because you've got to deal with the work they made and the meaning of that work at the moment that it arrived on the scene. You've got to deal with that.

In terms of this pathway that that fifteen-year-old would take—I mean, that's one of the things you have to

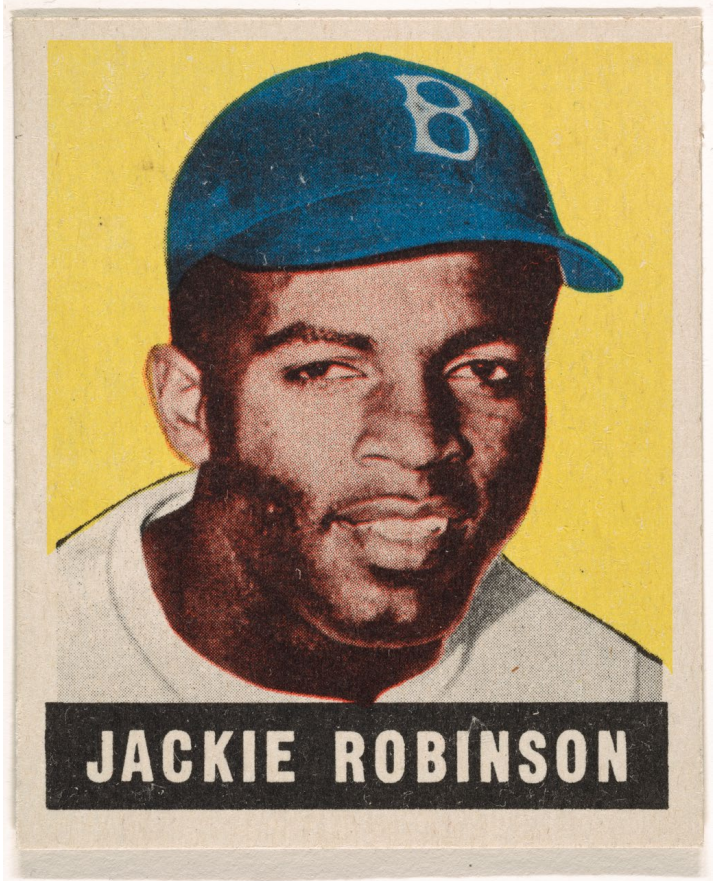
[B]lackness]  
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always have at the top of your mind. What was it about what [these canonical artists] did that caused people to put them in the position they were in? What were the arguments for them, and what were the arguments against them? There were arguments on both sides of that equation. And you have to figure it out, from reading what everybody has to say about it. Where's the crack I can pry open, put my thing into, and use to make my way up the path to the top? It seems as simple as that to me.

BR Well, let me ask you this. [Speaks offstage] Do we have that shot of Jackie Robinson and Jackson Pollock? [Figs. A and B] Now, this is interesting. People are saying, "Okay, where are they going with this picture?" [Laughter] We'll get to it in a minute. I wrote a whole chapter in my book on Michael Jordan, called "The River Jordan." He's somebody who reached a point of acclaim and decided to be politically neutral. Basically, Republicans buy sneakers, too. When you were in position to lead, you didn't lead. And it raises a larger point: when black people get to a level of power, what do they do with the power? Too often, they get to a level of power and they say, "Well, you know what? I don't want to rock the boat." That happens to women, too, sometimes. You get to this level of power and [that's] fine, but when you get there, you don't bring people up. [Blackness] We talked a lot about just how tremendous this is. What does this mean globally to young black artists who see you get there and say, "There is a path. There is this path." You are the light, as they say. What does it mean for you to be here, beyond the accolades and the tremendous amount of work you've done in more than three decades? What does it mean in terms of the next twenty years, the next thirty years, of the next wave of young, talented black artists being here?



[Fig. A] Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, 1950. Photograph by Hans Namuth.



[Fig. B] Jackie Robinson, Brooklyn Dodgers, 1948-49 from Baseball's Greatest Stars (R401-1), no. 79.

KJM Well, I mean, I'm not alone [he chuckles] in this. To the degree that I am able and available, I never miss an opportunity to tell people, "This is how you should be thinking about it." Literally, that's all I can do, in the philosophical sense. So I can tell people, this is what I did, this is how I thought about it, this is how I think you should think about it, because I think if you do a cost-benefit analysis, this approach will get you further than whatever you think you're trying to do. So that's one way. There's also another way in the art world, where you're only as good as your words and actions. Integrity matters. So if you say something about something, you better know what you're talking about and you better not be bullshitting. Just don't. There's no time or room or place for that, because it does nobody any good. When you were talking about Michael Jordan, and you were talking about his success and the money he'd made and all this stuff—there's a way in which you can confuse wealth with power, because wealth is not power. Power would've been the ability to walk away from the game and not be affected by the consequences of having done so. That's power. [Freedom]

BR Right.

