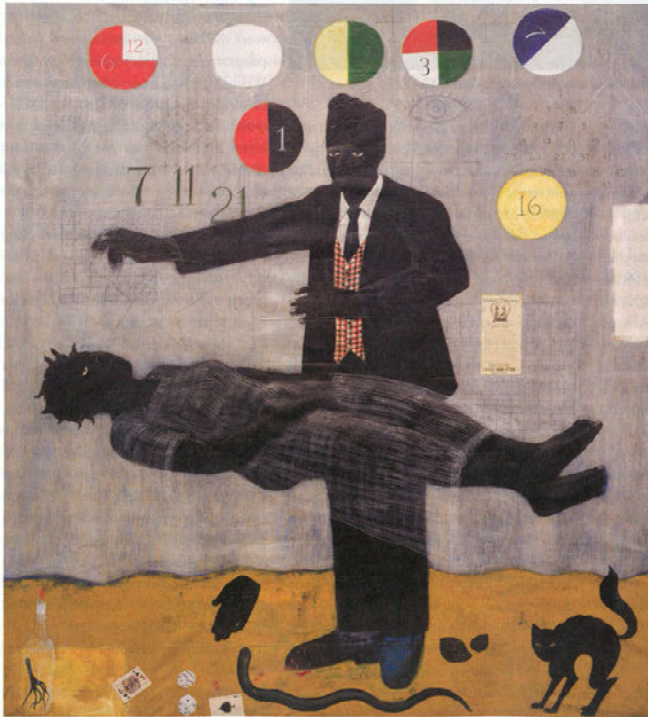


Mobilio, Albert. "Kerry James Marshall: Mastry." *Bookforum* (June/July/Aug 2016): 54 [ill.]

## BOOKFORUM

**KERRY JAMES MARSHALL: MASTRY** EDITED WITH AN ESSAY BY HELEN MOLESWORTH; ESSAYS BY IAN ALTEVEER, DIETER ROELSTRAETE, AND LANKA TATTERSALL; WRITINGS BY KERRY JAMES MARSHALL  
NEW YORK: SKIRA/RIZZOLI. 288 PAGES. \$65.



Kerry James Marshall, *When Frustration Threatens Desire*, 1990, acrylic and collage on canvas, 80 x 72".

KERRY JAMES MARSHALL'S 1980 painting *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self* sets out a thematic and stylistic program for decades of subversively distinctive work to follow. The black man in the painting is presented in a cartoonlike manner. His fedora is worn at a jaunty angle, yet scant distinguishing features emerge from the vibrantly deep black paint (Marshall employs three versions of this color, one made from tar, another from iron oxide, and yet another from the burning of teeth and bones) that fills the outline of his face, except for his eyes and shockingly white gap-toothed smile. Against a black background nearly as dark as the man, the figure hovers uncertainly between moving out of or receding into shadow, erasure and assertion in equilibrium, or perhaps in contention. It's also easy to imagine that the expressive mouth and eyes belong to another man, one peering from behind the smooth obsidian mask. The double consciousness exemplified by this comic-seeming disguise is complicated by a flatness that emphasizes the texture of pigment over representational detail.

In one of this volume's essays, "Shall I Compare Thee . . . ?," Marshall broods on the inspiration that African masks and statues provided to Picasso and his contemporaries: If Europeans "saw savages behind those masks, what did black folk, acculturated to Western ways but subordinate to 'white' authority, see in them?" Marshall's physiognomies—chiseled in broad lines, sculptural in their stillness—are his attempt to answer this question while affirming the presence of black faces against centuries of absence. The book's title, *Mastry*, a colloquializing of *mastery*, signals the artist's skepticism about the history of representation, a challenge the 1990 painting *When Frustration Threatens Desire* (left) poses to Édouard Manet's *Olympia*. While Manet depicts a white prostitute and her black maid, Marshall offers a fresh scenario: A black man (an artist?) elevates through some kind of magic a black woman (the maid?) whose supine position echoes that of Manet's nude. The black cat in the corner—a direct quote from *Olympia*—along with a jack and ace of spades, a pair of dice, and an advertisement for a fortune-teller, renovate this talismanic modernist image by evoking voodoo, the blues, and black magic. These totems are at the apparent command of the mesmerist as well as Marshall: The hocus-pocus of artmaking is not so different, he suggests, from the invisibility act African Americans have long been called on to perform. —ALBERT MOBILIO

David Zwirner