

## *The New Danger of the Pure Idea*

Raél Jero Salley, 2012

I had the desire to make that central thing black and the rest of the painting was black. Well, I was in the state of terror because what would happen—I never had black on black... The terror of it was intense. As a matter of fact, it took me, you might say, weeks to arrive at the point where I finally did it... Well, I finally made it black. And that moment was almost, I don't know, it would be wrong to say it was violent. At the same time I think that every stroke one makes is violent because once you make it, it's there and you've got to handle it

—Barnett Newman<sup>1</sup>

Kerry James Marshall's (b.1955) *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green* are pictures so visually imposing they may terrify some of their viewers. The three canvases, produced in 2012, vary in size, surface quality, orientation, and level of figural depiction. The picture's immersive scale and structure challenge the viewer's perception to the point of intimidation. The compositions do violence to orthodox understandings of colour field painting, because they challenge the viewer's perception of colour itself.

The series *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green* features unapologetic fields of colour delivered on a scale that exceed many of Marshall's previous works. A shared motif is the use of the hues red, green and black, colours that are deployed with fiery intensity, enveloping serenity or dark subtlety. The combination of abstract colour and large-scale form might be taken as the central structural principle in these pictures because colour poses complex problems to seeing. The visual impact of the large, simplified, abstract compositions might thereby be neutralized by a common denominator that manages meaning and protects the viewer's imagination. But there is no such comfort for the viewer of these pictures. Rather, in *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green* dramatic fields of chroma are punctuated by lines, shapes and figures, leaving the viewer threatened by a cacophony of meanings and representational modes.

### ***If they come in the morning***

*If they come in the morning* (2012) is the first of three paintings in Marshall's series. The painting is organized with bands of color to the far left and right of the canvas. A flat black band on the left and an incident of green to the right dramatize the

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<sup>1</sup> Barnett Newman quoted in Yves Alan Bois 2004. "On Two Paintings by Barnett Newman" p. 16  
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unapologetic red field that dominates this picture. The flatness and symmetry of the field of red produces an unusually direct perceptual experience of its chromatic span. At eighteen feet, its breadth is too wide to take in the full scene and observe its details simultaneously. The painting offers forthright colour in combination with flatness, symmetry and a spartan format. This combination establishes its visual vocabulary as Abstract Expressionist, colour field painting.<sup>2</sup> There are shifting values within its red span—the phrase “*If they come in the morning*” is legible in large block letters across the field. A main characteristic of colour field painting is the use of colours close in tonal value and intensity in simplified compositions and large formats. While *If they come in the morning* demonstrates these features, the inclusion of text is an extraordinary move to representation.

I want to argue this representational gesture signals subtle conceptual complexity in the *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green* series. The paintings in this series assert their authority by scale and colour, formal references which, in context, invoke the absolute and the infinite. The move responds to modernist orthodoxy, but also associates the painting with a chain of ideas that include autonomous will, conceptual elasticity, cultural integrity, and blackness as aesthetic model. Alone, the power of any one of these ideas may be intimidating to a conservative western visual canon. But Marshall goes further. By consolidating the strengths of these principles and ideals, Marshall transforms the potential power of colour into an actual force in society. The pictures, then, open to discourse about ways of preserving the poetic and sublime without reduction to pure form.

### ***Marshall's Poetic Realism***

Marshall's pictures have long invoked disputes about meaning. Often, they include visual arguments about cultural definition and identification, discursive activity that introduces poetic fiction into visual interpretation. Since the 1980s, Marshall has demonstrated a consistent interest in realism that combines observed depictions of the everyday, handwritten phrases or lines of music, and a non-depictive brushwork and patterning that Jeff Wall describes as a complexly layered “discordant poetic realism.”<sup>3</sup> Poetic modes of art making evidence more than literal meanings, and thereby make interpretation more open and elastic. Poetic uses of both language and images foreground the visual appearance of symbols, but visual images never fully reduce to this sort of descriptive language. As viewers describe or simply recognize representations in pictures, relationships are formed between words and images. The dominant narratives shaping western visual history have long been understood—despite innumerable historical variations—to function as common denominators, meta-narratives and cultural universals. In actuality, stories of art are

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<sup>2</sup> David Anfam. "Colour field painting." In *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T018823> (accessed July 13, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Jeff Wall 2010. "Kerry James Marshall" in *Kerry James Marshall* Kathleen S. Bartels, ed. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery p.13

subject to variation, historical transformation and geographic dislocation. The visual image's capacity for metaphor and metonymy is particularly dangerous to dominant narratives, because images appeal to the viewer's senses in unexpected ways and beyond the bounds of reason.