KJM But the problem for most athletes is that some of them are a knee injury away from ending their career next Sunday, you know? And when they stop playing, they stop generating money. That's not power. So what does Michael Jordan do? He licenses his name to Nike, and he licensed his name to some restaurants. Whether Michael Jordan is at the restaurant or not, or whether he's got a pair of Nikes on, those Air Jordans will still be generating money, whether Michael Jordan is there or not. They will be generating money after Michael Jordan is dead, probably. So power is really the ability to operate in

the world without fear of any consequences. [Freedom]  
You know?

BR Right, right, right. You know, that's a great point, because what I've found [is that] in the past few years, you've had a lot of young athletes, young black athletes, finally wake up and realize that they really are part of the community. When you're in St. Louis and you don't wear number 95 or number 22, you're as likely to get a shot as anybody else. What happens is, a lot of money weakens. Money's supposed to give you power. It's supposed to make you strong. But what has happened in my field is that it's made people weak, because they don't want to lose it. They don't want to lose the money. So people who are really strong and tough and courageous in one arena are very weak and docile in another, because they don't want to risk [anything]. They don't want to lose anything. And again, it gets back to what do you do with power.

KJM That's also sort of not really understanding what money is, what money does, and how money is—how money is made, how real money is made. Earning money is not making money. There have been generations, at this point, of black folks who had gotten a position on Wall Street, who've been working in investment banking, things like that. Now you have a lot more black organizations moving into private equity and things like that. That's making money. To create instruments that allow people to make money where they hadn't been able to make money before, that's power. If you go back to the whole financial collapse—I mean, a credit default swap? Well, that was something somebody came up with as a strategy for generating money where you couldn't have generated money before. Now, it turned out to be a Ponzi scheme, like a lot of shell games. But, as with shell games and Ponzi schemes

in general, the sucker at the end is always left holding the bag, while the people who made all the money at the beginning, who invented the structure, skipped off and are using their money now to do other things.

Minister Louis Farrakhan made a speech at the University of California, San Diego, in 1983 or '84. A friend of mine, who was teaching down there at the time, had the recording. There's a passage in that speech that gets to the point of the whole thing. It comes down to how intelligently you engage with the world you live in. So Farrakhan put out this challenge, and it's that business challenge that even the Nation of Islam failed at because there are no guarantees. What you need is excess capital so you can survive downturns, and so you can keep trying new things. It's what the drug companies keep saying about the R&D [research and development] they do in order to have the drugs we need and sell them at a price that will yield them a profit. But Farrakhan, he said about black folks, "If you're going to college, well, what are you going to college for? If you're going to get an education, what are you being educated to do?" Does your education allow you to do things for yourself that everybody else's education allows them to do for themselves? I mean, isn't that how you're supposed to be thinking about what you're doing? He says, "Can't you take the hide off of a cow and make a shoe like somebody can take the hide off? Can't you take a bark off a tree and make toilet paper like somebody else can make toilet paper? Can't you do those things, too? And if you can't do those things, too, then where are you?" Because, he said, "Nobody respects a non-producer." In the general scheme of things, it's all about production. Can you deliver? And can you keep producing in a sustainable way so that it has a chance to make an impact?

This retrospective is a thirty-year slice of my career and production as an artist. When I started out, I used to

make ink, used to make chalk, used to make crayons, used to make all those things, because I needed to guarantee I would have materials, if I couldn't afford to go to the art supply store and buy them [applause]. I didn't want there to be anything blocking my way, anything that would prevent me from being able to produce the things I wanted to produce. If I had to make the materials myself, I was going to make them. I made paper, I did all that stuff, because I didn't want to be without supplies. And that could happen sometimes at crucial moments in your development. There're a lot of people whose careers in sports were cut short by an injury, cut short by an indiscretion, you could say, or something they didn't see coming. And at that point, where's their talent then? And where's the next opportunity? There're people who are pariahs, who can't get picked up by any team now—not because they don't play well anymore, but because of some other thing that happened in their development that they now have to bear the burden of. So on some level, there're people we know, famous people, who can engage in some of those same indiscretions, and they carry on because they're . . . Well, it's almost like Donald Sterling. Now, Donald Sterling loses control of the L.A. Clippers, but Donald Sterling made \$4 billion in loss.

