





Grand Style

From barbershop customers to abolitionists, American artist Kerry James Marshall places the Black figure at the heart of his history paintings. Julian Lucas visits him at his Chicago studio ahead of his RA show

When I visited Kerry James Marshall, one of America's greatest living painters, at his studio in Chicago's Bronzeville neighbourhood, I hardly expected to find him playing with Lego bricks. 'This is the museum complex,' he said, brandishing a small cityscape, one of several that he'd assembled from toy cars, biscuit tins, plastic hair-rollers, and other odds and ends. The narrow, two-storey space was crammed with props, from a tiny sphinx to birdhouses wreathed in fake flowers. Marshall grinned as he showed me a modified Ken doll representing the Oba of Benin, in West Africa, and a sack with stick arms modelled after a Senufo ritual figure. It was for 'Rythm Mastr', a series of comic strips that he's been drawing for a quarter of a century and aspires to adapt as a feature film. First, though, he has to get the drawings right – hence the toys, which serve as references in a process as exacting as that of any Old Master's workshop. 'I'm only interested in precision, in precisely delineating everything,' he said. 'When you don't

have that pressure to get it right, anything goes. I'm not happy with that.'

Marshall is an affable, mischievous man of 69, who carries himself with a sunny self-assurance that must have seemed cocky before he'd backed it up with decades of painterly achievement. (In art school, he was elected president of the student body, and earned the nickname 'Idi Amin' for pushing out a clique of graduate students who were monopolising the campus gallery.) He has a white goatee and boyishly protuberant cheeks, set at the end of a long forehead that slopes downward from his shapely, mostly bald crown. The day I visited, he wore cargo pants, an army-green work shirt, and a beige t-shirt printed with one of his drawings, which he'd tucked in over his slight paunch. He likes to stroke his chin and gesticulate expansively – for instance, when he led me outside for a history lesson about 'Rythm Mastr'.

'You see the other side of those El tracks?' he said,

Previous spread:
De Style, 1993, by
Kerry James Marshall

This page, below left:
Watts, 1963, 1995,
by Marshall

Opposite page:
*School of Beauty, School
of Culture*, 2012,
by Marshall





‘He made his name with a series of paintings depicting public housing projects in the stylised guise of the utopias they were meant to become’

pointing westward. I squinted past a block of dull brick low-rises with rusty awnings, where, earlier, I’d seen a man drinking from a paper bag. On the other side of a raised platform in the distance, Marshall explained, had once stood an enormous residential complex called Robert Taylor Homes. It was built in the 1960s, when public housing seemed to promise Black families upward mobility, then torn down in the early 2000s, after a long descent into poverty and violence. The demolition inspired ‘Rythm Mastr’, in which a young man living in a similar community uses special drumming patterns to break a group of African sculptures out of the museum and bring them to life. The artworks join him in the fight against gang warfare – a

commonplace ordeal in American inner cities that Marshall raises to epic dimensions. ‘The whole idea is, “Can you develop a complex, futuristic narrative from elements that only exist in the neighbourhood where those projects were?”’ he said. ‘Somebody’s got to do it.’

Marshall has devoted his entire career to ensuring the artistic posterity of Black American life. He has painted barbershops, beauty parlours, and barbecues; slave-rebellion leaders and schoolchildren; and the living rooms of old women grieving Civil Rights heroes, all on a scale and with a virtuosity that evoke the grandest history paintings of the Renaissance. He made his name in the late 1990s with a series of monumental paintings called ‘Garden Project’, which depicted public housing projects in the stylised, quasi-allegorical guise of the utopias they were meant to become. (Among them is Nickerson Gardens in Los Angeles, where Marshall spent part of his childhood; *Watts*, 1963, 1995; left.) Since 2016, when his blockbuster retrospective ‘Mastery’ opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and travelled to the Metropolitan Museum in New York and MOCA Los Angeles, he has been one of America’s most celebrated artists. His remarkable success has been driven by two principles – that Black history deserves a place at the



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museum, and that the Western tradition of figurative painting, with all its supposedly outmoded attachment to technique, beauty, and the human form, remains the one true way.

