



In the Tower:
Kerry James Marshall

National Gallery of Art
June 28 – December 7, 2013

Kerry James Marshall was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955. He moved with his family to Los Angeles in 1963, where he was educated at the Otis Art Institute; he currently lives in Chicago. One of the most accomplished painters of his generation, Marshall has exhibited widely in both the United States and abroad and is the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, among other honors. His work explores the experiences of African Americans and the narratives of American history that have often excluded black people. Drawing upon the artist's prodigious knowledge of art history and African diasporic culture, his paintings combine figurative and abstract styles and multiple allusions. In Marshall's art, the past is never truly past. History exerts a constant, often unconscious, pressure on the living.

In 2011, the artist's painting *Great America* (1994) was acquired by the National Gallery of Art. The present exhibition — the latest of the In the Tower series focusing on art since midcentury — affords a context for understanding this painting and its powerful imagery, and includes several of Marshall's preparatory drawings as well as some of his most arresting paintings. Marshall sat down with James Meyer, associate curator of modern art, to discuss the exhibition.

James Meyer (JM): Let's begin with *Great America* [cover], the work that precipitated our show. How did it come about?

Kerry James Marshall (KJM): Among a lot of friends and acquaintances of mine there has been this idea of a transitional moment in the experience of Africans being brought to the New World. The moment of the Middle Passage [the transportation of enslaved people between Africa and the New World] was traumatic. There's this idea that many of the attitudes and personality developments in black folks in the diaspora are a consequence of this unresolved trauma. There have been attempts by black artists to try and figure out how to represent that in some kind of way. None of those images were ever really satisfactory. I'd always wanted to do a work that addressed the Middle Passage, but because I don't have any way of comprehending what that experience must have been like, I can only look at some of the aftereffects — how that might have filtered down to generations who still have knowledge, but no direct experience, of it.

JM: It's often said that the Holocaust evades depiction. The Middle Passage is also described in this way. Many of your predecessors, such as Romare Bearden and Aaron Douglas, have tried to depict it. How are you doing something different?

KJM: We're not dealing with a genuine historic memory but with information we've come to know through indirect sources. As African Americans we're trying to come to terms with a zero point in an evolving history. We can only locate our point of origin at a "no place" in the middle of a vast sea; it represents nothingness. We're trying to figure out a way to construct a point of origin from that "no place." And the reason why we are compelled to do it is because a story has been told. It's a story to which we feel related. The philosopher Cornel West has said, "There are things that one cannot not know."¹ For a lot of African Americans, not knowing something about their origins is one of those things. You have to fill in a lot of the gaps.

Where other artists may have tried to focus on the trauma, I felt like you had to displace it and attach it to some things in a more indirect way that don't appear to be traumatic. Which is how I arrived at the use of the amusement park haunted tunnel ride in *Great America*.

It was the only way I could comprehend what the idea of the Middle Passage was and the closest I could get to something that suggests that kind of fright and anticipation.

JM: There are hints of trauma in *Great America*. The ghosts, the head bobbing in the water, the word WOW painted in white on top of a splatter of red paint...

KJM: There can only be hints. In order to get to *Great America* I had to imagine the Middle Passage in the most traumatic terms that I could — the reality that 25, sometimes 30 percent of the people didn't make it to the other side. Even setting it up that way doesn't begin with the most extreme manifestation of the trauma: the brutality of being dragged onto a ship, being locked in a hold, being chained down with little space to move. The only thing that seemed to make the most sense when I started out was to begin with the sketch from below the boat showing figures floating down to the bottom [fig. 1]. And then it started to

evolve through the other drawings where the notion of the Middle Passage as a haunted theme park ride started to emerge. The figures in a lot of the drawings don't immediately suggest figures in distress.

JM: In some of them you depict water polo players outside of a Tunnel of Love [fig. 2]. Two kinds of leisure activity...

KJM: Which don't go together. That's the way I'm trying to figure out how to come to an image that embodies all of the dimensions of the Middle Passage.

