



**Helen Molesworth**

# **THINKING OF A MASTR PLAN**

**Kerry James  
Marshall and  
the Museum**



Figure 7  
Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Studio)*, 2014 (pl. 79).

The picture is immediately legible: We are in a studio, an interior where pictures are made. A painting leans mid-process on an easel; the adjacent table is littered with brushes and paints. A model sits patiently in front of a red backdrop while a young woman adjusts her profile. Two men occupy the background: one is nude, the other pulls a mustard-colored jacket or smock over his arm. A yellow dog in the foreground watches the scene intently. If the first glance is rewarded with the speed of this quick gestalt, then the second viewing is like entering a time warp. Comprehension slows. All the figures are black: jet black, ebony black, charcoal black, obsidian black, velvety black, inky black. Their blackness heightens the intensity of their pictorial role as figures against a ground. This effect is amplified by the painting on the easel: a female torso is roughly sketched in with the blocks of color that will ultimately serve to model her form, while her face appears with the starkness of a cameo, nearly floating above the picture plane. A male figure stands behind her, weighted, rooted to the ground like a tree. He both creates and stands in shadow, an act that renders his nudity palpable yet occluded. His position slightly behind the easel lends him an air of being in the wings of a stage, as if an actor in a play. Behind him is a stack of canvases, their stretcher bars echoing the windowpanes to his left. Standing in contrapposto, he is a model—but for whom? Given that he does not appear in the picture on the easel, his nudity forms itself as a question. His figure grows increasingly shadowlike, flattened in the shallow space between the canvases. His identity as an actual figure in space becomes uncertain; his role as an apparition grows. His immobile flatness

Figure 8  
 Albrecht Dürer, *The Virgin and Child*  
 (*The Madonna with the Iris*), 1500–10.  
 Oil on lime; 58  $\frac{3}{4}$  × 46  $\frac{1}{8}$  in.  
 The National Gallery, London.





Figure 9  
 Diego Rodríguez de Silva y  
 Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, c. 1656.  
 Oil on canvas; 125 × 109 in.  
 Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.



is exacerbated by the physicality and movement of his male counterpart behind the red drape to the right. Backlit from the windows he, too, falls in shadow. But as he adjusts the right-hand collar of his jacket, and as he pulls his arm through the left-hand sleeve, he is all sartorial movement, the angle of his head set at a jaunty forty-five degrees. His role in the scenario is unclear. Is he the artist or another model? Is he starting work or finishing it?

Meanwhile, the women in front of him prepare for the painting in progress. The seated figure is the model, and the outline on the canvas acts as her shadow, her double. She is becoming an image. She is already an image. The woman who adjusts her head, the woman in green high heels, the woman with a paint-smeared dress: Is she the artist or the artist's assistant? Her gaze is directed out of the frame, but its recipient is unknown. Is she looking at the artist for confirmation? Is she making an adjustment in a mirror? Is her gaze reserved for us, the viewer?

*Untitled (Studio)* (fig. 7), a seemingly straightforward image in the realist tradition, starts to wobble, to pivot around its central absence: Where, or who, is the artist? The work is filled with allusions to other paintings: the flowers are pulled from Albrecht Dürer's *The Virgin and Child (The Madonna with the Iris)* (fig. 8) and Edgar Degas's portrait *A Woman Seated beside a Vase of Flowers* (1865). The skull on the table is part Hans Holbein, part Marvel Comics. The two buckets of brushes are a nod to Jasper Johns, while the knife does double duty summoning both Jean-Siméon Chardin and Paul Cézanne. In addition to these fragments, the overall composition and subject matter allude to Diego Velázquez's magisterial *Las Meninas* (fig. 9),



Figure 10  
Gustave Courbet, *The Artist's Studio, A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic and Moral Life*, 1854–55. Oil on canvas; 142 × 235 in. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Gustave Courbet's monumental *The Artist's Studio, a Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic and Moral Life* (fig. 10), and Thomas Eakins's complex *William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River* (1908). And because all of these historical images depict the artist at work, the absence of the artist in *The Studio* grows even more confounding. This central lack is made even stranger by how emphatically this painting is about painting: the pigment-stained worktable; the abstraction being transformed into figuration on the canvas; everywhere the tools of the trade—brushes, paints, professional lights, backdrops, clips from Home Depot; stretched canvases at the ready; finished works stockpiled; and the ultimate trace, left like a gift from the artist to the viewer, bits of colored paper tacked to the corner of the table. Placed ever so slightly off center, these scraps point to the heart of the matter: This is a painting about color. This is a painting about the rendering of the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional plane. This painting is a trick. This painting is an illusion. This painting is a representation. This painting knows exactly what it is doing. This painting is masterful. This painting has viewers who will be rewarded by its complexity. These pieces of colored paper indicate all of that while insisting that this painting is flat—it has edges and limits, and we, the viewers, are outside this line of demarcation. This painting, purchased by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, is now part of the public trust. If we are looking at it, we are in a museum.