Now, a retrospective of Marshall’s work, ‘The Histories’, opens at the Royal Academy, curated by Mark Godfrey. It features paintings from every stage of the artist’s career, including a new body of work inspired by the life of Olaudah Equiano, who escaped from slavery to become an abolitionist in London. It’s the largest survey of Marshall’s work to date in the UK, and in another sense, a homecoming, he explained, ‘because of what the “academy” represents.’ In 2023, his painting *Great America* (1994; opposite) was exhibited alongside *Watson and the Shark* (c. 1778), by John Singleton Copley, at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. Marshall’s painting imagines a boatload of Black figures coming out of a theme park-style Tunnel of Love, in a morbidly comic allusion to the Atlantic slave trade. Copley’s work portrays an infamously pro-slavery Lord Mayor of London during a

childhood brush with watery death, when, ironically, a Black man was among his rescuers; at the time, it was a radical departure in what history painting could portray. To Marshall, seeing the two works together was proof of the tradition’s vitality. ‘And Copley was a student at the Royal Academy,’ he added. ‘That kind of continuity is what it’s all about.’

Marshall is something like a godfather to the contemporary renaissance in Black figurative painting. Yet, when he decided to become an artist, his medium, his subject matter, and his commitment to representation were all on the outs. ‘Abstraction was supposed to be “advanced,”’ he recalled. ‘There weren’t even any Black people who wanted to paint Black people.’ Growing up in South Central Los Angeles, he was enraptured by Old Masters such as Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, a volume of whose works became the first art book he ever purchased. ‘I bought it on layaway for 19 dollars,’ he said.

Opposite page:
*A Portrait of the Artist
 as a Shadow of His
 Former Self*, 1980,
 by Marshall

This page, below:
Great America, 1994,
 by Marshall

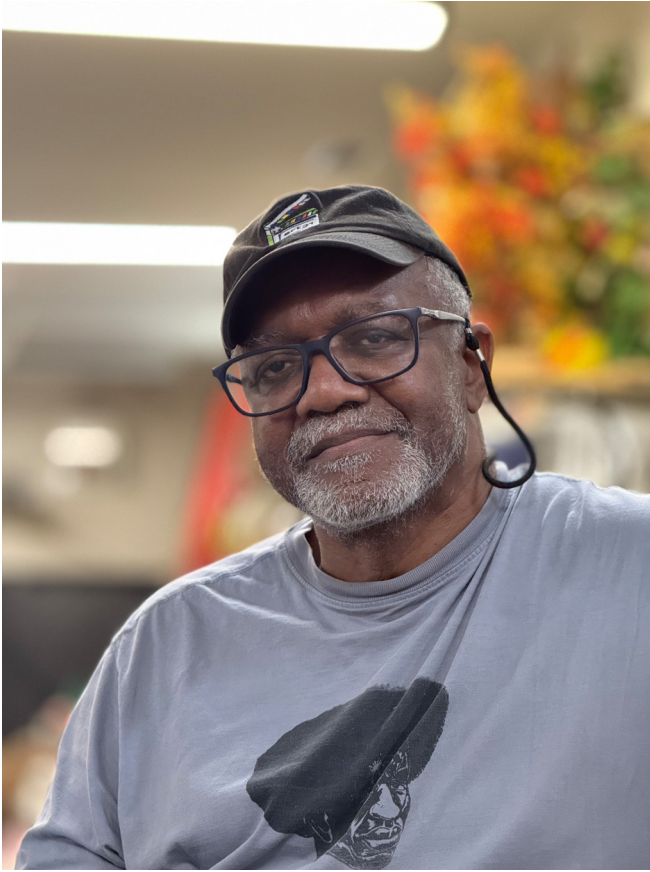
'It took me about a month-and-a-half to pay off.' He shared the Renaissance veneration of technical skill, excelling in his high-school shop classes, and easily earned admission to the Otis Art Institute of Los Angeles County where he was undeterred by conceptualism's ascendance: 'I'm always interested in doing the thing that nobody else is doing.'