BR     And the NBA gets rid of that hassle.

KJM    Right. But I don't think Donald Sterling is hurting so much because of that.

BR     No. In this next section, I wanted to really get into evolution. You know, I'm really obsessed with this parallel evolution, the evolution of athletes, of black athletes, how they evolved in the sport. We were talking, and you mentioned Jackson Pollock and 1948, which is a sort of a magical year in baseball, with Jackie Robinson. You have these two

iconoclastic people who had this tremendous impact on American culture, in two different ways: the idea of black folks playing baseball, and the idea of dripping paint on a thing. I was trying to get us to talk about this evolution, and you said something very interesting. You talked about Robinson and Pollock, and you agree that Robinson was as iconoclastic in his way as Pollock was in his way. But then we had a conversation and moved up to Muhammad Ali in 1962, who completely changed boxing, changed the way young black men were perceived. And I was asking you, who was the black artist at that time who made a similar radical change in the way art was made? And you said something interesting, which I've been thinking about ever since. You said, "Here's the problem with black artists. There are no black innovations in visual arts. No black American innovation." So I mentioned, "Well, what about Romare Bearden?" You said, "Well, what's important about Bearden's work, what's important about Jacob Lawrence's work, is that he has a black subjectivity—that is, a black perspective, a black narrative. That's what's important about the work, not the form. They didn't invent those forms." [Blackness] I guess we went back and forth. But I thought that was a really compelling take. Does that mean that there's a void? I thought that given our history in this country, the mere act of survival is an innovation, you know? [Laughter]

KJM But that's a different matter altogether.

BR Well, okay. But I thought it's still a compelling point of view, and I said, "Well, what about you?"

KJM And what did I say? [Laughter]

BR You said you thought that to some extent, perhaps,

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people have painted black figures before. Right? But I want you to elaborate. People have painted black figures. I want you to go through the whole thing. You said, “People have painted black figures before, but—.” But what? I mean, I just think that the idea that this void of black innovation in the visual arts is—I don’t want to say phenomenal, but it almost didn’t seem possible.

KJM So if you look at what I’ve done as an artist, my work ends up being a synthesis of a variety of different approaches to the problems of representation. Everything that I’m doing is from things that I’ve observed elsewhere that were deployed to do different things. What I’ve done was simply reorient those things, so that their primary function was in the representation of a black subject. The black figure becomes a primary subject matter of the picture, although the primary subject of the picture is how pictures are made. And when I look at the way pictures have been made across the historical spectrum, I feel like I’ve adapted enough of what I’ve learned from that to make use of it in a way that advances my project, by positioning the black figure in the pictures that I make in a way that I don’t think they had been represented before. That’s what I think I’ve done. The painter and collage artist Raymond Saunders wrote an essay called “Black Is a Color.” [8] And if you look at my paintings, black is a color. I don’t mean it’s a color because it’s black; it’s a color in my paintings because I treat it like every other color that’s in the picture. So if there’s cobalt blue and ultramarine blue and phthalo blue and cerulean blue, that’s

[8] Saunders’s 1967 pamphlet “Black Is a Color” argues against the concept of “black” art, a categorization that he finds degrading and restrictive. He advocates a more race-neutral approach to art.

four different blues. Well, in my paintings, there's carbon black, there's iron-oxide black, there's bone black, and then I make those even richer by adding other colors to those. So I'm working with black chromatically, not as a limitation, which is the way almost everybody had thought about how black functioned in paintings up until this time, I think [applause]. So in my paintings, black is chromatic. [Blackness]

SANDRA JACKSON-DUMONT I think we have a hashtag: #blackischromatic [laughter]. So please join me in thanking these two amazing people [applause].

[Blackness]  
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OCTOBER 25, 2016–JANUARY 29, 2017

# Kerry James Marshall: Mastry

THIRD- AND FOURTH-FLOOR GALLERIES  
THE MET BREUER



*Kerry James Marshall: Mastry* was a major monographic exhibition and the largest museum retrospective to date of the work of American artist Kerry James Marshall (born 1955). Encompassing nearly eighty works—including seventy-two paintings—that span the artist’s remarkable thirty-five-year career, it revealed Marshall’s practice to be one that synthesizes a wide range of pictorial traditions to present the American experience as unimaginable without black history and to reassert the place of the black figure within the canon of Western painting. The exhibition was curated by Ian Alteveer, Helen Molesworth, and Dieter Roelstraete. For more information, visit [metmuseum.org/kerryjamesmarshall](http://metmuseum.org/kerryjamesmarshall).

