

This spring, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago presents the first retrospective exhibition of acclaimed artist Kerry James Marshall, considered one of America's greatest living painters. Over the past three decades, Marshall has been an inspired and imaginative chronicler of the African-American experience. Best known for large-scale interiors, landscapes, and portraits featuring powerful black figures, Marshall explores narratives of African-American history from slave ships to contemporary culture, and draws on his deep knowledge of art history from the Renaissance to 20th-century abstraction, as well as other sources such as the comic book and the muralist tradition.

His powerful paintings confront the position of African Americans throughout American History, with direct and intimate scenes of black middle-class life, painted in vibrant color with detailed patterning. *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry* runs from April 23 to September 25, 2016, and is co-organized by the MCA with the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. It is co-curated by Dieter Roelstraete, a member of the curatorial team of Documenta 14 and former Manilow Senior Curator at the MCA; Helen Molesworth, Chief Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and Ian Alteveer, Associate Curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The exhibition focuses on Marshall's paintings made over the last 35 years, from his seminal statement in *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self* (1980), to his most recent explorations of African-American history. Organized in a broadly chronological order, the exhibition considers the dominant themes in Marshall's practice over the years, including: history painting, landscape, portraiture, the nude, religion, and abstraction. These thematic concerns revolve around his interrogation of the canon of Western art history, which is central to Marshall's artistic vision and his preoccupation with mastery. The exhibition consists of nearly 70 paintings, along with a selection of drawings, and works of related media such as photography, video, and sculpture.

Marshall was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1955, before the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and he moved to Los Angeles with his family in 1963, two years before the Watts riots in 1965. The exhibition begins with some of Marshall's earliest drawings, made in Los Angeles while studying at Otis College of Art and Design under the legendary social realist painter Charles White. There, he learned the language of portraiture, a pictorial tradition that White believed could uplift race through aspirational images. However, in the wake of the Watts riots, and the general breakdown of urban life in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Marshall was not content with

merely adding to a tradition structured by exclusion. Instead, Marshall's work through the present day is driven by an examination of the historical absence, or 'invisibility' of the black figure in the tradition of painting.

Marshall has since created work that is concerned with the aesthetic challenge of how to tell the story of African-American daily life and history, and the impact these stories have on the grand tradition and master narratives associated with Western culture. His critical questions come through the canon's most recognized forms—history painting, landscape, and portraiture—and other vernacular forms such as the comic book, including his comics such as the *Rythm Mastr drawings* (2000-present). In each, he makes what was once 'invisible,' visible.

These issues are evident in his first cabinet paintings of the *Lost Boys*, 'exceedingly moody and impossibly black portraits of young black men. They continue through his exploration of modernism's failed legacy with the international style housing blocks built to house poor and working class black families in America's urban centers. These paintings, which brought Marshall to prominence, suggest that abstract painting, modernist architecture, and the philosophical abstraction of 'blackness' as an identity overlap with one another. Only through a solid knowledge of history—as shown through Marshall's *Memento* series, works dedicated to the history of the civil rights and black power movements—does the United States have a hope at enacting its highest goals of freedom for all of its citizens.

Marshall's work also forms a sustained meditation of the problem of blackness as both a social and aesthetic concern. His re-thinking of abstraction—either in his recent work concerning Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*, or his large-scale paintings depicting fictional artists in their studios, at work on paint-by-number canvases—foregrounds the problem of blackness as a color, pigment, hue, historical idea, and identity.

While Marshall continues to work in painting as his primary medium, concerned with the century-long struggle between figuration and abstraction, he also takes on the challenges of photography, sculpture, comics, and installation, and has made significant work in all of these areas. To accompany his exhibition at the MCA, Marshall has also been commissioned to create a special wall project for the second-floor atrium of the museum. Vividly colored and printed on vinyl, this 38-foot mural, titled *Happy Revolution Day*, features characters from Marshall's *Rythm Mastr* project.

Kerry James Marshall has received solo exhibitions throughout Europe and North America and his work has been included in such prestigious international exhibitions as the 1997 Whitney Biennial,

the 2003 Venice Biennial, the 2009 Gwangju Biennial, two Documentas (1997 and 2007), and the 1999 Carnegie International. His paintings are in private collections and foundations as well as major public collections including the MCA.

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