He found mentors in teachers such as Sam Clayberger and Arnold Mesches, as well as Charles White, who'd chronicled early 20th-century Black life as a painter, printmaker, and muralist. He also took a class with Betye Saar, known for her collages and assemblages, whose interest in spiritualism, numerology, Jim Crow-era knick-knacks, and other Black Americana left its own mark on his work. Marshall tried collage himself for a while, in an abstract mode, but the results left him dissatisfied.

A breakthrough came when he read the novel *Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison, whose famous account of the ways that American society erases Black people – 'I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me,' the nameless protagonist declares – inspired him to attempt a similar feat on canvas. Was there a way to picture the absence of Black faces from fine art museums, and, indeed, from art history itself?

His answer to Ellison was a small work in egg tempera called *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self* (1980; opposite). The subject is a grinning man so featurelessly black that he all but blurs into his black jacket, black hat, and the nearly black background. He evokes racist caricatures, but the missing front tooth endows his smile with a taunting defiance, as though to say, 'Did you





think you could make me disappear?’ The painting touched off a career-long exploration. ‘I wanted blackness always to be present, always dominant,’ Marshall said of his figures, so dark that they appear less tinged with melanin than cut from obsidian. The style was both a political statement and a technical challenge, an effort to represent Black life, and pictorially define Black features, without any admixture of whiteness: ‘I arrived at a point when I began asking myself, “If you have an object that’s black, can it get any blacker in the shadows?”’

In the 1980s and early 90s, Marshall explored the problem of Black representation in riffs on myriad genres of Western painting: religious icons depicting Black women, whose stigmata are white beauty standards; a Biblical scene showing a Black Adam and Eve, who look up quizzically at the tree of dubious racial categories that seems to be growing out from under them. Over time, though, he moved away from investigating the ways Black people had been represented and embraced the vocation of chronicler more directly. *De Style* (1993; page 44), the first of his paintings to be acquired by a museum, portrays a barbershop, the emblematic setting of Black male camaraderie. Behind a scene of nattily dressed men is a wall pattern that evokes Piet Mondrian’s abstractions – and is nearly covered by mirrors and hair products.

‘All of the attempts to erase the idea of being a human being from the objects that we make as artists?’ Marshall told me, alluding to modernist abstraction. ‘Those are the things that have exhausted themselves.’ Vindicated by the resurgence of figuration, he often sounds as though he’s



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dancing on the death of painting’s grave. ‘I hate it when people try to make claims about the presence of things embedded in otherwise random shapes,’ he said, comparing interpreters of Abstract Expressionism to his late mother-in-law, who hallucinated ‘a little man the size of a baby’ while she was in hospital.

Despite his skepticism of conceptual innovations – ‘that idea of transgression is an illusion,’ he told me – Marshall has occasionally experimented with other media. Among his most arresting works is *Heirlooms and Accessories* (2002), a black-and-white photoprint of three smiling white women with their faces set in locket – who turn out to be excerpted from the crowd at a lynching. Another is *Wake* (2003; detail left), a moving installation that pictures contemporary Black Americans as survivors bobbing in the Atlantic slave trade’s wake. It takes the form of a model sailboat trailing more than a thousand portrait medallions. They’re printed with Black faces lifted from yearbooks, or, sometimes, taken by Marshall, as he did recently at an arts festival in Chicago’s



Opposite page top:
Marshall photographed
in his studio, 2025, by
Christopher Williams

Opposite page,
bottom:
Wake, 2003–ongoing,
by Marshall

This page, above:
Vignette, 2023,
by Marshall

Washington Park. He brought a Canon SELPHY wireless printer so that people could see themselves before they were added to the artwork. ‘Most of the people in history are anonymous to us,’ he said. ‘But, sometimes, there are images that give some sense of the vastness.’