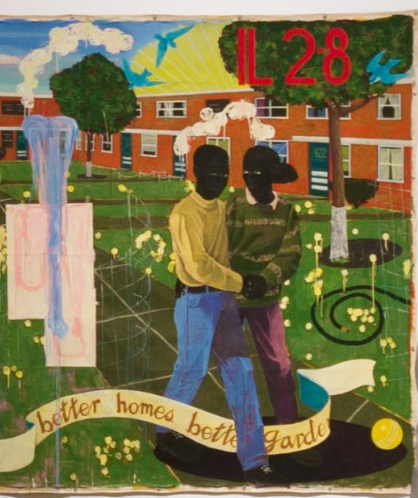
The accompanying exhibition catalogue, *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry*, was written by Ian Alteveer, Kerry James Marshall, Helen Molesworth, Dieter Roelstraete, and Lanka Tattersall. It includes catalogue entries by Anna Katz, Karsten Lund, and Abigail Winograd. The comprehensive monograph provides a sustained consideration of Kerry James Marshall’s reinvention of American history, landscape painting, and portraiture and establishes his standing as one of America’s greatest living painters. It was published by the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and Skira Rizzoli Publications, Inc., New York, 2016.



# Mastery











Marshall's project to destabilize conventional narratives around images of black people includes historical subjects. The paintings in this gallery affirm a centuries-long history of black resistance and acknowledge the role of violence in the pursuit of liberty. In these imagined portraits—of the leader of the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina in 1739, Nat Turner, the slave who organized an insurrection in Virginia in 1831, and the fictional actor Hecuba Washington playing the part of Julian Carlton, the servant who set a lethal fire at architect Frank Lloyd Wright's estate—Marshall presents historical black subjects as strong, defiant, even heroic individuals.

His wedding portrait of escaped slave and abolitionist Harriet Tubman and her first husband portrays a tender moment in the private life of the famous woman, even as the black-gloved hand holding the portrait implies more recent resistance. The large *Vignette* (2003) suggests an alternative, happier outcome to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, one in which butterflies, cardinals, and bluebirds lead the way and clover softens the path. Marshall's depictions of significant, if sometimes relatively unknown, rebels carry with them a contemporary urgency. As the artist has explained, "rebellion wasn't something that started with the civil rights struggle. It started in the eighteenth century, and the goals of that struggle are yet to be realized."



Portrait of a Black Woman  
Kehinde Wiley, 2013  
Oil on canvas, 111 x 141 cm  
The painting is a portrait of a Black woman, crouching on a patterned rug in a room with a white balustrade and a wooden floor. To her right is a tall, narrow bookshelf filled with various books. Above her head, two thought bubbles contain the word "SOB...". In the foreground, a small black book with a gold globe illustration and the title "Portrait of a Black Woman" is placed on the rug. The background features a window with a view of a blue landscape.





Francis Bacon  
Two Figures  
1964  
Oil on canvas  
100 x 120 cm  
The painting depicts a man and a woman in a distorted, cubist style. The man is standing, wearing a dark suit and a red and white checkered tie. The woman is lying down, wearing a patterned dress. The background is light blue with various symbols, including numbers (1, 3, 6, 7, 11, 12, 16) and flags (Italian, French, and a red/white/black flag). The foreground is orange with a black cat and a snake.











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### FRONT COVER AND FLAP

Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Untitled (Studio)* (detail), 2014. Acrylic on PVC panels, 83 $\frac{5}{16}$  × 119 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (211.6 × 302.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Foundation Gift, Acquisitions Fund and The Metropolitan Museum of Art Multicultural Audience Development Initiative Gift, 2015 (2015.366) ©Kerry James Marshall.

### INSIDE FRONT COVER

Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *7am Sunday Morning* (detail), 2003. Acrylic on unstretched canvas, 120 × 216 in. (304.8 × 548.6 cm). Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Joseph and Jory Shapiro Fund by exchange, 2003.16.

### BACK FLAP

Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Portrait of a Curator (In Memory of Beryl Wright)* (detail), 2009. Acrylic on PVC, 30 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 24 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 1 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. Collection of Penny Pritzker and Bryan Traubert ©Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

### INSIDE BACK COVER

Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *School of Beauty, School of Culture*, 2012. Acrylic and glitter on unstretched canvas, 108 × 158 in. (274 × 401 cm). Birmingham Museum of Art; Museum purchase with funds provided by Elizabeth (Bibby) Smith, the Collectors Circle for Contemporary Art, Jane Comer, the Sankofa Society, and general acquisition funds ©Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

KERRY JAMES MARSHALL:

A CREATIVE CONVENING

Photographs of the convening, pages 21-34 ©Stephanie Berger

TOSHI REAGON

Photo of Reagon by Erica Beckman.

