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Kerry James Marshall Has First Canadian Solo Exhibition at Vancouver Art Gallery

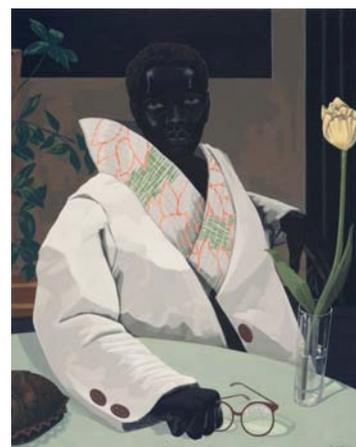
Media Preview with artist in attendance, Thursday, May 6 at 9AM

VANCOUVER, BC – From **May 8, 2010 to January 3, 2011**, the **Vancouver Art Gallery** will present the first Canadian solo exhibition of paintings by prominent American artist **Kerry James Marshall**. Drawing on his upbringing during the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham, Alabama and later in the politically charged atmosphere of South Central Los Angeles, Marshall is celebrated for his insightful work focused on the African American experience. Co-curated by Vancouver Art Gallery director **Kathleen Bartels** and artist **Jeff Wall**, the exhibition, titled **Kerry James Marshall**, presents 19 exemplary works created since the early 1990s.

“Marshall’s paintings depict primarily African-American figures that transcend an autobiographical approach, using formally diverse art historical methods that speak to the visibility and invisibility of “Blackness” in the history of western art,” said Vancouver Art Gallery director **Kathleen Bartels**. “His skill as an artist, his keen observation of other genres, and his acuity as a thinker have led to a twenty-five year practice characterized by historically informed explorations of the representation of the black figure in pictorial space, as well as investigations into the pretensions of the art world in which he participates.”

For Marshall, social responsibility means creating artworks that both celebrate and unravel the Black experience in America. His series from the early 1990s, *Garden Projects*, depicts seemingly idyllic urban scenes that respond to the United States government’s failed utopian ideal for public housing. In these paintings, residence blocks are unmarked by vandalism and appear fresh and tidy, the weather is glorious and delicate banners hover in the air inscribed with slogans, such as, “Here We Rest.” Overlaying these scenes, the artist adds discordant brushstrokes with no descriptive purpose, which interrupt the composition like graffiti and tarnish its pastoral qualities. These dissonant markings act as a kind of jarring static surrounding the Black people portrayed in the paintings, who are pictured in activities of leisure—riding bikes and walking hand-in-hand—and rendered in almost pure black pigment.

“The figures have a spectral quality that makes their generally innocuous activities seem fraught with inner unrest,” writes co-curator Jeff Wall in his essay for the exhibition’s catalogue about the way the artist chooses to depict Black people in his painting. “Marshall is conjuring a mood, an atmosphere in which “Blackness” both is and is not a fitting part of the democratic vistas of his pastoral settlements. He has consistently maintained this manner in the treatment of all the figures in his work, and he claims that at the age of fourteen he vowed never to paint a white person.”



*Portrait of a Curator (In Memory of Beryl Wright), 2009
acrylic on pvc
Collection of Penny Pritzker and Bryan Traubert*

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Marshall's *Souvenir* paintings made in 1997 and 1998 are devoted to the remembrance of the American Civil Rights movement. The exhibition includes three works from the series, all very large, with two rendered in tones of grey and one in vibrant colour. The paintings are affectionate pictures of middle-aged Black ladies in their immaculate living rooms. Looking back at the viewer, the women, depicted with glittering wings of angels, possess an unnerving calm and sober demeanor. The incongruous brushwork of the *Garden Projects* paintings is gone, replaced in these works with neat garlands, sunbursts and scrolls reading "In Memory" and "We Mourn Our Loss." Marshall also overlays the paintings with silkscreens made from photographs of Civil Rights and Black Power heroes, including Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John and Bobby Kennedy.

Marshall's more recent series, *Vignettes*, presents idyllic images of Black couples in sumptuous romantic landscapes reminiscent of eighteenth century Rococo paintings, inserting the Black figure into a historical narrative in which they have traditionally been absent. These painting created since 2003, have taken Marshall in new directions, moving him away from the large scale format of his earlier work and concentrating his attention on themes of boy-girl courtship in urban or suburban settings, or in idyllic natural environments. Along with other recent paintings in the exhibition, these works present subjects within romantic and pastoral contexts previously occupied throughout the history of European art by Caucasians.

Kerry James Marshall was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1955 to a working class African-American family. As a young person he was drawn to artistic pursuits and spent his early years exploring art and its techniques through his immediate environment—popular culture, library books, schoolteachers and acquaintances. Through this exploration he developed his ideas of "great art" without visiting a museum or seeing an original painting or sculpture until the age of eleven. Marshall's family left Birmingham for Los Angeles in 1963, just as the Civil Rights Movement focused the world's attention on the Alabama city. In Los Angeles, the artist's family lived in Watts, the area most directly involved in the major conflicts of 1965 that resulted from growing resistance to racial injustices suffered by Black Americans. He began his art education in the junior college system in Los Angeles and then entered the Otis Art Institute, graduating in 1978. He spent time in New York in the mid-1980s before moving to Chicago, where he has lived since 1987.