Marshall's enterprise invokes an ancient problem in studies of art and in theories of human subjectivity—the comparison of poetry and painting has been a consistent theme in visual analysis and aesthetics, and as such is one of the most enduring traditions in Western painting. This deep link to tradition matters to Marshall's *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green*, because it opens pathways to meanings that go beyond a false dichotomy between materialistic fiction and metaphysical truth. Marshall is fascinated by the possibilities of ambitious, traditional western painting and in radical forms for developing an anti-canon.<sup>4</sup> I see in *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green* another instance of Marshall's poetic realism—it is a strategy for producing fraught, analytical pictures.

Marshall's artwork consistently strikes tenuous balance between formal rigor and social engagement, while his practice is characterized by historically informed explorations of representational practices. These interrogations focus on issues of blackness, visual perception, and the ways they combine to appear in art world contexts. Marshall's upbringing and social environment shaped a critical stance toward art history, and his insertion of *blackness* into historical narrative is a way of questioning its presence (and absence) in western society and the pictorial tradition.

### ***Imagining Blackness***

On a 2009 visit to Kerry James Marshall's studio in Chicago, USA, he and I talked about the ideas driving his large, allegorical, allusive (and sometimes elusive) pictures. I pointed to a work in progress, one that featured a black figure on a black background. It was striking materially and conceptually, not least because it seemed to directly respond to a debate concerning the rhetoric of race in visual art. At the time, artists and critics were raging about an impulse to simultaneously reject and retain notions of blackness in art. So, I asked Marshall what role "black" played in his work.

My familiarity with the Marshall's rich, complicated and nuanced work cautioned me against launching this query. Marshall's formative years as an artist took place in the 1960s and 70s. In that period the validity of the western canon was subject to scrutiny by various kinds of radical thinkers who developed new ways of looking at the relationship between word and image. Art and culture was linked, directly and in new ways, to society and politics. The artistic milieu is the 1970s radical art and the 1980s and 90s revival of painting in a grand manner and of high ambition. From

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<sup>4</sup> Jeff Wall 2010. "Kerry James Marshall" in *Kerry James Marshall* Kathleen S. Bartels, ed. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery p.13

the early 2000s, the pictures have become overtly mannered to include modes of depiction that include popular culture, sentimentality and parody, modes of depiction that combine in the *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green* series.

Marshall has long made interpretations of African American identity a focus of his work, often placing a black figure on a black ground. This longstanding sensibility appears in early works, such as *A Portrait of the Artist and a Shadow of His Former Self* (1980), or *Two Invisible Men* (1985) and *Two Invisible Men Naked* (1985). In fact, the highly stylized black persona is Marshall's signature image. He has discussed its iconic function at length: "I decided that whenever I painted an image of a person, it would always be a black image, and that image wouldn't be a personality so much as it would be an image that spoke directly to the issue of blackness."<sup>5</sup> Marshall has deployed his virtuosic technical facility as a painter to investigate the tradition of painting itself; depictions, interpretations and languages of racial identity; and aesthetic and cultural systems. The artist's portrayals of black beauty appear through collage-like juxtapositions of symbols and icons that are literal and metaphoric, unconventional and in the vernacular. Marshall's paintings offer romantic, sometimes utopic, often ironic vistas that riff on classical history painting—*Many Mansions* (1994) and *Better Homes, Better Gardens* (1994) are two examples. Terrie Sultan notes Marshall overlaps everyday actions with intangible philosophical and psychological values such as spirituality and religion.<sup>6</sup> There is danger with starting a conversation with what might seem so basic a question. It could be taken as uninformed, silly, or even worse, an affront, but my query to Marshall about the "black" in that particular image was aimed toward uncovering his view on the relevance of black representation *in the moment*.