- Fig.A Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Voyager*, 1992. Acrylic and collage on canvas, painted surface: 87 × 86 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (221 × 220.4 cm), overall: 91 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 86 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (233.4 × 219.7 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Corcoran Collection (Gift of the Women's Committee of the Corcoran Gallery of Art) (2014.79.52).

MARSHALL AND MOLESWORTH

Photo of Marshall by Kendall Karmanian; photo of Molesworth by Myles Pettengill.

- Fig.A Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, 1980. Egg tempera on paper, 8 × 6 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (20.3 × 16.5 cm). Steven and Deborah Lebowitz.
- Fig.B Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Untitled (Beach Towel)*, 2014. Acrylic on PVC panel, 60 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 72 $\frac{5}{8}$  × 2 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (154.6 × 184.5 × 7 cm). Private collection ©Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner, London.
- Fig.C Édouard Manet (French, 1832-83), *Olympia*, 1865. Oil on canvas, 51 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 74 $\frac{1}{4}$  × 1 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (130.5 × 190 cm). RF644. Photo by Patrice Schmidt. Musée d'Orsay ©RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource NY.
- Fig.D Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Baobab Ensemble*, 2003. Milk crates, cinder blocks, found objects, and ink-jet prints on paper, dimensions variable. Installation view, *Kerry James Marshall: Painting and Other Stuff*, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, Antwerp, October 4-February 2, 2014 ©Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

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Fig.B Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Black Painting*, 2003. Acrylic on fiberglass, 72×108 in. (182.9×274.3 cm). Private collection ©Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

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Fig.A Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Untitled*, 2009. Acrylic on PVC panel, 61<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>×72<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>×3<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (155.3×185.1×9.8 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Purchased with the Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund and a gift from Jacqueline L. Bradley, B.A. 1979 ©Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

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Fig.A Romare Bearden (American, 1911-88), *The Woodshed*, 1969. Cut and pasted printed and colored papers, photo-stats, cloth, graphite, and sprayed ink on Masonite, 40<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>×50<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (102.9×128.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, George A. Hearn Fund, 1970 (1970.19). Art ©Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

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Fig.A Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *De Style*, 1993. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 104×122 in. (264.2×309.9 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by Ruth and Jacob Bloom ©Kerry James Marshall.

Fig.B Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Untitled (Studio)*, 2014. Acrylic on PVC panels, 83<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub>×119<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (211.6×302.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Foundation Gift, Acquisitions Fund and The Metropolitan Museum of Art Multicultural Audience Development Initiative Gift, 2015 (2015.366) ©Kerry James Marshall.

FRED EVERSLEY

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Fig.A Fred Eversley (American, b. 1941), *Parabolic Flight*, 2016. Stainless steel, neon, and plastic, 432×162×152 in. Miami International Airport. Photo courtesy of Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs.

Fig.B Courtesy of Fred Eversley.

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Fig.A Photo of Carter at the 2016 Olympics courtesy USATF.
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Fig.A Photo of Bumbray by Teddy Wolff. Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *The Lost Boys*, 1993. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 100×120 in. (254×304.8 cm). Collection of Rick Hunting and Jolanda Hunting.
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Fig.A Photo of Uzuri by Petra Richterova. Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Slow Dance*, 1992-93. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 75¼×74¼ in. (191.1×188.6 cm). The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago; Purchase, Smart Family Foundation Fund for Contemporary Art, and Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for Acquisitions ©Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.
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- P.208 Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955), *Untitled (Blot)*, 2014. Acrylic on PVC panel, 7 ft.×9 ft. 11⅝ in.×3⅜ in. (213.4×303.8×8.6 cm). Rennie Collection, Vancouver, Canada.
- AN EVENING WITH KERRY JAMES MARSHALL: MARSHALL AND RHODEN  
Photo of Rhoden by Joe Faraoni/ESPN Images.
- Fig.A Photograph by Hans Namuth. Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona ©1991 Hans Namuth Estate.
- Fig.B Jackie Robinson, *Brooklyn Dodgers*, from *Baseball's Greatest Stars* (R401-1), no. 79. Publisher: Leaf Gum, Co., Chicago, IL, 1948-49. Commercial chromolithograph, 27⅞×23⅞ in. (7.3×6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Jefferson R. Burdick Collection, Gift of Jefferson R. Burdick (Burdick 326, R401-1.30).
- KERRY JAMES MARSHALL: MASTRY  
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