

"I am overwhelmed by White figure representations every time I go to a museum. It is almost universally understood that these images are the foundation of art in the western world."

Kerry James Marshall

In *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green*, his first exhibition in Austria, African American artist Kerry James Marshall shows a new 16-part series in which he once again examines the visual representation of black people in "western" society and the pictorial tradition associated with it. The programmatic title points to the show's linking of the ideas and goals of the Black Power and Civil Rights movements and the abstract color field painting of Barnett Newman.

Marshall's figurative pictures are characterized by the way they combine an exploration of traditions in western painting with issues and themes related to black identity, visual perception, and their linking in art. For Raél Jero Salley, writing in the catalogue, his works thus represent a "fragile balance between formal rigor and social engagement."

In terms of form, content, and meaning, Marshall's *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green* series refers to Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*, especially the third variation (1966/67) that now hangs in Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum. Instead of the primary colors, Marshall chooses the political tricolor of red, black, and green—the colors of the pan-African flag, also known as the Afro-American flag, the Black Liberation Flag, or the UNIA flag. This tricolor, still used as an emblem of Black Power, was designed in 1920 by Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) that was founded in 1914 and which counts as one of the first programmatic movements to emerge from the black population of the United States.

In his pictures, Marshall refers to the aesthetic achievements of color field painting, such as flatness, nuanced planes of color, and the perceptual directness of experiencing large formats. But he also questions the genre's manifestations of the absolute and the infinite, contrasting this with different forms of representation and figuration. One clear example is provided by his depictions of black people. On the one hand, he explores the materiality of paint in all its subtlety while, on the other, the color "black" refers in both concrete and symbolic terms to political and cultural experiences of "being black". Marshall: "So the challenges of inscribing notions of 'blackness' onto a form hostile to images and indifferent to political particularities was something I wanted to give a try. Throughout the entire exhibition, a Black consciousness fluctuates between overt and subtextual manifestations."

Another example of the way Marshall plays with colliding levels of meaning is *Red (If They Come In The Morning)*. The direct experience of the red color field is marked by the gradual appearance of the eye-catching words "If They Come In The Morning." They are taken from an open letter from writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin (1924-1987) to civil rights activist Angela Davis. In the 1960s, Davis was a leading member of the Communist Party. In 1970, she was accused of murder and was only able to prove her innocence after spending 16 months on prison. "For, if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night," was the closing line of Baldwin's letter. In 1971, Davis answered with her book "If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance". By bringing together the strengths and ideas of his various sources, Marshall turns "the power of color into a power of real social significance," writes Salley: "In this way, the pictures open up a discourse on upholding the poetic and the sublime beyond any reduction to mere form."

In the exhibition, the three monumental paintings *Red (If They Come in the Morning)*, *Black*, and *Green* hang in the middle of the two side walls and the apse, following the design of the flag and structuring the gallery space. Between them are a further 13 works that reflect and explore this color scheme in various nuances, as well as offering variations of the theme. Like the nude *Black Star 2* and *The Club*, the painting *School of Beauty, School of Culture* appeals to the self-confidence of black women. It shows a beauty parlor coming under attack from the distorted image of a blond, white girl, Walt Disney's Sleeping Beauty. The anamorphosis quotes Hans Holbein's famous painting *The Ambassadors*, where it represents the ubiquity of death. The portraits of the "Stono Group," on the other hand, give faces to four 18th-century freedom fighters—people who have previously had little or no place in official historiography because no pictures of them exist.

*Black Owned and Buy Black*, on the other hand, quote the neon signs used by black shop owners during the riots to protect themselves from attack and to appeal for solidarity, thus pointing to the still inferior economic power of the black population. Finally, with the *Robert Johnson Frieze*, Kerry James Marshall creates a counterpart to Gustav Klimt's Beethoven Frieze, which is on permanent display at the Secession. This homage is dedicated to the legendary musician who died young and who Marshall calls "one of the greatest Blues men I've ever heard." In the frieze's two 15-meter sections, the artist translates the rhythm of blues music, with its typical breaking of symmetries, into a visual idiom. "I think of myself as working in modes," Marshall says: "Each modality is selected because of how it engages the narrative of art's history and presents an opportunity to address the nominal presence, or total absence of Black figures in a particular genre of art making."

All quotations from Kerry James Marshall from an interview with Annette Südbeck, "A move towards freedom or how to generate that sparkle," exhibition catalogue, Secession 2012.

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