BLACK ART: IN THE ABSENCE OF LIGHT

ART MAKING APPENDIX
WHEN I MET CHARLES WHITE, ONE OF THE THINGS THAT STUCK WITH ME THAT HE SAID WAS, ‘WHENEVER YOU MAKE WORK, IT OUGHT TO BE ABOUT SOMETHING THAT MATTERS!’

—KERRY JAMES MARSHALL
ARTIST
WHAT TO EXPECT

1A. Cull Your Signature Style
2A. Make the Personal Universal
2B. Discover the Person Behind the Portrait
4A. Make Your Subconscious Conscious

HANDS-ON ART MAKING

ACTIVITIES

Tap into your creative instincts & develop your own unique aesthetic, or style!
FEATURED: ‘School of Beauty, School of Culture’, Kerry James Marshall, 2012. Photo Credit: Courtesy HBO
In this activity, you will first train your eye to work in the style of Kerry James Marshall. You will then paint or draw a portrait of yourself or someone else using a photograph. You will draw inspiration for the background of your portrait from a novel that inspires you. Lastly, you will transform your portrait by adding to it consistently over time, through your own signature style.

**MATERIALS NEEDED:**
- 3 variations of your favorite color ink, paint or dye and a paintbrush
- a blank paper, canvas or screen
- a photograph of your subject
- reference images (Kerry James Marshall)
- reference text (a novel of your choosing)
Artist Kerry James Marshall discusses the early influence of Charles White’s *Images of Dignity* on his development as an emerging painter. One of his first oil paintings was “in the style of” Charles White, which means that he borrowed from his mentor’s technique, and use of “form, color and tone.” Marshall discusses this exercise as a two-part process; first training one’s own perception of form by copying what one sees; and second, breaking free from mimicry to produce one’s own distinct visual aesthetic.

Later in the segment, Marshall shares his own unique approach to the grayscale, which involves mixing paints to create at least seven different types of black. His desire to deepen the spectrum of black pigment was inspired by reading Ralph Ellison. He shares, “I was trying to embody in a picture the concept that Ralph Ellison had laid out in his novel, *Invisible Man*. He describes the condition of invisibility as it relates to Black people in America. Being seen and not seen simultaneously.” In 1980, his first experimentation with this new grayscale yielded one of his most famous paintings, *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*!
Kerry James Marshall’s focus is on diversifying the spectrum of Black representation, in both his material and his subject matter. What is your focus?

Whose words have most shaped how you experience the world?

Whose images have most impacted how you see the world?

Where do these histories converge, and where do they diverge?

Which histories are you exploring through this exercise? Who do they belong to? What is your relationship to them?
Spend some time regarding the works of Kerry James Marshall

Get fun with it! Why not start with his newest paintings, and work your way back to his earlier works? It can be fun to see how someone’s style or aesthetic has changed over time!

Illustrate what you see. Take note of anything that inspires you! Remember, this is an exercise in interpreting and translating Kerry James Marshall’s style! There is no right or wrong way to do this

Let your exploration of Marshall’s work guide you to the novel you select as your source material for your background

Bring your research to your workstation where you will now create your own original work of art!
• Prep your workstation so that you have a blank canvas in the center, your pigments to one side, and your photograph to the other

• Make a color palette. If you are using paint, grab a disposable plate and squeeze a dab of your three color variations next to each other. Leave space in between to mix them together in different combinations and amounts! If you are using ink or dye, you might want to use disposable cups instead of plates

• Feel free to add additional colors to your palette, so long as you mix them with one of the three variations of your chosen color

• Have fun and experiment with color combinations, either on your palette or directly on your canvas if you’re feeling bold!

• Begin with your portrait, using your photograph as a guide to paint exactly what you see. Don’t forget: if you choose blue as your color, you will likely have blue skin! But that’s OK. Remember Jordan Casteel and Amy Sherald experiment with skin tone all the time!

• Then cut in on your background, using imagery inspired from your novel
Under artist Betye Saar's mentorship, Kerry James Marshall developed his own unique aesthetic by leaving his artwork, and returning to it each week to transform it gradually over time.

Don't put too much pressure on yourself. Your unique style will emerge in due time! Just be patient, and commit to returning to the canvas week after week until you reach a natural stopping point!
How does your aesthetic differ from Kerry James Marshall's? How is it similar?

Which was more difficult, painting a person or a landscape? Why?

How many color variations were you able to develop?

How did broadening your color spectrum lead to a more complex portrayal of your subject?

“BLACK HAS A PALLETTE THAT’S AS COMPLEX AND AS BROAD IN ITS RANGE AS ANY OTHER COLOR THAT’S ON THE SPECTRUM!”