At the beginning of the millennium, Kerry James Marshall penned the following: "I gave up on the idea of making Art a long time ago, because

I wanted to know how to make paintings; but once I came to know that, reconsidering the question of what Art is returned as a critical issue.”<sup>1</sup> This statement is an inversion of the conventional narrative about art after World War II in which the medium of painting was seen to have given way to the category of art, since it seemed that painting was unable to answer the question of what art is, much less help us describe what art does. For the past decade or so, the discipline of art history has been working steadily to consolidate this plot. Anthologies dedicated to movements, readers of collected essays, and the appearance of an authoritative new textbook, *Art Since 1900*, all signal a field-wide desire for explication.<sup>2</sup> In almost all of these narratives, painting’s hierarchical and traditional place as the apogee of art was toppled. Instead, the strategies of minimalism and conceptualism were given pride of place, positioned as the engines that lead to site-specificity, installation art, appropriation, and institutional critique.

Marshall’s abandonment of Art for the sake of painting might be a way of understanding the degree to which his work has not figured prominently, if at all, in these increasingly dominant accounts of art after 1945. I’d like to suggest that the failure to account for Marshall’s oeuvre is largely bound up with the intensity with which his work has been discussed almost exclusively in terms of subject matter, particularly his sustained investigation of the black figure and its placement within conventional pictorial structures. (This is an all-too-common hermeneutic applied to subaltern artists, a vestigial prejudice that leaves the problem of form to the putatively universalist structures that attend whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality.) In focusing nearly exclusively on subject matter, Marshall’s critics and interlocutors have neglected to articulate the systematicity with which Marshall has taken on the museum, particularly the Western encyclopedic museum, as one of the constitutive institutions of civil society.<sup>3</sup> I would like to argue that one reason Marshall abandoned Art in favor of painting was to focus more specifically on the problem-idea of the museum, by understanding fully, and deploying tactically, its most hallowed object: easel painting. Indeed, I want to suggest that one productive, albeit counterintuitive, way to think about Marshall’s oeuvre is to see it as participating in the logic and practice of institutional critique and, further, to see it as operating as a kind of metacommentary on the ways in which institutional critique has been performed and historicized. Marshall’s project is multifold because he is involved simultaneously, through his use of the black figure, in a deep inquiry into the category of race. And race, as Hamza Walker has succinctly argued, is not “an immutable framework belonging to a natural order”; rather, “race, as a modernist construct *par excellence*, depends on institutions and their ideological underpinnings for its form and content.”<sup>4</sup>

Marshall’s oeuvre is a sustained exegesis on the ways in which the museum, painting, and the discipline of art history have participated—both historically and presently—in the defining, and maintaining, of race as a naturalized category. His population of the painterly field with exclusively black figures points to the yawning and inexcusable lack of black protagonists in the history of painting and, subsequently, their absence in the museum as an institution that helps form the fabric of the public sphere. Such a persistent absence is not a form of benign neglect, nor can it be claimed to be a

1 Kerry James Marshall, foreword in Kerry James Marshall, Terrie Sultan, and Arthur Jafa, *Kerry James Marshall* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 9.

2 Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2011); James Sampson Meyer, *Minimalism* (London: Phaidon, 2000); Peter Osborn, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 2002); and Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan, *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon, 2001).

3 I am working here with a generalized understanding of the public sphere as established by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. The public sphere is made up of those institutions that compose, either spatially or discursively, the places where free discussion may transpire: classic institutions of the public sphere might be the library, the newspaper, the museum, schools, etc. These institutions form the fabric of civil society—the spaces that are ideationally separate from the realms of government and business. One distinct quality of civil rights struggles is that they must claim access to these spaces as part of their rhetorical strategy to establish rights while engaging in a critique of these institutions for their role in prohibiting those same rights.

4 Hamza Walker, “Introduction: Domino Effect,” in Walker et al., *Black Is—Black Ain’t* (Chicago: Renaissance Society, 2013), 11.

historical “fact.” Rather, it confirms daily the idea that black lives don’t merit representation; that they don’t matter. Further, the absence of black bodies allows whiteness to remain as the de facto standard of beauty and truth. This lacuna, this structuring absence, confirms implicitly and explicitly whiteness as an unassailable value. Marshall’s oeuvre produces an acute awareness that such omnipotent white presence can exist only through the absence of blackness. His project, in its entirety, insists that the absence must be eradicated through daily lived presence.