At least, I thought, posing the question was worth the risk because the artist's answer would provide a nuanced, focused and specific insight on that single piece.

Marshall offered far more when he replied: "You know, black power has not gone far enough!" He continued: "Black power began to construct new frameworks for the development of black people, including through visual forms. The point was to counter racism and inequality. But racism still persists. The goals [of the Black Power Movement] have not yet been realized." This response startled me, but also re-oriented my approach to Marshall's endeavor in a broad sense. Marshall's response provides a way of seeing complexities in the artwork, because it sheds light on the black in his imagery.

The "black"—as hue, symbol, metaphor and idea—operates as in representation, as attribute, and as mnemonic device. It links directly to political and cultural experiences. Blackness and black power occurs over and over in various permutations, in various pictures and objects, and in various venues. In *Who's Afraid*

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<sup>5</sup> Terry Sultan 2000. "This Is the Way We Live" in *Kerry James Marshall* New York: Harry N. Abrams p.12

<sup>6</sup> Terry Sultan 2000. "This Is the Way We Live" in *Kerry James Marshall* New York: Harry N. Abrams p.11

of *Red, Black and Green*, blackness is the means of responding to and countering frameworks that structure patterns of behavior in the visual and cultural world.

### ***Colour field Painting***

The notion that art may be a force in society may be contextualized by further consideration of *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green's* unmistakable relationship with colour field painting. Reference to abstract, colour field painting is, for Marshall, a point of departure and a way of orienting these pictures' effect.

The earliest forms of European abstraction appeared in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when artists Kasimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian attempted to break free from inherited norms and rules of picture making in an effort to link material qualities and spiritual terms. Kobena Mercer notes that by mid-century, a consensus developed "in which the key term for understanding the formal openness of abstract art was 'purity.'"<sup>7</sup> Absent from conventional histories of modernism, Mercer observes, is the "protean, shape shifting rupture" that questions the very nature and definition of art itself. What is more, the premise that there could only be 'one' way of considering abstraction was "implicitly monocultural by virtue of limiting itself to a Eurocentric purview that ignored the various directions abstract art had taken as a global phenomenon of 20<sup>th</sup> century culture."<sup>8</sup> Abstraction may be understood to be—rather than a monological quest for absolute 'truth'—open to a multiplicity of interpretations beyond 'purity' toward a de-centering of the boundaries that separate 'art' from other phenomena.

Emergent in the late 1950s, the popularity of colour field painting as a modernist form was galvanized by the formalist art criticism of Clement Greenberg, among others. It was Greenberg's 1955 essay "American-type Painting" that established a doctrinaire and increasingly widespread notion that paintings produced through the application of large 'fields' of colour were best suited to address the historical situation of post-war America. Greenberg's championing of colour field painting was a move away from gestural abstraction, which Greenberg associated with both Cubist tradition and a reliance on value contrast as the basis of pictorial structure. As an ideal, it was also a way of resisting a mass mentality in favor of a 'genuine cultural pluralism'.<sup>9</sup> In colour field painting Greenberg found a new avant-garde practice, a form that could fulfill a resistance to 'kitsch,' but was radical enough to turn conflict into a source of creativity.

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<sup>7</sup> Kobena Mercer 2006. "Introduction" in *Discrepant Abstraction* London: INIVA p. 8

<sup>8</sup> Kobena Mercer 2006. "Introduction" in *Discrepant Abstraction* London: INIVA p. 8

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Jachec 1998. "Modernism, Enlightenment Values, and Clement Greenberg" p. 130 *Oxford Art Journal* 21:2

For Greenberg, the aesthetic principles of colour field painting could encompass the tradition of Western art since the sixteenth century.<sup>10</sup> This pictorial tradition had been characterized by alterations between the painterly and the non-painterly, by flatness and its delimitation. As Greenberg writes in 'After Abstract Expressionism,' the strength in colour field painting would be its resistance to imitation, because "inspiration alone belongs altogether to the individual; everything else, including skill, can now be acquired by anyone."<sup>11</sup> By the late 1960s a framework emerges for aesthetic valuation—degrees of 'painterliness' and flatness; the strength of colour, a resistance to imitation—metrics that form into a solid 'modernist paradigm'.<sup>12</sup> This paradigm shaped modernist art as experimental, autonomous and innovative. The politics of the paradigm—whether or not the paradigm may be seen as a strategy for preserving radical values through political absence, or as an apolitical aesthetic—remains a matter of dispute.<sup>13</sup>