JM: You set up troubling exchanges between history and the present. Your works are history paintings but not *merely* history paintings.

KJM: They aren't costume dramas that locate the events in the past. What you're trying to do is figure out a way to embed all of that historical knowledge into a work that remains compelling in this moment and hopefully for generations to come. It has to exist in a bubble that's outside of any particular time. None of

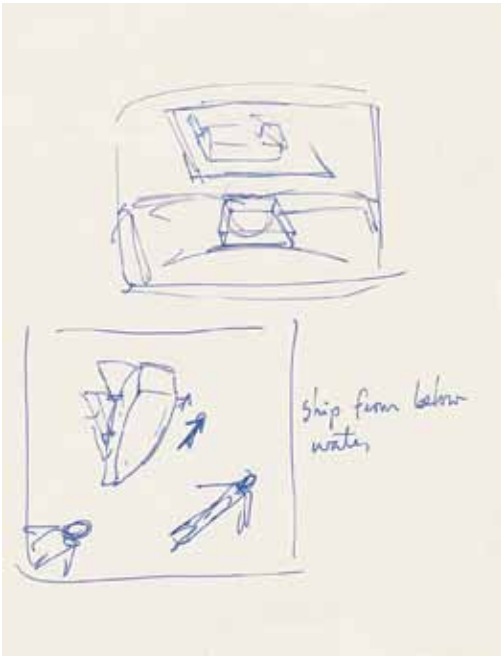


Fig. 1: Sketch for *Great America: Under Water*, c. 1994

Fig. 2: Study for *Great America*, c. 1994 (right)

the things in the picture are specific to a particular time or place.

JM: *Great America* presents several techniques in a single picture. In this painting alone you have figurative images of people, abstract expressionist brushwork, Renaissance one-point perspective, symbols — the red cross, circles of stars — and even different surfaces due to your use of collage. How would you describe your technique? It seems deeply connected to the idea of subject matter you just described.

KJM: There are two ways to think about it. There is the classic postmodernist mode of thinking about this *mélange* of styles as “pastiche.”

JM: Pastiche was described during the 1980s as a combination of different kinds of images and symbols that projected a lack of meaning. The signs didn’t add up. That kind of work was current when you were coming up as an artist.²

KJM: I’m going in a completely opposite direction. I would use “amalgamation” more than “pastiche” as a way of thinking about the work. It’s an accumulation and use of styles to create a *unity* — a unified field where everything is linked to the overall narrative in one way or another. I’m not trying to divest images of meaning. I’m not simply deploying them for their own sake. I try and channel the way a viewer is able to think through the relationships between these component parts and to look at the differences between them.

I’m juggling all of these different modes of operating. You’re trying to hold together a multiplicity of parts that under every other circumstance seems to want to fly apart. This is the way I thought about it: You have a car driving down a winding mountain road, the way we see them in movies. Every time it gets to one of those curves the tires skid toward the edge. And then the car gets to a hairpin turn. It goes up on two wheels and is just about to



Fig. 3: *Baptist*, 1992

go off, and then you freeze the frame right there. But you keep the sound of the wheels spinning and the engine roaring. The person who is in the car gets out and walks away. That's the metaphor I use for what I'm trying to do with all of these different elements in a picture.

JM: You spoke about the Middle Passage as a “nowhere.” It's also a *passage*, a transition from one place to another and from one state of being to another. In *Baptist*, you depict the Middle Passage as a map of the Atlantic Ocean with two hemispheres visible. A body treads water [fig. 3]. In *Voyager*, you paint a dory with two passengers. The boat is called *Wanderer* [fig. 4].

KJM: It was said to have been the last slave ship to disembark cargo in the United States.³

The number seven [repeated in the work] is the magic number for the Seven African Powers, the pantheon of Yoruba gods and

deities—Yemaya, Oshun, Ogun, Elegba.... *Voyager* in particular is about becoming something different. The diagrams [such as the elaborate crosses next to the kneeling passenger] are Haitian *veves*.⁴ Each one of them represents the different manifestations of those Yoruban gods and deities.