Institutional critique, briefly sketched, is a form of art dedicated to examining the sociopolitical framework of the museum as the structural device that establishes the category of art. It has had two generational iterations. The first emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and included artists such as Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, and Hans Haacke. The second wave appeared in the 1990s and consolidated around Mark Dion, Andrea Fraser, and Fred Wilson, among others. One result of this critique’s one-two punch has been the dismantling (at least for some) of the idea of the museum’s neutrality. Instead, we have come to understand that the museum is an institution that effectively “organized the experience of art.”<sup>5</sup> It could be seen as an ideological apparatus with its own aims, however unconscious, that were a mixture of the needs and tastes of the economic class, and/or nation-state agenda that governed them, and as such one function of the museum, particularly through its statements of autonomy, is to promote and maintain the status quo. Institutional critique grew out of the fertile soil of 1960s and 1970s minimalism and conceptualism and can be seen as an extension of their generally deconstructive nature. If minimalism permitted artists to call attention to the physical space of the museum (its white walls, its conventional modes of presentation) as well as its physical limitations (its remove from the spheres of everyday life), then conceptualism allowed a privileging of idea over object and process over product. The discipline of art history positions both of these movements as a preamable to institutional critique.

For instance, in *Art Since 1900*, Richard Serra’s *To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram, Right Angles Inverted* (1970) opens the section of the textbook that leads to the discussion of institutional critique. The work, situated outside, is freed from the constraints of both scale and regulation offered by the museum. In some ways, the first “attack” on the museum by artists was their abandonment of it. The depiction of Serra’s work is particularly interesting; it is taken from an aerial vantage, and we see a large circular form in a city street that stops just short of the curb on either side. The street is lined with rubble and a chain-link fence, and a solitary figure is nearly cropped out of the image on the far right-hand side. The text describes the location as “a derelict street in the Bronx.”<sup>6</sup> There is no mention of the people who live in this neighborhood, no mention of the socioeconomic conditions of the Bronx around 1970, no mention of recent race riots and the growing condition of “white flight”—no mention, in other words, of anything other than how, as described by the authors, “this ‘minimal’ gesture intervenes in the urban setting as a kind of liminally perceived signal of order.”<sup>7</sup> What is neglected in this account is the specificity of the abandoned Bronx streets; what goes unnoticed are the social conditions of lived experience for the

5 Frazer Ward, “The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity,” *October* 73 (Summer 1995): 73.

6 Foster et al., *Art Since 1900*, 584.

7 Ibid.



Figure 11  
View of *Mining the Museum:*  
*An Installation by Fred Wilson,*  
1992–93, Maryland Historical  
Society, Baltimore.



predominantly poor people of color who lived there. This absence starts a haunting. It means that although Serra's work can be seen to expose the limitations of the museum as a framing device for the condition and/or experience of art, it maintains an abstraction (inherent to the Western museum) of imagining the context and social conditions of art as perpetually suspended or ignored in the name of Art.

If the logic of minimalism was to draw attention to both the specificity and the limitations of the museum's physical site, then this attribute was furthered by artists explicitly involved in institutional critique. The first image of the next section in *Art Since 1900* is Hans Haacke's *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System as of May 1, 1971* (1971), a landmark work of the genre, it is comprised of a row of steadfast and affectless images of the substandard housing units owned and operated by a trustee of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. In one simple gesture, Haacke peels back the curtain and reveals who was in charge of the museum and how they made their money. Not surprisingly, Haacke's exposure of the intimate connections between the highest realms of culture and one of the most pernicious forms of predatory capital engendered censorship when this work was first shown. And although this piece incisively exposed the economic structure of the museum, it, too, made no mention of the inhabitants of these "slum empires." Indeed, the resulting censorship continued to situate the owner/trustee at the perpetual center of the story.