One of the modernist paradigm's more forceful doctrines was that in painting, meaning and interpretation emerges from a uniquely inspired individual. A feature of grand scale colour field painting is its production of an unusually direct perceptual experience. As articulated by Modernist critics, meaningful interpretation of a painting was initially located in the individual experience of the first viewer, the artist, and the assumption is that the artist is a subjective, yet rational individual who is able to invoke.<sup>14</sup> Meaning emerges, not through visual representation or iconography, but by the work having an effect on the artist, an experience that may or may not be shared with other viewers. Modernist aesthetics matter to *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green*, because the paintings weigh-in to this dispute by suggesting another strategy altogether. Marshall's paintings respond to representational absence with presence, and answer apolitical aesthetics with a forceful political engagement.

### ***Who's Afraid of Barney Newman?***

Marshall's *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green* specifically respond to—but also turn away from—the form, content and implications of Barnett Newman's paintings.<sup>15</sup> An abstract expressionist who matured during the events of World War

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<sup>10</sup> Nancy Jachec 1998. "Modernism, Enlightenment Values, and Clement Greenberg" p. 131 *Oxford Art Journal* 21:2

<sup>11</sup> Nancy Jachec 1998. "Modernism, Enlightenment Values, and Clement Greenberg" p. 131 *Oxford Art Journal* 21:2

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Jachec 1998. "Modernism, Enlightenment Values, and Clement Greenberg" p. 131 *Oxford Art Journal* 21:2

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Jachec 1998. "Modernism, Enlightenment Values, and Clement Greenberg" p. 121 *Oxford Art Journal* 21:2

<sup>14</sup> Clement Greenberg 1955 "American-type Painting" pp.179-196 *Partisan Review* xxii: 2; also in *Art and Culture* (Boston, 1961), pp. 208-29

<sup>15</sup> Marshall is not the first black painter to make reference to Newman's influential abstraction. Frank Bowling's *Who's Afraid of Barney Newman* (1971) was a single abstract work that linked Newman's three part form with graphic representation. Bowling's work resisted the hegemony of the 'modernist paradigm'. Bowling's early work was figurative, but he later became an abstract painter,

II, Newman developed a reductive idiom that employed large chromatic expanses. Newman's art impacted abstract art after World War II, while his writings and pronouncements contributed to aesthetic debates during and after the 1960s about meaning in non-figurative expression.<sup>16</sup> Newman's series titled *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* (1966–70; e.g. *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III*, 1967; Amsterdam, Stedel. Mus.) was produced between 1966 and 1970, and were meant to overcome viewers with their sublimity, "to make viewers acknowledge the existential drama of their humanity."<sup>17</sup>

Newman's primary concern was with how the artworks will bear upon the individual, how the pictures functioned to enhance the viewer's own sense of awareness. David Anfam describes this experience as Newman's version of the Sublime, a notion recuperated from the late 18th century and 19th. In 1950 Newman wrote of his pictures: "They are specific, and separate embodiments of feeling, to be experienced, each picture for itself."<sup>18</sup> Newman's diverse visual vocabulary included a dialogue between chromatic field and the upright line, a motif that he later named a 'zip'; a penchant for poetically suggestive titles; the capacity of colour to engulf the beholder, and an accompanying use of pictorial balance to structure the personal act of perception. Newman writes: "The image we produce is the *self-evident one of revelation*, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history."<sup>19</sup> Rather than recoil in stunned amazement, the viewer's overwhelming feelings of fear and intimidation are to be worked through and overcome.

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and this work falls between the two periods. A Newman-like composition of vertical stripes is altered by the intrusion of a stenciled map of South America. Bowling was born in British Guiana (later Guyana) and this was one of several images he used that referred to his home. The colouring may also refer to his ethnicity as they are the colours of Rastafarianism: red for the blood of those killed for the black community, green for the vegetation and gold for the wealth of Africa.

