

Artist Profile – Kerry James Marshall

b. 1955 Birmingham, AL; lives and works in Chicago, IL

Marshall was born in Birmingham, Alabama and left for Los Angeles during one of the last waves of the great migration, he left to follow his father who had been living on the west coast for some time in search of work. Alabama was becoming more and more dangerous for people of color to live in and they had hope Los Angeles would be different. Although Alabama was not safe for his family, Marshall remembers mostly good things from his childhood and growing up there. Marshall had been creating art since he was a child, and in high school he entered a piece in a competition winning second place, receiving a scholarship to Chouinard. Instead of attending Chouinard on scholarship, he decided to take life-drawing classes from Sam Clayberger at Otis, as well as from Charles White. Marshall ended up graduating from Otis in 1978 and very soon after at age twenty-five discovered the book *Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison which would go on to influence most of his works. Along with being widely known and receiving a number of awards for his work, like the Wolfgang Hahn Prize and the Rosenberger Medal, Marshall was appointed to Barack Obama's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities in 2013.

Marshall began by creating paintings that were abstract and involved a collage aspect, but after reading the novel *Invisible Man*, he was inspired to paint works with a different meaning behind them. Marshall's small paintings depict black men who are indistinguishable from their background by using slightly differentiating dark hues and by flattening subject and background. These works that became his focus throughout his career speak to the underrepresentation of black people in art as well as racist representations of them. Marshall uses symbols from African culture, religion, and art to make a statement about African American ethnic pride.

His works today move towards depicting every day life, as opposed to portraits, of African Americans and shows them with great power and heroism. Overall, typical themes that surround Marshall's work are absence versus presence, black versus white, visible versus visible, and the idea that the viewer should look at the overlooked. Marshall's works also touches on the subjects of death and time; death by using black as the main color choice, alluding to mourning or loneliness, and time by creating pieces that are so ambiguous that it seems it could have been from a number of different years. For example, a painting of Marshall's could have the clothing style from the 1970s, but resemble an event that took place in the 1960s, while other paintings of his can't be placed in a certain time frame at all.

Marshall uses three different blacks in his paintings; Ivory, Mars, and Carbon. Ivory black is made by burning bones, teeth, or tusks, and Carbon black is made through the incomplete combustion of petroleum products, like tar. By using these three blacks Marshall is representing his subjects as literally black, instead of tones that actually are their skin type, like umber or sienna. By choosing this palette, Marshall is pushing his intended themes forward and making sure that the viewer acknowledges them right away.

A good example of Marshall's collage style that was a foundation for his later works is *Past Times (1)*, which depicts an urban scene of black figures engaged in various activities. One of the first pieces Marshall did to start his new style based on *Invisible Man*, is titled *A Portrait*

of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self (2), which is portrait style and only contains black, white, and red paint.