By the advent of the 1990s, the practice of institutional critique was no longer capable of imagining either the physical space of the museum or its viewers with the same degree of abstraction that attended the experiments of the 1970s. The rise of "identity politics" meant that both artist and spectator are "social subject[s] marked by multiple differences of class, race, and gender."<sup>8</sup> The authors of *Art Since 1900* link this newfound awareness to the burgeoning academic discipline of "cultural studies" and an "anthropological model of project art based on fieldwork."<sup>9</sup> They offer as the

8 Ibid., 668.

9 Ibid.

defining example of the new wave of institutional critique Fred Wilson's brilliant 1992 exhibition *Mining the Museum* (fig. 11). Taking on the role of curator, Wilson reorganized and re-presented objects of material history in the Maryland Historical Society, exposing its "neutral" version of history as one that occluded the lived reality of Maryland's African American citizens and that privileged—to the point of excluding all others—the history of white landowning men.<sup>10</sup>

Wilson's challenge to the putative neutrality of the first generation of institutional critique artists was swift and surgical, but it also happened through a series of displacements. Art was displaced by cultural artifacts, art history was sacrificed for anthropology, and the traditional role of the artist was usurped by taking up the mantle of artist-as-curator. Marshall's project did not proceed in this vein. Rather, his oeuvre held fast to the powerful categories that constitute the field of art as we know it: painting, art history, the museum, and the artist. However, no one mentioned institutional critique when Marshall's work first came into public view.

In 1997, five years after Wilson's landmark exhibition, Marshall's work was featured in both the Whitney Biennial and Documenta X (fig. 12). It was a breakout year for the artist, whose Garden Project paintings (pls. 26–38) appeared publicly with undeniable force. From 1994 to 1997 Marshall made a series of large-scale paintings depicting daily life in the low-income inner-city housing projects in Los Angeles and Chicago. The monumental paintings—unstretched canvases affixed with grommets directly to the wall—evoke both WPA murals and Renaissance tapestries. Emphatically colored and emotive, their deep recessive spaces are countered by a high level of painterly and decorative incidence—florets and daubs and drips of paint—that sit on the surface, calling attention to the resolute flatness of the picture plane.

Figure 12  
Installation view of Kerry James Marshall's  
Garden Project paintings, Documenta X,  
1997, Kassel, Germany.



This pictorial flatness, a key feature of modernist painting, was held in a dialectical relation to the repetitive housing blocks that were also part of the modernist utopian tradition, allowing the endgame of painting and the failure of modernist social planning to touch each other ever so gently.<sup>11</sup> Both pastoral and elegiac, Marshall's Garden Project works felt like contemporary history paintings, operating in the grand tradition of the artist as a chronicler of social truths. They were also beautiful and alluring—snippets of lyrics from contemporary love songs float in the air, cartoon bluebirds circle people's heads, the sun is always shining, and children play on bicycles. The visual pleasure of the paintings allowed them to serve as a rejoinder to the more generalized discourse of tragedy surrounding low-income housing. This was particularly charged because their exhibition coincided with a national shift in urban policy toward the destruction of housing projects, pointedly the infamous 1997 recommendation to demolish the Cabrini Green housing units in Chicago. Several of these paintings had been considered for the 1995 Whitney Biennial, when their appearance would have been a sign of prescience rather than contemporaneity. But, according to the *New York Times Magazine*'s account of the studio visit between the Biennial's curator Klaus Kertess and the artist, inclusion was not on the docket: "It is this determination to think primarily in visual terms that caused Kertess such uncertainty as he left Kerry Marshall's studio in Chicago. He admitted that he had not yet decided whether Marshall would make the cut. 'It was sweet,' Kertess said of *Many Mansions*, 'but I would wish for more of an edge, a little more tension. He is nice and bright and fighting the good fight; it isn't easy to be a black artist in the center, doing very classically composed works. But I'm not ready to take a flyer with it yet.'"<sup>12</sup>

Kertess clearly did not see the dialectics at work within the individual paintings, nor, it seems, had he considered the work Marshall had made leading up to the Garden Project: works dedicated to the exploration of religious imagery, drawn dually from the history of Italian Renaissance painting and Haitian voodoo traditions, as seen in *Voyager* (pl. 20). He had not reviewed the hagiographic series of portraits of young African American men called *The Lost Boys* (pls. 23, 24). So, too, it seems he neglected to consider a work such as *Beauty Examined* (pl. 21), in which beauty as an aesthetic category is dismantled. In other words, Kertess didn't comprehend that the paintings in Marshall's Garden Project were part of an oeuvre that was well on its way to offering a forensic analysis of Western painting, inasmuch as the artist was examining painterly genres one at a time—self-portraiture, religious painting, history painting, genre scenes, landscape, and abstraction. To be fair to Kertess, even by 1997, when the works appeared in Documenta and the Whitney Biennial, they were not yet being framed in this manner (that is the task of this essay). They were still being read as a form of realism or reportage, as *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter explained: "Kerry James Marshall, an artist based in Chicago, has described his work as history painting, and he has taken black life in America as his primary subject. In the large-scale pieces he contributed to last year's Whitney Biennial, black children played in housing projects that resembled those he had lived in during the 1960s in Los Angeles. The settings were carefully detailed, but surreal."<sup>13</sup>

11 On the failure of architectural modernism alongside the apotheosis of modernist painting in the work of Marshall, see Helen Molesworth, "Project America: Kerry James Marshall," *Frieze* 40 (May 1998): 72–75, [frieze.com/issue/article/project\\_america](http://frieze.com/issue/article/project_america).

