



ABOUT THE ART

Our Town

ARTIST

Kerry James Marshall
(born 1955)

TITLE

Our Town

YEAR

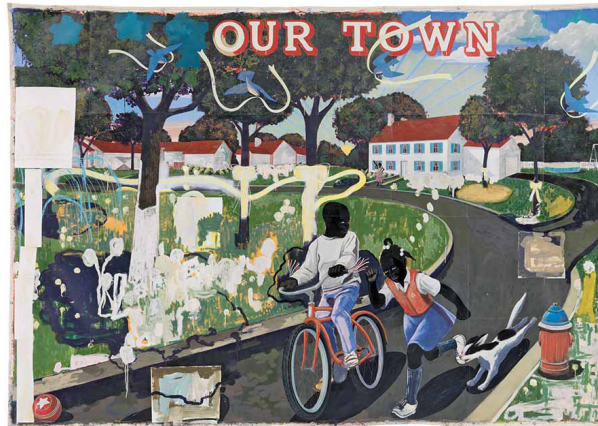
1995

MEDIA/MATERIALS

Acrylic and collage on canvas

DIMENSIONS

101 x 143 in.
(256.5 x 363.2 cm)



Kerry James Marshall's *Our Town* is a large mural which at first glance seems to depict the ideal American life in suburbia. We see a beautiful white home, well-kept lawns, playful children, a mom waving, and chirping bluebirds. However upon closer inspection the artist reveals a not-so-idyllic scene. The African American children

in the foreground seem to be playing, but neither of them is smiling. Instead, the little girl has a serious look on her face and runs with her arm raised and fist clenched. In the lower foreground, we see random white, black, and yellow marks and lines similar to urban graffiti in contrast to the neat and tidy suburban scene. While the bluebirds seem cheerful, the yellow ribbons they are carrying often represent soldiers away at war. In the background, the houses seem much smaller than and not as beautiful as the large one in the front.

REFERENCES

ⁱBartles, Kathleen S. and Jeff Wall. Kerry James Marshall. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2010. Print. 14

ⁱⁱSalley, Rael Jero. "The New Danger of the Pure Idea." Kerry James Marshall: Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green—secession. Ed. Andras Palffy. Berlin: Revolver, 2012. 15. Print.

ⁱⁱⁱSudbeck, Annette. "Interview with Kerry James Marshall: A move towards freedom or how to generate that sparkle." Kerry James Marshall: Who's Afraid of Red, Black and Green—secession. Ed. Andras Palffy. Berlin: Revolver, 2012. 50

Our Town is part of Marshall's Garden Project Series in which the artist created large, colorful murals representing African American life in government housing projects.ⁱ These artworks do not portray 'the projects' as run-down, violent ghettos, but rather as hopeful paradises. Marshall, an African American, lived in the housing projects in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, California. Marshall's family moved from Birmingham, Alabama to Watts in 1963, just two years before violent rioting over unjust social, economic, and political conditions erupted there. This area was also the birthplace of the African American activist group the Black Panthers. In contrast to Martin Luther King's nonviolent approach to gaining equality, the Black Panthers pledged to use "any means necessary," including violence, to ensure African Americans would have all the rights guaranteed to US citizens. While the group primarily aimed to prevent police abuse and secure equality for black Americans, their AK-47s and military-style uniforms frightened the whites in power. The raised fist of the little girl in *Our Town* is a gesture associated with the Black Panthers. The title, *Our Town*, also evokes the 1938 play by Thornton Wilder and poses the question of for whom does the American ideal exist?

Like all of Marshall's paintings, he depicts African Americans in the darkest of black hues. This highly stylized black persona is the artist's signature image.ⁱⁱ Marshall only paints black figures because, according to the artist, he feels that he has a social responsibility to make sure that there are "more than a few Black bodies in the grand palaces of fine art."ⁱⁱⁱ Marshall continues to make art that challenges the viewer to examine stereotypes of African Americans. He currently works and teaches in Chicago, Illinois.



Kerry James Marshall. *Our Town*, 1995. Acrylic and Collage on Canvas. Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas.