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KERRY JAMES MARSHALL

01.01.11

Kerry James Marshall employs the conventions of European painting to cast a wide net of political and cultural commentary. Growing up during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, Marshall's focus was shaped and has remained constant; to change the museum experience with regard to black subjects in painting as well as other mediums. Marshall's reclamation of genres to include black figures as the primary subject has included works that reference many movements in art history.

—Pam Paulson

Paulson Bott Press: I saw the untitled twelve-panel woodprint at the Rubell Family Collection in Miami. Print is a medium you seem comfortable with. Tell me what you've found frustrating or satisfying.

Kerry James Marshall: Many things! The first time I tried to make an etching, I was about fourteen or fifteen. I'd spent a lot of time looking at books in the library, going through all of the books on technique, and I wanted to know how to do all those things. The etchings by Goya, Rembrandt, and Whistler looked so fantastic.

I bought a small copper plate, some hard ground, a needle, and some nitric acid. I followed all the instructions—up to the acid bath, which I didn't do because I was afraid of it.



VIGNETTE (WISHING WELL), 2010

Color Aquatint Etching; 53" x 41";
Edition of 50

Q: What was the appeal?

KJM: I'm really interested in how things are made—not just the appearance, but from the inside. I've done a lot of woodcuts because they're more direct. I never really liked lithography, it's not tactile, there is no texture, it's all even. Flat.

I like being able to load the ink up, pile it up. Technicians would say I over-ink.

Q: Have you done much intaglio printing?

KJM: I did some at Los Angeles City College. But you have to have a press if you want to keep going.

Q: Did you have an idea of what you wanted to do before you came to Paulson Bott Press?

KJM: I had an image before I came, so we could start with that as our point of departure.

Q: Where is this image coming from?

KJM: I did a group of paintings called Vignettes. They were all based on the Rococo style of artwork and decoration that was popular in France for a period in the 18th century. That's where I started. There are certain characteristics of Rococo painting—via Boucher and Fragonard and Watteau—I was interested in, because of what they represent in the history of painting and the feeling that people have about those kinds of works. That was the “high” style before the French Revolution.

Later, critical examination of the work began to take on a lot of negative characteristics—that it was frivolous, hedonistic, just purely about pleasure. The problem is that when people see those images today, they still like them.

Q: Like a guilty pleasure?

KJM: Yes. As with all forms of kitsch. But another feature of Rococo painting from that period is that you almost never see a black person in them. If you do, they are peripheral, a servant figure or something like that in the background.



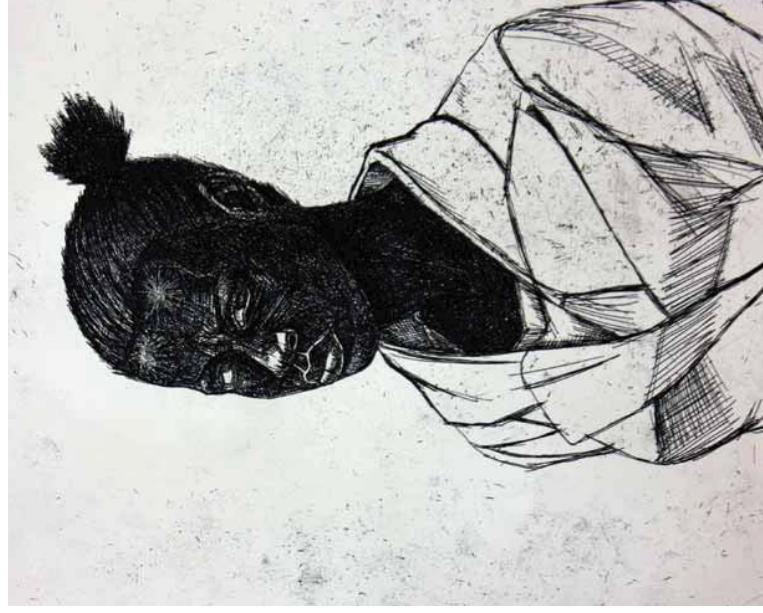
I started making the central characters in these narratives black characters, because a lot of black people want to see themselves in that kind of fantasy too—where at least there's something positive, something satisfying about their relationships and interactions with each other.

In this print, there are the classic qualities of the Rococo composition: asymmetry and irregularity. The theme is the relationship between a man and a woman. The series was inspired, in part by Fragonard's painting “The Swing,” where a woman is being pushed in the swing by a priest. Her lover, however, is in the bushes underneath, so that when she swings out, he gets to look under her petticoat.

In this print, there is a wishing well grogno, and she's throwing the coins over her shoulder into the well. There is also a figure spying on her from behind the trees and rocks. And I started adding the pink hearts as heart balloons that say something about the kind of ephemeral quality of romantic love. They're bubbles that are easily burst.

Q: What are some other influences?

KJM: Whistler did a lot of dry point etching. They have a certain quality that's unlike anything else. I'm doing a lot of dry point etching in here, and so I said to Pam and Renee that this is my Whistler-esque thing. The technique of making the print is what's important about it.



Q: What is the inspiration for the four smaller prints?

KJM: I'm really interested in the classic, drawing quality of etching. It is a perfect extension of pen and ink drawing. That's why I like Rembrandt, Whistler, and Kathe Kolwitz. The smaller prints all have that direct, and spontaneous quality.

Q: Some artists want to make an intaglio version of their painting. But are you extending an exploration you started in your painting?

KJM: The print should be more than a reproduction of a thing, because it has its own qualities that are a result of making the print. If you just want to reproduce an image that already exists,

there are a lot of photographic processes that do that quite well. I wouldn't put a lot of effort into scratching into a piece of metal because I want to reproduce the same thing that I already had!

When the print is done, it should be its own thing. There should be nothing else like it. You go through all of these different variations, you see what that looks like, and then you see what you need to do, and you adjust.

Q: So what's going to happen in the top of “Wishing Well”? Above the tree? I see the two colors and then I see the strip of something.

KJM: It's like a cloud. That's a part of the vignette shape that creates a kind of abstraction or irregularity.



Kerry James Marshall in the Paulson Bott studio.

(far left)

UNTITLED

(HANDSOME YOUNG MAN), 2010
Hardground Etching, 22 1/2" x 19";
Edition of 50

(left)

UNTITLED (WOMAN), 2010

Hardground Etching, 22 1/2" x 19";
Edition of 50

Q: It's very much like a dream.

KJM: Yeah. ✱

*Interview conducted and edited by
Kenneth Caldwell*



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DESIGN: MICHAEL OSBORNE DESIGN

BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN, 2010
Hardground Etching; 22 1/2" x 19";
Edition of 50

FRANKENSTEIN, 2010
Hardground Etching; 22 1/2" x 19";
Edition of 50