12 Paul Goldberger, "The Art of His Choosing," *New York Times*, Feb. 26, 1995, [nytimes.com/1995/02/26/magazine/the-art-of-his-choosing.html?pagewanted=2](http://nytimes.com/1995/02/26/magazine/the-art-of-his-choosing.html?pagewanted=2).

13 Holland Cotter, "In Civil Rights Ferment, a Conflicted Nostalgia," *New York Times*, Oct. 2, 1998, [nytimes.com/1998/10/02/arts/art-review-in-civil-rights-ferment-a-conflicted-nostalgia.html](http://nytimes.com/1998/10/02/arts/art-review-in-civil-rights-ferment-a-conflicted-nostalgia.html).

But hindsight is always 20/20, so Kertess's lapse of curatorial judgment isn't really the point. What is important is to return to Marshall's project as a form of institutional critique, a profound querying of the museum through its most privileged object: painting. His approach is a three-part tactical maneuver: first, the production of an entire body of work dedicated to images of black people; second, that black figuration occurs in as many different types of images as possible; third, the paintings were made in a manner that explicitly engages with the ideological terms of the museum, namely beauty and mastery. His aim, in other words, is to take on the museum on its own terms. He does so with an explicit agenda of populating the museum with a range of black figures. The emphaticness of Marshall's black figures makes an issue of how absent the black body is in images prior to the late twentieth century. Moreover, his self-conscious deployment of numerous painterly genres problematizes the umbrella of exceptionalism or marginalia that hangs over the black figure in Western art.<sup>14</sup> Each Kerry James Marshall painting plainly states and painfully asks: can we adjust our historical imaginary?

But more than mere pictorial correction, the systematic approach of Marshall's project suggests that the museum, as the institution that has framed and enabled art's master narrative, is impossible without painting—painting and the Western museum are codependent—and, further, that the dual values of mastery and beauty are mutually upheld and performed by their conjoining. Taken together, all of Marshall's paintings argue that if the collusion of painting and the museum form one of the primary sites for the values of mastery and beauty in Western culture, then what does it mean that those values were formed with the explicit absence of images of black people? One deeply uncomfortable answer to this question is that those values, and those institutions, are shaped *at their core* by a racist premise. Blackness is not presented by Marshall as an afterthought or as a form of special pleading; it is offered as a radical presence that shows how the very ideas of beauty and truth that paintings and museums hold to be self-evident are premised on exclusions that are ethically, philosophically, and aesthetically untenable.

Marshall has been explicit about this aspect of his work: "Since the overwhelming majority of the bodies on display in art and advertising are white, producing images of black bodies was important to offset the impression that beauty is synonymous with whiteness. It is not hard to see how one's interest in being part of the western art-historical tradition conditions you to perpetuate the models and values it privileges. . . . I had never seen a grand, epic narrative painting with black figures in it, and that's the kind of painting that I became interested in making—pictures in the grand manner."<sup>15</sup>

But what does it mean to make pictures in the grand manner in the late 1980s and early 1990s? As Jeff Wall points out in his incisive essay on the artist, Marshall is part of the generational formation that returned painting to primacy in the 1980s. But unlike his peers David Salle and Albert Oehlen, Marshall was not interested in expressionism as a guarantee of authorial presence, nor was he invested in ironizing that painterly project.<sup>16</sup> Rather, as Wall suggests, Marshall found himself, because he is interested in the conditions and representations of blackness, in a state of belatedness to the

14 David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds., *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press, 2010–14).

15 Dieter Roelstraete, "An Argument for Something Else: Dieter Roelstraete in Conversation with Kerry James Marshall, Chicago 2012," in *Kerry James Marshall: Painting and Other Stuff*, ed. Nav Haq (Antwerp: Ludion, 2014), 21.