JM: New World translations of African ideas.

KJM: Eshu/Elegba is the god of crossroads, of transitions. Yemaya is the goddess of the ocean. The picture embodies those concepts of transformation, of birth and rebirth. The invention of the African American, or the Haitian or Jamaican, is a consequence of the transatlantic slave trade.

JM: Red crosses recur in several of your works. I assumed they stood for the Red Cross, but apparently they are Yoruban, too.

KJM: They're both. They're syncretic, two things simultaneously: a crossroads. So is the *veve* for Eshu/Elegba. Red is also associated with rescue and distress.



Fig. 4: *Voyager*, 1992

WOW



G

R

E

A

M

JM: *Plunge* is an important hinge of the show [fig. 5]. You have a swimming pool with the text “Atlantic Ocean,” a toy boat, and a swimmer. A diver is about to jump in. You’ve moved a viewer from the open sea to the suburb, from an extremely marginal state of being into a middle-class ambience.

KJM: There is privilege and status embodied in the image of a flagstone-lined pool in a backyard. A little bit of ambivalence is created by the location of the sign on the gate. It says “Private” on the inside. The figure is occupying the space you would have thought she might have been denied access to. Is this side “private” — or is the *other* side?

JM: We’ve included two works from your *Housing* series. Many of those paintings depict public housing projects, including Nickerson Gardens in Watts, Los Angeles, where you grew up. In *Bang* [fig. 6] and *Our Town*, however, you depict middle-class children in neighborhoods of white houses and picket fences. The theme of water enters these works, too.

KJM: Water was the locus of the trauma. The ocean is that vast incomprehensible, what appears to be nothingness. If you ever find yourself on a boat in the middle of the ocean you look around in every direction and don’t see anything. That’s a terrifying experience. Water still has significance relative to this idea of the Middle Passage. It enters into the suburban environment, through the pools in *Plunge* and *Our Town* and the water hose in *Bang*.

JM: The water hose is like a big black snake circling around the girl.

KJM: It circles around and it’s *aimed*. It alludes in an indirect way to the events in Birmingham in 1963, when children were water-hosed by the fire department. The theme of the picture and the title are about this duality, this ambivalence.

JM: A duality of past and present, of trauma and desire.

KJM: For black Americans it’s always all those things all the time: a consciousness that oscillates between these things. It never seemed



Fig. 5: *Plunge*, 1992

to matter how patriotic black Americans have been over the centuries. Because however much patriotism you displayed you were still subject to the same kinds of disenfranchisement as somebody who might not have been patriotic in any way at all. Arriving into the middle class didn't make you immune from any of those victimizations. All of the promises of democracy and the trappings of success were not armor enough to make African Americans immune from the ways in which the overwhelming power of the dominant white group could take advantage of or abuse them.

JM: In *Bang*, the little girl holds up the American flag. The boys say the Pledge of Allegiance. A text states, "Happy July 4th. We are one." To the right, it says, "Bang." Two doves hold scrolls in their beaks that read: "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God."

KJM: That's a Revolutionary War banner.⁵ "We are one" is on the back of the dollar bill.⁶

JM: The children are standing in a classic suburb with white picket fences and lawns

sprinkled with flowers. Yet there's this threatening garden hose. And the black barbecue, a Weber, emits billows of smoke.

KJM: The figures are situated between these two ideals: between the revolutionary ideal of resistance to tyranny and being welcomed into a collective under the promises of the revolution, and the way in which tools that are supposed to be used to assist and to aid ended up being turned against people who were only trying to exercise rights that had been promised by law.

JM: The little girl has a diadem like the Statue of Liberty's [fig. 7]. But African Americans were not immigrants in the same way as others. No "Give me your tired, your poor."