(<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bowling-whos-afraid-of-barney-newman-t12244/text-display-caption>) I asked Marshall his view of the critical impact of this particular work by Bowling. He responded that for him, Bowling only sought to make space for his artwork *within* pre-existing terms, looking to demonstrate that although he was on the periphery of a canon, his work could also be abstract expressionist. Differently, Marshall works to uproot and re-organize modernist aesthetics altogether. For further discussion on Bowling's abstraction, see Kobena Mercer 2009 "Introduction" in *Discrepant Abstraction* Kobena Mercer, ed. London: Iniva.

<sup>16</sup> David Anfam. "Newman, Barnett." In *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T062140> (accessed July 13, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Rich 2005. "Bridging the Generation Gaps in Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*" pp.16-39 *American Art* 19:3

<sup>18</sup> David Anfam. "Newman, Barnett." In *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T062140> (accessed July 13, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> David Anfam. "Newman, Barnett." In *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T062140> (accessed July 13, 2012). Italics mine.

Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* pictures, writes Sarah Rich, "were very much about fear, even if Newman attempted to qualify that fear with a question mark."<sup>20</sup> Fear and intimidation were defining emotions of Newman's late 1940s and 1950s generation. But the evocation of an emotion like "fear," notes Rich, was too sincere for the art world of the late 1960s, which was dominated by stoic minimalism and ironic pop. Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* group was meant to "return feelings like fear to the emotional palette of art making... emotional turbulence in opposition to the cool, matter-of-fact characteristics of the contemporary art scene."<sup>21</sup> Newman's series externalized his individual anxieties, including the fear of becoming obsolescent. 'Modern man is his own terror,' Newman wrote in 1946.<sup>22</sup> Lifelong anarchist and libertarian political views underlay Newman's assertion that free human creativity, as manifest in the artistic act itself, was a primeval urge whereby human beings gained control over, and thereby redeemed, a tragic world. Such statements helped establish Newman as an unofficial spokesman for the Abstract Expressionist avant-garde.

The mature Newman was anxious—about a generation gap, ambivalence to societal and artistic change, and his place in a younger art world environment. "Each painting to me, [each] new painting, is as if I had never painted before," Newman declared, adding: "I do have the weight of my work on top of me, so I'm in a worse position than a young painter in that I have to some extent to force myself to begin anew."<sup>23</sup> Newman's intensely personal artistic endeavor was intended, in part, to validate his biography in art historical narrative. Without an updated sublimity for Newman's era, the complex compositions may have merely served as empty examples of good form. Rather, Newman's complex series reveals concerns about personal relevance in the context of abstract expressionism and the epic terror of existential drama. Characteristic of Newman's visual form is the meeting of two great entities at an infinitesimal juncture. His use of acrylics reinforced an enameled brilliance that linked to sharper chromatic contrasts. In *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* Newman juxtaposed the primaries in forthright blocks so that they embody sheer chroma, a riposte to 'purists and formalists who have put a mortgage on red, yellow and blue, transforming these colors into an idea that destroys them as color'.<sup>24</sup>

Marshall's response is to translate red, black and green as 'primary' colours. The gesture is a riposte to modernist aesthetics generally and Newman's polemics

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<sup>20</sup> Sarah Rich 2005. "Bridging the Generation Gaps in Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*" p.17 *American Art* 19:3

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Rich 2005. "Bridging the Generation Gaps in Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*" p.19 *American Art* 19:3

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Rich 2005. "Bridging the Generation Gaps in Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*" pp.16-39 *American Art* 19:3

<sup>23</sup> Yves Alan Bois 2004. "On Two Paintings by Barnett Newman" pp. 3-34 *October* 108.

<sup>24</sup> David Anfam. "Newman, Barnett." In *Grove Art Online*. *Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T062140> (accessed July 13, 2012)



specifically. Both Newman and Marshall explore variations between two altogether different kinds of difference. Symmetry is the differential system whereby two things are identical according to quality and quantity. Balance is the differential system whereby two quantitatively different things are equal only according to quality. Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* project generates a system in which two qualitatively different systems—symmetry and balance—weigh against each other without resolution.<sup>25</sup> Whereas Newman works to make colors expressive *rather* than didactic, Marshall intends to exploit colours for *both* expressive and didactic purposes.

### ***Marshall's Black Power***

Marshall's pictures both transform colours into ideas and shift ideas into colours. In *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green*, the viewer is invited to an active conceptual engagement aimed at renewing the aesthetics of black empowerment. Red, black and green are readily identifiable as the colours of the Pan-African flag, also referred to as the UNIA flag, Afro-American flag or Black Liberation Flag. This is a tri-color banner consists of three equal horizontal bands coloured red, black and green. The Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA) formally adopted it on August 13, 1920 as part of the Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World. Variations of the flag can and have been used throughout the continent of Africa, in the Caribbean, and the Americas to represent Pan-Africanist ideology and Black Power.

The cultural background to Marshall's pictures is the conflicts incited by black militants, new Left intellectuals, feminists and anti-colonialists. The ensuing conflicts—struggles that are visualized through Marshall's artworks—are over cultural values, public policy and power struggles. The layered metaphors of *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green* signal another fear essential to late 1960s American (and global) life—the threat to the American status quo embodied by movements for Civil Rights and Black Power. By invoking black power in various forms, Marshall both invokes its legacy and asserts its contemporary relevance.

***Black Painting*** (2012) is the second in the *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green* series. The painting is dominated by an immersive blackness. To the far left of the canvas are three bands of vibrant red. To the right is an incident of dark green, overlaid with a florescent green band of color. Whereas *If they come in the morning* features a field of red is flattened by the billboard-like text, ***Black Painting's*** vertical strips of chroma dramatize a sense of recession. The scene draws the viewer into the deep black field of color. The black is punctuated by subtle value shifts, variations that signal an illegible scape. On either side of center in the chromatic field figures appear. To the left of center is a bronze eagle with outstretched wings

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<sup>25</sup> Sarah Rich 2005. "Bridging the Generation Gaps in Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*" p.36 *American Art* 19:3

perched atop a flagpole, an American flag, and the banner of the city of Chicago. To the right of center is a large dimensional object, the letter “X”. It is arranged to seem to recede into the distance by means of linear perspective. The “X” is also tri-colored red, black and green. All of these figures seem to float in space, subsumed in a haze of blackness. For a viewer enveloped in the scene, it is difficult to imagine a stable ground for seeing, which produces a sense of floating. *Black Painting’s* width does not allow an at-once general and detailed view. Once more, colour combines with overwhelming scale and reductive format. The shifting tonal values within its span are legible in the blackness, while the symbolism alternates between legible objects to abstract symbols. *Black Painting* seems to ask the viewer to consider the flags together and wonder about their compatibility.

*The big green painting (TITLE)?* is a verdant green field of color. There is illusionistic variety in this field of color. While the green hue dominates the field, it is punctuated by brushwork and detailed lines. The viewer is faced with a field of vegetation, which comes further into focus by noticing the brown tree trunk and branches toward the bottom of the canvas. The abstracted leaves feature stylized veins of red. Some areas refuse depth of field altogether, while others permit the illusion of shallow recession. Three birds appear, a red cardinal, a black crow, and a green parrot. As in the other paintings, the viewer is absorbed by the painting’s scope and occupies an ambiguous viewpoint. Here, the viewer is inside a canopy of tree leaves, which suggests this painting is the most directly representational of the group. This observation is supported by the contrasting bands of color to the far left and right. Rather than pure chroma, these are truncated buildings, evidenced by detailed brickwork and windows. To the left, the high-rise apartment building is black. To the right, the building appears in red brick. This apartment complex throws the scene into high drama—it is on fire. Flaming tongues of red and yellow emerge from red windows, eventually dissolving into an incident of yellow at the edge limit.

### *Colours of Belonging*

In my view, the conceptual complexity of the *Who’s Afraid of Red, Black and Green* series may be approached by observing its unabashed articulation of the colors that symbolize African nationhood and Pan-Africanism. Marshall responds to modernist orthodoxy with aggression, willfully redefining the terms and theoretical bases of modernist colour field painting. *Who’s Afraid of Red, Black and Green* visualizes the red, black and green of the Garveyites: “the color of the blood which men must shed for their redemption and liberty,’ black for ‘the color of the noble and distinguished race to which we belong,’ and green for ‘the luxuriant vegetation of our Motherland.’”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Universal Black Men Catechism (n.p., n.d.) p.37 as quoted by [www.unia-acl.com/history-black,red,%20green.html](http://www.unia-acl.com/history-black,red,%20green.html) (accessed July 13, 2012).