16 Jeff Wall brings up the problem of belatedness in his introduction to *Kerry James Marshall* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2010).



overall development of Western painting. Marshall's own assessment of the atemporality of his project was to say:

The problem that African American artists in particular were having is that by the 1950s people were saying that the game was essentially over while we were just getting started. We still don't get to decide what kinds of things will or will not be recognized as works of art, or what can and cannot enter the museum. All my life I've been expected to acknowledge the power and beauty of pictures made by white artists that only have white people in them; I think it's only reasonable to ask other people to do the same vis-à-vis paintings that only have black figures in them. That is part of the counter-archive that I'm seeking to establish in my work. In fact, I would have to qualify even that notion, as my work is not an argument *against* anything; it is an argument *for* something else.<sup>17</sup>

I've been arguing that Marshall's project is one aimed at the heart of the museum: that through a tactical deployment of the historical modes of painting, his oeuvre constitutes an attack on the invisibility of blackness as an ideal (aesthetic, psychic, political), and the structural absence of African Americans as a historically specific group of persons, in the Western museum. This absence, far from being factual or anodyne, has active repercussions, especially if we believe that race as a category is institutionally created and maintained. Hence, Marshall's oeuvre demonstrates how the museum, along with its attending academic discipline, art history, has played a key role in the invention of racism and now must play a role in its dismantling. Institutional critique for Marshall would be double—it was an argument that denied the neutrality of an institution that declined to depict people of color, and it was an argument for an institution capable of representing the fullness of the world's population.

Marshall's capacity for a critique that was simultaneously against and for something operates in the tradition of immanent critique, the identification and deployment of a given system's internal code of ethics as a channel toward emancipation, as a means of using the ideas within a system to "right," or "correct," the faults of that system. Midcentury America saw the logic of immanent critique put into powerful motion by the civil rights movement. It is the rhetorical strategy mobilized by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when he used the Bill of Rights, a foundational text of American democracy, particularly its statement that "all men are created equal," to argue that America had failed to live up to this fundamental value and promise. In many ways the institutional critique practiced by Marshall is guided by similar principles. As the art historian Johanna Burton has argued: "Institutional critique necessarily enacts a protection of, rather than an assault on, the very institution of art. The nature of that protection is also an interrogation, but one performed, as it were, from the inside."<sup>18</sup> This is a way of linking the two aims of Marshall's oeuvre: the reimagination of the museum as a public-sphere institution and the full articulation of the subjectivities of people of

17 Roelstraete, "An Argument for Something Else," 28.

18 Johanna Burton, "Cultural Interference: The Reunion of Appropriation and Institutional Critique," in *Take It or Leave It: Institution, Image, Ideology*, ed. Johanna Burton and Anne Ellegood (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum and DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2014), 18.



Figure 13  
Jean-Antoine Watteau, *Fête Galante in a Wooded Landscape with the Sculpture of a Seated Nude Woman*, c. 1720.  
Oil on canvas; 50  $\frac{1}{16}$   $\times$  75  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. The Wallace Collection, London.

color. This form of criticism is not inherently destructive; rather, it is possible to see that both immanent critique and institutional critique are born of love, born of the desire to have our public institutions live up to their highest ideals. When Marshall takes the institution of the museum, the medium of painting, and the discipline of art history to task, he does so in order that they can better serve their stated ideals.

If Marshall's deployment of immanent and institutional critique places him among the vanguard of contemporary art practice, then his engagement with the highest ideals of the museum—mastery and beauty—positions his work on the side of belatedness, for the avant-garde has spent the better part of a century attempting to purge the category of art from its dependence on those attributes. Yet, I want to argue that an interest in mastery, a desire to make pictures in the grand manner, is in Marshall a form of belatedness that is generative rather than retrograde, critical rather than traumatic, a space of fecundity rather than exhaustion.<sup>19</sup> Arguably, the method that most permitted this transvaluation of belatedness was that of appropriation.

Marshall is part of the generation born in the 1950s who came of age alongside television and the rise of America's domination in the fields of mass media and advertising. Sometimes this generation of artists is referred to as the Pictures generation because the status of the image—particularly the mass-produced and reproduced image—was a source of common inquiry, fascination, and critique for them. The Pictures artists involved with

19 The critical text most associated with the exhaustion of painting as such is Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 39–68.