Nearly all the new paintings in ‘The Histories’ are set in Africa, a continent Marshall has never visited but which looms large in the Black American imagination. He has long looked askance at Afrocentrism, or, as he put it, ‘this crazy idea that before white people came we were like Adam and Eve.’ *Vignette* (2003; above) depicts a Black man and a Black woman running naked through tall grass among bluebirds and butterflies – an idyll belied by a wedge of sidewalk in the corner. ‘That’s not Eden,’ he told me, laughing mischievously. ‘It’s Washington Park, down by the University of Chicago.’ To him, idealising the past is a surefire way to misunderstand the present and foreclose

the future. ‘If you just look at the world around where you grow up, that’ll disabuse you of any romantic ideas about the possibilities that are present in any time, place, or philosophy,’ he said. ‘I’m so not a utopian it’s not even funny.’

Accordingly, the new paintings centre on such subjects as the Zulu king Shaka’s assassination by his half-brothers, in 1828, and the controversial marriages of two post-independence African leaders, Senegal’s Léopold Sédar Senghor and Botswana’s Sir Seretse Khama, to women from Europe, whom Marshall puckishly depicts as ‘White Queens of Africa.’ The central suite, inspired by Equiano’s 1789 ‘Narrative’ of his kidnapping and struggle for freedom, focuses on the slave trade – a coffer emerging from a forest’s edge, a canoe heaped with cowrie shells and other luxury goods, exchanged for human lives (*Haul*, 2025; page 53). Along with the new themes is a new directness. Gone are the drips, diagrams, and esoteric symbolism that have adorned many of his previous works. ‘I don’t want people



‘Some artists believe that difficult histories ought to be difficult to look at. Not Marshall’



Opposite page:
*Abduction of Olaudah
and his Sister*, 2025,
by Marshall

This page, above:
Haul, 2025,
by Marshall

thinking they can just free associate when they look at the work,' he told me. 'They have to deal with that thing there.'

Some artists believe that difficult histories ought to be difficult to look at. Not Marshall. His *Via Crucis* of enslavement is overwhelming in its sheer visual pleasure – sharply defined figures, intricate compositions, and a palette so distinctively saturated that it gives the impression of a world more real than real. In *Abduction of Olaudah and his Sister* (2025; opposite), one marvels at the spider monkeys leaping through the dense foliage, an emerald leaf's vivid contrast with the jet-black pectorals of a man carrying a rifle inlaid with an engraving reminiscent of Botticelli's *Venus*. Only belatedly do the kidnapped siblings become apparent.

Marshall's favourite passage in the 'Narrative' is when, having realised that his European captors did not intend to eat him, Equiano began to marvel at their ingenuity. 'He realised they had something going on that we didn't have going on,' Marshall said, and determined to 'imbibe everything they were.' Ultimately, he used these skills to effect his own liberation – and, rather than return to his country, live out his days in London, because he knew that 'ahead of him was more possibility than what lay behind.'

Perhaps Marshall recognised a kindred spirit. Some critics have conflated his project with those of the younger Black artists he has influenced, who've looked to the Western canon with an eye to showing up its absences or cribbing its symbols of prestige. Yet Marshall's mission is more Promethean, less a matter of prodding the flames than of seizing the sacred fire itself. 'I'm carrying on for Giotto,' he said with a flourish that was only slightly ironic. "Giotto, to whose hand all things are possible" – that's my ideal.'

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Julian Lucas is a staff writer at the New Yorker

● **Kerry James Marshall: The Histories** Main Galleries, Royal Academy of Arts, 20 Sep–18 Jan 2026. Exhibition organised by the Royal Academy of Arts, in collaboration with the Kunsthau Zurich and the Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris. Lead Supporter BNP Paribas. Supported by Idan & Batia Ofer, the Huo Family Foundation, Sotheby's, David Zwirner and The Kerry James Marshall Supporters Circle. Additional support from Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne, Jack Shainman Gallery, The Reuben Foundation, The Bob Rennie Collection, The Magic Trust and Alireza Abrishamchi

● **Friends Previews** 17 Sep and 18 Sep 10am–6pm, 19 Sep 10am–9pm