Marshall visualizes these ideals to develop a different sense of the sublime. By consolidating the strengths of these principles with the ideals of Modernist painting, Marshall transforms the potential power of blackness into an actual force in society. It is but one example of the way Marshall's eclectic modes of depiction raise questions about validity of colour and representation in culture and society, and demonstrates Marshall's commitment to achieving new dimensions of black visibility.

By means of modern picture making, Marshall endeavors to establish the autonomy, resilience, and sincerity of blackness as an aesthetic. Consequently, these images have potent social and psychological force. The pictures infuse the field of social perception and representation with pastiches of likenesses and invented images based on typologies and conventions in modern art history. Blackness as aesthetic is a strategy that aims at the subtle and continuous transformation of the potential power of black people into actual power.

This essay is focused on the *Who's Afraid* paintings, but at this point, other works also come into further focus. Marshall's pictures aggressively engage formal, conceptual and epistemological systems that produce, shape, and frame colour as racial trope. This is a self-reflexive historical reckoning that is concerned with oscillations between legibility and illegibility in imaging blackness.<sup>27</sup> These ideas may be seen in *Buy Black* and *Black Owned* (2012), which involve the use of neon text in relief, mounted above hard edge, abstract forms. Rendered in the glow of naked green neon light, "Buy black" is a distilled rephrasing of a Black Power mantra. It is also reference to commodity forms, racial identity, art market systems, legibility, and metaphor. These texts hover above abstract colour, and set up oscillations of meaning between "pure" abstraction and the exacting semantic queries of Joseph Kosuth, Bruce Nauman and Glenn Ligon.<sup>28</sup> It is yet another gesture aimed at producing conditions—by means of a visual project—through which black folk may conceive, initiate, construct and implement plans, projects and programs in public and private spheres of society.

The lens of Pan-Africanism and black power further enriches understanding of *If they come in the morning*, and the *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green* series overall. The painted hues vibrate with the same intensity as Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Blue and Yellow* series, but Marshall's pictures require the viewer to see *actively*, to *read* the written phrase 'If they come in the morning,' *identify* a national flag, or

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<sup>27</sup> Okwui Enwesor's observations concerning the work of Glenn Ligon are useful here. A younger contemporary of Marshall, Ligon's images challenge the seeing, reading and comprehending of blackness, but in different viewpoints and modes. See Okwui Enwesor 2012 "Text, Subtext, Intertext: Painting, Language, and Signifying in the Work of Glenn Ligon" in *Glenn Ligon America* Scott Rothkopf, ed. New Haven and London: Yale University Press and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Pp.51-63

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of neon signage in the context of blackness, see Scott Rothkopf 2012 "Glenn Ligon: AMERICA" in *Glenn Ligon America* Scott Rothkopf, ed. New Haven and London: Yale University Press and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Pp.44-45

*make sense* of a burning building. The viewing process requires precisely the sort of grounded socio-political specificity and intent that Newman's formal strategy seeks to avoid, but generates, in wonderfully paradoxical ways, the idealistic vitality sought by the modernist paradigm.

The title refers both to James Baldwin's (1924-1987) open letter to Angela Y. Davis, published in *The New York Review of Books* in 1970, and Davis's subsequent book of essays published in 1971. Baldwin offered a vital literary voice during the era of civil rights activism in the 1950s and '60s. His essay collections [*Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), and *The Fire Next Time* (1963)] were influential in informing a large white audience. Baldwin's open letter is addressed to Miss Angela Davis (b.1944), a scholar, activist and organizer. In the 1960s, Davis was a leader of the Communist party in the United States and associated with the Civil Rights Movement and Black Panther Party. In 1969 she came to national attention after being removed from her teaching position in the Philosophy Department at UCLA as a result of her social activism and her membership in the Communist Party. In 1970 she was placed on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted List on false charges, and was the subject of an intense police search that drove her underground and culminated in one of the most famous trials in recent U.S. history. During her sixteen-month incarceration, a massive international "Free Angela Davis" campaign was organized, leading to her acquittal in 1972. The occasion of Baldwin's letter is Davis' trial and false imprisonment for suspected murder.