appropriation typically reused existing images rather than creating new ones, and hence they often shunned the idea of mastery, replacing it instead with the logic of the copy. Concomitantly, they abandoned traditional artistic skills (such as drawing and painting) and substituted these with a range of cut-and-paste activities. Yet the politics of an exhausted image, or the image as pure surface or simulacrum (in other words, the politics of the criticism that accompanied the Pictures generation), did not hold any appeal for Marshall.<sup>20</sup> As he described above, it was impossible for him as an African American to walk through the museum and merely see one picture after another without also encountering one absence after another, one marginalization, and one distortion after another. Hence a relatively straightforward pillorying or re-presentation of images was impossible for him. Nevertheless, commensurate with his peers, Marshall did pillage the history of images, specifically painted ones. He engaged in a full exploitation of the “museum without walls,” and his work hewed closely to one of the central articulations about the Pictures generation ethos formulated by the critic Douglas Crimp: “Underneath each picture there is always another picture.”<sup>21</sup> Instead of reveling in the field of mass-produced imagery, Marshall appropriated fragments from the rich archive of Western painting. Much of his early work displayed a collage aesthetic, with Marshall composing his paintings from borrowed fragments and passages to subsume them into a new whole. But in order to make a body of images that could withstand their placement in a museum radically unprepared for them, he needed to both rearticulate old forms and create new ones—hence, mastery was to become an issue.

For instance, in *When Frustration Threatens Desire* (pl. 12) we can see Marshall’s use of appropriation as a component or technique to construct an image. The black cat in the far left-hand corner is lifted right out of Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863), itself a kind of talismanic object for modernism. Its appearance in Marshall’s painting recasts the figure of the floating woman as a condensation of Manet’s famously direct white prostitute/artist’s model/artist’s lover and her black maid.<sup>22</sup> Marshall’s composition includes other appropriated images, notably an advertisement for a fortune-teller—an offering of an interpreter of signs, a decoder of messages. The sleight of hand alluded to through the cards and dice in the foreground and the male figure’s powers of levitation are as much about witnessing the strength of street knowledge as they are about the illusionistic powers of the artist. In this painting, appropriation is a way of layering meanings that allows for both their sedimentation and their mobility.

But I fear I have fallen into a kind of defensive special pleading. I worry I may be trying to use Marshall’s “contemporaneous” practice of appropriation and institutional critique to mitigate his “belated” interest in such values as mastery, beauty, and painting in the “grand manner.” I fear I have a lingering ambivalence or anxiety that assumes belatedness is a charge rather than a virtue. But what if belatedness as an overall strategy is precisely of interest? For instance, it is belatedness that allows us to recognize that no matter how chronologically a museum is installed, it is still offering all time, all ages, all places at once.<sup>23</sup> Museums are predicated on the notion that all time can be rendered simultaneous, which is a way of saying that we have all arrived too late: it has all existed before us. This is the

20 For an account of the Pictures generation’s relationship to images and the politics of representation, see Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75–88; Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1985); and Helen Molesworth, *This Will Have Been: Art, Love, and Politics in the 1980s* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2012).

21 Crimp, “Pictures,” 87.

22 See T. J. Clark’s account of this painting in *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); and Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1991).

23 Juliet Mitchell has argued that an artist’s experience of the museum is one of radical temporal simultaneity, such that artists, even those “long dead and buried,” are “imaginatively experienced as the same age”; Mitchell, *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 17.



Figure 14  
Album cover, The Douglass High School  
Concert Choir, Concert Orchestra, and  
Mixed Chorus, *Black Is Beautiful*, 1970.



primal scene of representation. But in Marshall's case a late arrival is a way to reorganize the simultaneity of that information. So vignettes (pls. 63, 64) of black heterosexual couples in courtship and love imagined in the style of the rococo are also rendered within the iconographic framework of the Black Panthers—full Afros, big picks, and clenched fists. This particular cross-pollination is not pastiche for its own sake; rather, it helps us recall that “Black Is Beautiful” was an idea that emerged in a specific place and time (fig. 14), one with as much sociohistorical relevance as the historical development of an aristocratic class reinventing models of love and courtship in subtle opposition to the restrictions imposed by royalty (fig. 13).<sup>24</sup> To cross the wires of these image histories is to suggest that black self-love is capable of being narrativized, consolidated, and imaged only at a certain point in time.

Similarly, when Marshall painted a group of images of black women painters, each posed majestically in front of an as-yet-completed paint by numbers (pls. 54, 56), he was making an issue of the coincidental 1950s historical development and marketing of painting as a hobby and the stirrings of the civil rights movement, the beginning of a pervasive discourse on the equality of black people and the ethical and psychic necessity that they take full part in the privileges of American citizenship. It is to suggest that not everything is available to everyone at the same time and that the battles for rights, and access to the freedoms that attend those rights, are fought-for things that some people *already have*, and that one powerful record of how they possessed those freedoms and rights comes to us through the history of culture and, specifically, through the history of art. This is one way

24 I am leaning on Thomas Crow's argument that the *fêtes galantes* of Jean-Antoine Watteau were subtle but incisive critiques on the part of the aristocracy toward the monarchy that had to do with their freedom and mobility; see Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).



that Marshall's oeuvre has continually argued about what museums are for and what they do: they offer us an ongoing pictorial record of the ideas and values that shape who we are in the present.

