

Ulysses Marshall, "The Displaced People," 2001, Oil and charcoal on canvas

ARTIST

Vitae: Ulysses Marshall is a contemporary African American painter who was born in Vienna, Georgia in 1946 and now lives in Baltimore, Maryland. He was educated in both locales—he got an undergraduate degree in sociology at Albany State University in Albany, Georgia and an undergraduate and masters' degree in fine arts from the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland. He served in the Armed Services in Vietnam, 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, Bien Hoa, infantry light weapons specialist, 1965-66. He is an active artist, lecturer, and conducts workshops for children.

His works are in private and public collections including: The Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington DC), National Vietnam Veterans Museum (Chicago), the Woodmere Art Museum (Philadelphia), the John Heinz History Museum (Pittsburg), King-Tisdell Museum (Savannah), the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, the DeMenil Art Gallery (Houston), the Atlanta Life Insurance Company (Atlanta), the International Visions Gallery (Washington DC), and the Reginald Lewis Museum (Baltimore). He has received various awards such as the Distinguished Whitney Independent Study Fellowship, Phillip Morris Fellowship, and Maryland State Art Council Individual Artist Awards.

Medium: Marshall works primarily in collage, "paper doll," and mixed media.

Style: Marshall has an expressionistic painting style using vibrant colors, strong lines and shapes, often incorporating collages into his works. His style is also described as pictorial. Some works contain his own pictograph language.

Influences on his work: Marshall's artwork shows the influences of his childhood upbringing with his grandmother, Grandma Gussie, a quilter and storyteller. Evenings in their rural home with the wood stove burning often consisted of narratives about present and past life situations. Marshall later brought those stories to life in his art.

Marshall's work was also influenced by his time in Vietnam and its effect on a nineteen year-old black man.: "The Vietnam of yesterday is my tomorrow: to give hope to helplessness and meaning to determination. From a place where I was trained to take a life, today I try to save one. Vietnam is a dream deferred, a place where I found and lost myself and my friends. It is a place I have learned to forgive and to forget."

Series of works: The subjects of Marshall's paintings include the history of African American culture, family connections, and individual dignity. Marshall's series for different exhibits reflect these themes: *Black Orpheus*; *Blues Man*; *Mother & Child*; *Surviving the Raging Storm*; *Stolen/Still Standing*; *The Journey to Hope*; *From Africa to America*; *Many Rivers to Cross*; etc.

Artist's self-described goals: Marshall describes his goal as an African American artist "is to use these story tales as a tool for sharing the plight of the almost forgotten colored people. I wish to preserve the pride, dignity, courage, and survival of a people's journey from slavery to slave. A people whose lives have been bent, but not broken." ... "for without their suffering/pain and a history of their journey our freedom would not be possible."

THE WORK OF ART: “The Displaced People” by Ulysses Marshall, 2001, Oil and Charcoal on Canvas

Context: “The Displaced People” is the artist’s rendering or his “story tale” of the “Middle Passage,” that is, the transportation of slaves across the Atlantic Ocean from Africa to America after their kidnapping and forced march to the ocean and before their final destination of enslavement. This piece is part of a series entitled “From Africa to America.” This painting reflects Marshall’s interpretation of that passage from the despair for lost lives, traditions and culture to the hope of others witnessed and passed on through generations.

Elements of art: The work is organized in three rectangles balanced by two on the top portion and one on the lower portion separated by varying widths of black lines. The work contains light colors (white, grayish), dark colors (brown, black and deep turquoise-blue), and bright colors (red, orange, blue, yellow). The medium is oil and charcoal on canvas. The figures and objects are curved and organic shapes with expressionistic representation. There are multiple renderings of oval shapes from the sun and faces to the semi-oval-shaped boat. Likewise, the range of colors are repeated from the red/orange sun and dress; the bluish sky and water; the white-gray illumination around the boat and female figures, the dress of the underwater figures, and the outline of the smaller female figure with child.

Description of the story tale:

The lower portion depicts the story of slaves who would rather die by drowning than live a life of captivity. They are five ghost-like figures in dull robes in blue-black water below a West African-type fishing boat. The boat (which is not depicted as a slave ship) is being moved forward by a group efforts in rowing.

The boat movement is towards the upper-right area of the painting depicted with lavender-blue skies, yellow squares of light, and an orange sun.

Meanwhile, in the upper-left area of the painting, blocked in by a black square there are two women figures watching, one mother figure who is larger and more substantial with a sun-colored orange dress and the other daughter figure with a grayish-white dress carrying within her a child.

Artist’s interpretation of his work: Each of the images depicted represents some aspect of the passage into slavery: The boat is a symbol of community—of people working together with purpose. It is the cultural symbol of the voyage from Africa to America. It is part of the search for the future. The water and fishing represent life. The mother figure is the embodiment of African culture who survives to tell past history and carry on traditions. The sun represents hope and aspiration. The ghostly figures represent lost lives, traditions, and culture. All the figures have only one eye which is symbolic of slaves coming to America not of their own free will but that of evil strangers, thereby closing one eye to remember where they came from and not where they were going.

TOUR GROUP CONSIDERATIONS: This work can be discussed on various levels. Middle school students may be able to describe what they observe but not fully appreciate all the symbolism. High school students and adults are more likely to pick up on the symbolism and recognize how the artist has used design principles and techniques to artistically convey his story.

QUESTIONS: Can you describe what you see in each of the three areas of the painting? What do you notice about the figures—faces, clothing, gender, and their position? Do you see any repetition of shapes, colors, and lines? What, if any, relationship is there between the repeated elements? Do all the parts work together to tell a story? What do you think the story is? What do you think the artist was trying to convey?

SOURCES: Websites of artist and exhibition museums; KIA materials