KJM: None of that applied. From the moment when the promises of liberty and freedom were inscribed in the founding documents of the country, black folks have been struggling to get the people who believe in those principles to adhere to them and actually live out, as Martin Luther King Jr. said, "the true meaning of its creed."⁷



Fig. 6: *Bang*, 1994

JM: As an artist who clearly thinks deeply about American history, what does it mean to exhibit your work at the National Gallery of Art?

KJM: For me, having a show here is one more step in the total fulfillment of all of the promises that were outlined in the Declaration of Independence. If the word “all” is to mean anything, then the institutions the country has established to recognize or celebrate the genius of the American project have to demonstrate what that really looks like. We have to be able to embrace all the dimensions of the history that led us to be the kind of country that America is, and not just rhetorically, because I think the material manifestations of the narrative are really important. Progress has always been understood to be driven by exceptional white men. Whether it’s the military victories we’ve achieved, the philosophi-

cal foundations that are the underpinnings of the nation, or our economic ingenuity, all this has been articulated through narratives of exceptional white men.

When you walk through the museum you don’t have a sense that the variety of different people who made up the nation as a whole have made any real meaningful contributions to the development of this country in the ways that people talk about its greatness. And I think to finally start to bring into a place like the National Gallery somebody who does work like mine that is not always celebratory of American ideals, that has an ambivalent and at times critical relationship to the overall story, to finally start to allow that work to be seen and those narratives to be articulated, starts to fulfill the promises that the idea of the country and the founding documents set out to guide us.

Notes

1 Anders Stephanson, “Interview with Cornel West.” *FlashArt* 133 (April 1987), 53.

2 For example, the paintings of David Salle or the photographic works of John Baldessari. On pastiche as a postmodernist form see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

3 The schooner *Wanderer* sailed from the Congo to the United States with a cargo of almost five hundred slaves. Each person was accorded a space of twelve inches in width, eighteen inches in height, and five feet in length. The ship arrived at Jekyll Island, Georgia, on November 28, 1858. Eighty individuals perished during the crossing. See Erik Calonius, *The Wanderer: The Last American Slave Ship and the Conspiracy That Set Its Sails* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006).

4 A *veve* or *vèvé* is a religious symbol of West African origins associated with Haitian voodoo.

5 There are historical variants of the phrase. For example, “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God” appeared in 1776 on Benjamin Franklin’s proposed design for the Great Seal and “Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God” was emblazoned on a 1776 Revolutionary battle flag. In the nineteenth century Susan B. Anthony appropriated the phrase as a feminist slogan.

6 The Great Seal of the United States, containing the phrase “E Pluribus Unum” (Out of many, one), appears on the reverse side of the one-dollar bill.

7 The phrase appears in Martin Luther King Jr.’s August 1963 speech at the Lincoln Memorial: “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.’”



Fig. 7: **Study for *Bang***, c. 1994

Exhibition checklist

Unless otherwise noted, all works are courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Koplin Del Rio, California.

Gallery 1

Baptist, 1992

acrylic and collage on canvas
133.35 × 148.59 cm (52 ½ × 58 ½ in.)
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund [fig. 3]

Plunge, 1992

acrylic and collage on canvas
220.98 × 276.86 cm (87 × 109 in.)
Geri and Mason Haupt, © Kerry James Marshall, photo courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York [fig. 5]

Voyager, 1992

acrylic and collage on canvas
233.36 × 233.05 cm (91 ⅞ × 91 ¾ in.)
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Gift of the Women's Committee of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1993.1.2 © 2004 Kerry James Marshall c/o Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC [fig. 4]

Bang, 1994

acrylic and collage on canvas
261.62 × 289.56 cm (103 × 114 in.)
The Progressive Art Collection, photo courtesy of The Progressive Corporation, Mayfield Village, Ohio [fig. 6]

Great America, 1994

acrylic and collage on canvas
261.62 × 289.56 cm (103 × 114 in.)
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Collectors Committee [cover]

