



NYC Museum Highlight - “Kerry James Marshall: Mastry” at The Met Breuer

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by Pat Rogers

The Met Breuer presents an exhibition that shouldn't be missed with “Kerry James Marshall: Mastry.” Filling two floors of the New York City art museum, the exhibition is the largest museum retrospective to date for American artist [Kerry James Marshall](#). The show presents around 80 works—including 72 paintings—spanning the artist's 35-year career that reveals Marshall's artist practice and exploration of his path to discover ways, through art, to counter stereotypical representations of people with black skin in society and reassert the place of the black figure within the canon of Western painting.



“Untitled (Studio)” by Kerry James Marshall, 2014. Acrylic on PVC panels, 83 5/16 x 119 1/4 inches. Purchase, The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Foundation Gift, Acquisitions Fund and The Metropolitan Museum of Art Multicultural Audience Development Initiative Gift, 2015. © Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the Met Breuer.

Kerry James Marshall is an imaginative chronicler of the African American experience. Marshall is known for his large-scale narrative history paintings featuring black figures, made as defiant assertions of blackness in a medium in which African Americans have long been invisible. Born in 1955, before the passage of the Civil Rights Act in Birmingham, Alabama, Marshall also experienced the Watts rebellion in 1965 as a child and witnessed the civil rights movement as it morphed in America

In his work, Marshall critically examines and reworks the Western canon through its archetypal forms: the historical tableau, landscape and genre painting and portraiture. In addition, his art can draw on a variety of forms, including the muralist tradition, the comic book and photography, to address and correct, in his words, the “vacuum in the image bank” and to make the invisible visible.



“Silence is Golden” by Kerry James Marshall, 1986. Acrylic on panel, 48 1/4 x 46 7/8 inches. The Studio Museum in Harlem Gift of the artist. Courtesy of the Met Breuer.

Marshall’s works are narrative and evocative, even when mysterious. A stand out of the retrospective is a series of nine murals installed on the museum’s fourth floor. The works present eye-catching and ambiguous scenes that depict scenes from African American life in a grand style and scale. Other murals appear as if they could be bucolic or capture happy times of innocence, but, instead, hold dark shadows. Powerful paintings include [Better Homes, Better Gardens](#), 1994; [Campfire Girls](#), 1995; [Past Times](#), 1997; and [Many Mansions](#), 1994. Five paintings collectively called “The Garden Project,” 1994-95, are reunited for the first time in 20 years for the retrospective.

Another compelling gallery includes works in Marshall’s “[Untitled \(Painter\)](#)” series. Each depicts a sole painter next to a partially completed “paint-by-number” painting. The artists are presented in typical poses in portraiture and self-portraiture traditions but can feature an oversize pallet or partially completed paint-by-number painting. The works seem to welcome wide-spread participation but also raise questions about the determination of when a painting is complete.

“Kerry James Marshall: Mastry” presents a full view of an American master through chronicling Marshall’s own art history that begins with his initial self-exploration of the [concept of invisibility](#) to his most recent works in a path that fully traced his journey as an artist.



“Beauty Examined” by Kerry James Marshall, 1993. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 84 x 98 inches. Collection of Charles Sims and Nancy Adams-Sims. Courtesy of the Met Breuer.

BASIC FACTS: “Kerry James Marshall: Mastry” remains on view through January 29, 2017. The Met Breuer is located at 945 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10021. www.metmuseum.org/met-breuer. An audio guide of the exhibition is available through the Met app and also online at the museum’s website. Click [here](#) to begin exploring the exhibition. Select art works in the show can be viewed by clicking here.

For a review of the exhibition, click “[Kerry James Marshall’s Paintings Show What it Means to be Black in America](#)” by Holland Cotter for *The New York Times*.