

CHAPTER 3: AMERICAN ABSTRACTION



Portrait of a Curator (In Memory of Beryl Wright), 2009 30 7/8 x 24 7/8 x 1 7/8 inches Acrylic on PVC

Marshall's childhood time spent in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, California, where the Black Power and Civil Rights movements happened, had a significant impact on his paintings. Strongly influenced by his experiences as a young man, he developed a signature style during his early years as an artist that involved the use of extremely dark, essentially black figures. These images represent his perspective of African Americans, specifically black men with separate and distinct inner and outer appearances. At the same time, they confront racial stereotypes within contemporary American society. This common theme appeared continuously in his work throughout the subsequent decades, especially in the 1980s and 1990s and still appears in his most recent works.

Marshall is known for large-scale paintings, sculptures, and other objects that take African-American life and history as their subject matter. In a 1998 interview with Bomb Magazine, Marshall observed, "Black people occupy a space, even mundane spaces, in the most fascinating ways.

Style is such an integral part of what black people do that just walking is not a simple thing. You've got to walk with style. You've got to talk with a certain rhythm; you've got to do things with some flair. And so, in the paintings I try to enact that same tendency toward the theatrical that seems to be so integral a part of the black cultural body."

Marshall's work is steeped in black history and black popular culture embracing blackness as a signifier of difference to critically address the marginalization of blacks in the visual sphere, utilizing a wide range of styles. His artworks are identity-based; specifically, he made black aesthetics visible and brought the black aesthetic into the fold of the grand narrative of art. In his own words, he uses blackness to amplify the difference as an oppositional force, both aesthetically and philosophically. One such "black" issue Marshall takes up is that of beauty. He stated that since most figures in advertising are white, he wanted to produce images of black bodies to "offset the impression that beauty is synonymous with whiteness" "Black is beautiful" was one of the Black Arts movement's slogans to counter the prevailing view that blackness was inherently unattractive.



Untitled, 2009 61 1/8 x 72 7/8 inches Acrylic on PVC Panel