—Kerry James Marshall, Artist
I collect objects that have a certain path. I see myself as a vessel and things come through me. I really believe in making something so personal that it becomes universal.

- Radcliffe Bailey
  artist
In this activity, you will transform a family photograph, found object, and personal effect into a single work of art using assemblage. You will traverse your immediate surroundings, seeing familiar objects in unfamiliar ways. You will reflect on memories conjured by these objects, and work to weave your personal narrative into a universal one!

**MATERIALS NEEDED:**
- family photos
- an object of personal significance that is not so precious you can’t transform it into something new!
- a flat surface on which to assemble your objects
Having considered how Black artists participated in the Civil Rights Movement, the film moves on to explore other ways artists engage the realities of everyday life. Multidisciplinary artist Radcliffe Bailey shares his distinct approach to making art, which includes navigating his environment with an openness to what he might learn from the objects he encounters. Recalling a memory of fishing with his father, Bailey transformed 500 sets of discarded piano keys into a rolling ocean. Building on the traditions of artists James Van Der Zee and Jacob Lawrence, he transformed 400 family photographs into multimedia collages and paintings that travel time and space.
HE LOVES THE MATERIALS THAT HE’S USING. AND IT’S PAINT, AND IT’S GLASS, AND IT’S PHOTOGRAPHS, AND IT’S BITS OF PAPER, AND IT’S FABRIC. HE HAS AN ABILITY TO BRING ALL OF THOSE FRAGMENTS TOGETHER TO TELL A STORY—ABOUT OUR PAST, AND SOMETHING ABOUT WHERE WE’RE GOING. RADCLIFFE BAILEY, FOR ME, REPRESENTS THE WONDER AND JOY OF AN ARTIST!

—MARY SCHMIDT CAMPBELL
PRESIDENT, SPELMAN COLLEGE
Who is your family historian? How well has your family achieved its history?

How is Radcliffe Bailey’s work different from the other artists the film has featured so far?

How can objects help you to tell a story?

What makes an artwork (or a story) personal? What makes it universal?

Where do you go when you are looking for inspiration?
Spend some time diving into your family photo albums. Even if you can only find one image of someone who came before you, study that image in depth! Remember your ancestors. Reflect on some of your favorite memories. Write down (or sketch out) the memories you want to hold onto most.

Now research the artistic form, assemblage. In addition to Radcliffe Bailey, the film also profiles Betye Saar, a pioneer of the artform. Research their works in depth, and see who else is out there transforming everyday objects into artistic masterpieces!
• As you carry these memories top-of-mind, venture outside. Dedicate one hour to wandering around and actively observing and engaging your environment.

• Collect objects that call to you, jotting down notes to remind you where you found them and why you felt compelled to pick them up. Remember, one woman’s trash is another woman’s treasure!

• Once you’ve returned to your point of origin, store your objects together in a safe space overnight. Take the evening to reflect on histories your objects hold. Who did they belong to before you? What function did they serve? What future purpose might they serve?

• The following day, assemble your objects in relationship to one another. Consider how the shapes, colors and textures of your objects fit (or don’t fit) together.

• Experiment! Break one into pieces and use those pieces to embellish another. Dip one in glitter or gold paint. Grab an old T-shirt, transform the fabric into rope, and use the rope to bind your objects together.

• Use everything at your disposal to flesh out your narrative, that is both personal and universal! Assemble and reassemble your objects until you reach a natural resting place. Then photograph your final assemblage so that you have a record of what you made.
What excited you about looking at familiar objects in new ways?

What did you learn about yourself by going through this process?

What did you learn about the past? The present? The future?

What surprised you about your objects' transformations?
In this activity, you will paint a portrait of someone from your neighborhood. You will get to know your neighbor and let what you learn about them inspire your artistic approach. You will experiment with different techniques shared by painters Amy Sherald and Jordan Casteel. By the end of this exercise, you will have deepened an interpersonal relationship and evolved your signature style!

**MATERIALS NEEDED:**
- a blank canvas or paper
- a paintbrush and paint
- a photograph of your subject

**ACTIVITY 2B: DISCOVER THE PERSON BEHIND THE PORTRAIT**
Midway through the film, we begin to explore Black subjectivity more in depth—not just what it means to be a Black artist, but also what it means to be the subject of contemporary Black art. In 2018, painters Amy Sherald and Kehinde Wiley were commissioned to paint the portraits of Michelle and Barack Obama respectively. In approaching this rare opportunity, Wiley said, “I will be looking not only at the presidency, or the history of received power, or the evolution of power as form. But rather, I’ll be looking at him as a man—his physical presence in the world.” His words speak to the portraitist’s challenge—to represent both the interior and the exterior of their subject—what can be read from how a person carries themself, and what can only be learned through deeper investigation.
I’M THINKING ABOUT GIRLS OF COLOR WHO, IN YEARS AHEAD, WILL COME TO THIS PLACE AND THEY WILL LOOK UP AND THEY WILL SEE AN IMAGE OF SOMEONE THAT LOOKS LIKE THEM, HANGING ON THE WALL OF THIS GREAT AMERICAN INSTITUTION.