### ***Unprecedented Nation***

The phrase '*If they come in the morning*' resonates for Baldwin, Davis and (decades later) Marshall, because it is part of a plea for both individual and collective consciousness based on the condition of *blackness*. This revolution in consciousness transcends race. Its focus—and its radicality—is in bringing into existence an unprecedented nation grounded in a common humanity. Baldwin writes:

Some of us, white and black, know how great a price has already been paid to bring into existence a new consciousness, a new people, an unprecedented nation. If we know, and do nothing, we are worse than the murderers hired in our name. If we know, then we must fight for your life as though it were our own—which it is—and render impassible with our bodies the corridor to the gas chamber. For, if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night.<sup>29</sup>

The humanistic plea in Baldwin's letter not only heralds a new era in American life for black people, but also makes *blackness* the symbol and foundation to achieve pure ideas.

Writing about aspects of contemporary black politics, the political and cultural theorist Richard Iton states that the most intriguing features appear in the

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<sup>29</sup> James Baldwin 1971. "An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis" *The New York Review of Books* January 7, 1971.

relationships between formal political activities and impactful cultural forms: “With significant increase in organic and sympathetic elected representation following the end of Jim Crow, one might expect that the means by which African American interests are conceived and articulated (and the urgency with which they are expressed) would change.”<sup>30</sup> Despite formal political successes such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which suggested a commitment to policies of anti-discrimination, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, legislation to enhance black voting power, the realms of protest activity, extra-state and often nationalist engagement, and black religiosity and popular culture have continued to be politically relevant. Black aesthetics and culture have continued “to play a major role in mobilizing and shaping (and containing and circumscribing) black politics.”<sup>31</sup> Iton observes the issues that drive political activity are based on “aesthetic grammars” that determine viewer responses to particular work, and “intentional silences” that suggest acceptance of existing arrangements and thereby political preferences. Aesthetic responses and strategies are politically valid and extend across historical periods and geographic territories.

Baldwin and Davis remind their audience of the paradox of being black in America and the challenge of contending with a government that, in practice, never lived up to its own promises and ideals. They also call on *individuals* to act both collectively and individually to address terror and violence. This is a call to overcome experiences of terror and intimidation. Newman’s theories are potent here, and provide a title for this essay:

The basis of an aesthetic art is the pure idea. But the pure idea is, of necessity, an aesthetic act. Here then is the epistemological paradox that is the artist’s problem. Not space cutting nor space building... but the idea-complex that makes contact with mystery—of life, of men, of nature, of the hard, black chaos that is death, or the greyer, softer chaos that is tragedy. For it is only the pure idea that has meaning. Everything else has everything else.<sup>32</sup>

Marshall’s contemporary invocation of *blackness*—as pure idea—synchronously visualizes and historicizes the threat to the American status quo as embodied by Civil Rights and Black Power. By invoking blackness in various forms, Marshall invokes black power’s legacy, addresses its absence from modernist discourse, and asserts its contemporary relevance.

In my view, this historical specificity enables a view of *Who’s Afraid of Red, Black and Green’s* simultaneous invocation of abstraction and representation. The series signal a revision of the legacy and relevance of black power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Blackness appears, neither as elegiac loss in the face of current events, nor as a solipsistic state

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Iton 2008. *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* New York: Oxford University Press p.4

<sup>31</sup> Richard Iton 2008. *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* New York: Oxford University Press p.4

<sup>32</sup> Barnett Newman 2005. “The Ideographic Picture (1947)” in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique* Ellen G. Landau, ed. Yale University Press: New Haven and London p. 135.

of terror. It features, rather, in reciprocally diverse and *productive* forms. The multiplicity calls for courage and solidarity in the fight for existence. Marshall's *blackness* thereby appears in contraposition to paradigms that refuse to accommodate dissent. *Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green* thereby invokes Baldwin's cautionary words: 'if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night.'