It is these kinds of ideas, ideas born of and in belatedness, which are the reason, I think, Marshall has remained so committed to painting—committed, that is, to an image technology that is more than six centuries old. It is precisely the antiquated nature of the medium that lends it the palimpsest complexity needed to articulate the spaces and languages necessary for freedom and equality. Just as the museum has been a defining institution of the public sphere, so, too, painting has been along for the ride as the long arc of history leans toward justice. It is worth remembering that ideas of freedom and democracy attend the very creation of the museum. Jacques-Louis David was a regicide, after all, and it was largely at his urging that the king's palace, the Louvre, became a museum, a space for the display of the nation's patrimony for its citizens. So it is no mistake that when Marshall made his portraits of the enslaved leaders of the Stono Rebellion, he did so in a manner of the great revolutionary portraits of David, redolent with the neoclassical connotations of liberty and justice, set against backdrops of clarion-blue skies designed to signal the triumph of rationality and enlightenment (pls. 69–72).

Part of the myth of modernity is its steadfast belief in progress. And the unfolding of historical movements in art history has done much to shore up a kind of magical thinking that leads us to believe that the developments of our contemporaneous age make us better or more advanced than our ancestors. Belatedness is a way of rethinking that temporality, a way of complicating the drive toward a progressivist/teleological version of an ever more perfect future. Belatedness is a way of pulling the past into the present, a way of not losing the textures and knowledge of a previous age. If, as we know, much is lost on the way to progress, then belatedness is a way of acknowledging the folds of time, a way of permitting the reality of competing times to exist simultaneously. When Marshall uses appropriation and institutional critique as the engines for his project of painting in the grand manner, they are neither pastiche nor historical reenactment. His project is not acting as if the present doesn't exist; it is not, in other words, regressive. Rather, Marshall is retooling tradition to query the confidence we have in the present, particularly any confidence we might have in being postracist or "better than" or "different from" our racist forefathers. Belatedness, as practiced by Marshall, is about acknowledging the lasting effects and permutations of ideas.

In 2008 the citizens of the United States elected their first African American president, an act that felt as much like a salve applied to old wounds as it did the dawning of a new era. Marshall's work did not reflect this historic event directly, but some of his recent paintings take place, quite pointedly, in the present. Deeply contemporaneous, they are in the here and now, and rather than operating from the site of belatedness, they seem to have their eye on the way the present sometimes traffics in the timeless.

In *Untitled (Club Couple)*, of 2014 (fig. 15), we find ourselves in the interior of a club—a nightclub, a supper club, an old-time disco with booths around the edges of the dance floor (okay, so the dance floor isn't in the

Figure 15  
Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled*  
(*Club Couple*), 2014 (pl. 78).



scene, but I want it to be). We see a young straight couple gazing directly at us, posed as if for a friend with a camera: open smiles, bright eyes, their foreheads touching, they hold hands on the table. They are in love. They have matching cocktails and matching sunglasses. They are dressed to impress. The background is a clinic of modernist tropes: the reflected lights of a disco ball overlay the gridded pattern on the wall. The lights bounce off a mirror. The lower edge of a window, or picture frame, indicates deep space, while the young woman's clutch sits on the edge of the tabletop, pushing into the space of the viewer. The chair she sits on is a cross between Gerrit Rietveld's *Red and Blue Chair* (1917) and the severity of Donald Judd's furniture at his compound in Marfa, Texas. The composition is landscape and portrait combined, with the salmon-pink stripe in the background creating a horizon line right at the heads of the two figures. The painting's play with color, light, reflection, pattern, decoration, and flatness all signal the artist's mastery of his medium and of the discipline of art history. Part of the accomplishment of this painting is the way in which it brushes against the temporality and compositional structures of photography—it's almost as if this is a portrait of a couple posing for an iPhone photo. In the shadowy right-hand side of the image is its narrative key, the thing that has not yet happened, the crux of the issue, a question to be asked, a present to be given, a vow to be taken, a promise to be made. Once we see this detail (this punctum), we are zipped into its space-time continuum. We are in collusion with this young man's desire. We are rooting for him. We are pretty sure she will say yes. Love wins.