Our Town, 1995

acrylic and collage on canvas
254 × 314.96 cm (100 × 124 in.)
Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, photography by Vancouver Art Gallery

Gulf Stream, 2003

acrylic and glitter on canvas
274.32 × 396.24 cm (108 × 156 in.)
Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2004

Study for Visible Means of Support: Monticello, 2008

acrylic on PVC panel
121.92 × 152.4 cm (48 × 60 in.)
Rodney M. Miller Collection, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Study for Visible Means of Support: Mount Vernon, 2008

acrylic on PVC panel
121.92 × 152.4 cm (48 × 60 in.)
Pat and Bill Wilson, San Francisco

Gallery 2

Study for Baptist, c. 1992
conté crayon on paper
60.96 × 45.72 cm (24 × 18 in.)

Diver, c. 1992

acrylic and ink on paper
60.96 × 45.72 cm (24 × 18 in.)

Study for Plunge, c. 1992
ink wash on paper
45.72 × 60.96 cm (18 × 24 in.)

Sketch for Voyager, c. 1992
pen and ink on graph paper
27.94 × 21.59 cm (11 × 8 ½ in.)

Study for Voyager, c. 1992
ink wash on paper
45.72 × 30.48 cm (18 × 12 in.)

Study for Bang, c. 1994
graphite on paper
48.26 × 40.64 cm (19 × 16 in.)

Study for Bang, c. 1994
graphite on paper
35.56 × 27.94 cm (14 × 11 in.) [fig. 7]

Study for Bang, c. 1994
graphite on paper
35.56 × 27.94 cm (14 × 11 in.)

Study for Bang: Weber Grill, c. 1994
graphite on paper
35.56 × 27.94 cm (14 × 11 in.)

Sketch for Great America, c. 1994
pen and ink on graph paper
21.59 × 27.94 cm (8 ½ × 11 in.)

Sketch for Great America, c. 1994
pen and ink on graph paper
27.94 × 21.59 cm (11 × 8 ½ in.)

Study for Great America, c. 1994
conté crayon on paper
60.96 × 45.72 cm (24 × 18 in.) [fig. 2]

Final study for Great America, c. 1994
conté crayon on paper
45.72 × 60.96 cm (18 × 24 in.)

Study for Great America: Mother and Child, c. 1994
conté crayon on paper
60.96 × 45.72 cm (24 × 18 in.)

Study for Great America: Mother and Child, c. 1994
graphite on paper
35.56 × 27.94 cm (14 × 11 in.)

Study for Great America: Mother and Child, c. 1994
graphite on paper
35.56 × 27.94 cm (14 × 11 in.)

Study for Great America: Tunnel of Love, c. 1994
graphite on paper
101.6 × 66.04 cm (40 × 26 in.)

Sketch for Great America: Under Water, c. 1994
pen and ink on paper
27.94 × 21.59 cm (11 × 8 ½ in.) [fig. 1]

Study for Great America, c. 1994
conté crayon on paper
66.04 × 101.6 cm (26 × 40 in.)

Study for Our Town, c. 1995
graphite on paper
45.72 × 60.96 cm (18 × 24 in.)

Study for Our Town: Running Girl, c. 1995
graphite on paper
35.56 × 27.94 cm (14 × 11 in.)

Study for Gulf Stream, 2003–2004
graphite, watercolor, glitter on paper
98.43 × 120.65 cm (38 ¾ × 47 ½ in.)
Collection Walker Art Center, Butler Family Fund

Portrait of Nat Turner with the Head of His Master, 2011

oil on canvas
91.44 × 74.93 cm (36 × 29 ½ in.)
Private collection

The exhibition was organized by the National Gallery of Art.

Sponsored by Dr. Anita Blanchard and Martin Nesbitt and Cari and Michael Sacks

Additional support from The Tower Project of the National Gallery of Art

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This brochure was produced by the department of exhibition programs and the publishing office to accompany the exhibition *In the Tower: Kerry James Marshall*.