-MICHELLE OBAMA
ATTORNEY, AUTHOR & FORMER FIRST LADY OF THE UNITED STATES
FEATURED: Amy Sherald. Photo Credit: Courtesy HBO
CONSIDER

What do you learn about a person from their posture, eyes, smile and clothing?

How does one capture the essence or aura of a person?

Who from your neighborhood might make a good subject for your portrait? Do you see them every day, but have yet to say hello? Could today be the day you finally introduce yourself?

What can’t you learn about a person from outward appearances alone?

What version of yourself do you present to the world most often? Why?
For Jordan Casteel, research meant walking around her neighborhood, engaging in conversations, taking photographs of willing subjects, and studying these photographs for hours on end. It was through this exercise that Jordan was able to “parse out a sense, emotion or feeling” that would anchor the portrait.

For Amy Sherald, research meant thumbing through hundreds of images of Michelle Obama, putting aside the popular images widely circulated by the media, and instead looking for Obama’s private side, or images where she was unaware of the camera. It was through this exercise that Amy was able to capture what Spelman President Mary Schmidt Campbell has described as “an incredible image of a powerful, beautiful, Black woman that’s become an international symbol.”

As you set about your own research, really consider who you want to paint from your community (and why) before approaching them — they will likely ask, “why me?” and you’ll already have your answer ready!
Having selected and photographed your subject, sit with the photograph for a while. Name the “sense, emotion and feeling” evoked by what you see.

Allow your eye to wander and pull out the most vibrant colors. Then build your palette using those colors.

Follow Casteel’s advice and start with the face and the eyes, before moving on to the background.

As you paint, remember what you learned about your neighbor in your conversation. Allow that newfound understanding to literally color your canvas!
After you’ve completed your portrait, share it with your neighbor. Ask them their thoughts about the experience!

Invite your neighbor to paint your portrait, sharing the tips you learned from Amy and Jordan!

Share your thoughts about the experience too.
What scenes or people from your day-to-day life are “art worthy”? What are the criteria you are using to make those value judgements?

How much of yourself do you present to the world? How much do you hold back?

What challenged you most about this exercise? What excited you? Would you repeat it again to produce an entire series like Jordan Casteel?

"JORDAN IS WORKING IN THE TRADITION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PORTRAITURE, IN A REALIST TRADITION, BUT SHE’S BRINGING TO IT HER OWN UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE AS A WOMAN AND AS A YOUNG PERSON DEPICTING PEOPLE IN THEIR EVERYDAY LIVES."

—BERNARD LUMPKIN, COLLECTOR
In this activity, you will experiment with collage to layer competing memories, histories, emotions and thoughts. Inspired by artist Kara Walker, these exercises ask you to confront what she terms your, “unconscious fantasies, fears, wishes, loathings [and] anxieties.” Using your own subconscious as your source material, you will cut out simple silhouettes and combine these forms to produce a new narrative!

ACTIVITY 4A: MAKE YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS CONSCIOUS

MATERIALS NEEDED:
- adhesive vinyl (or construction paper and glue)
- scissors (or an X-Acto Knife)
- a large blank surface (or paper) to assemble your cutouts
In this segment, the film continues to investigate how fear is processed through contemporary art. While the previous segment surveyed Studio Museum in Harlem Director Thelma Golden’s curatorial approach, here we meet artist Kara Walker and discover how she processes some of America’s most painful histories (such as Slavery) through her artistic practice. A multidisciplinary artist, she uses 2D forms such as collage, and 3D forms such as sculpture, to investigate race, gender, sexuality and violence. Her candid approach poses difficult questions, some of which we will attempt to address for ourselves in this exercise.
KARA WALKER IS A CRUCIBLE FOR THE FIELD OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART. SHE’S A CRUCIBLE FOR THE FIELD OF MODERNISM. I HAVE A LOT OF RESPECT FOR HER WILLINGNESS TO GO INTO THE UNDERBELLY OF THE NEO CONFEDERATE NARRATIVE OF AMERICAN CULTURE AND BRING IT TO OUR ATTENTION THROUGH FORMS THAT DISRUPT, THAT COMMAND, AND THAT RESHAPE OUR UNDERSTANDING ABOUT BLACK LIFE IN THIS COUNTRY.

LOVE THE WORK, HATE THE WORK, YOU HAVE TO RECKON WITH THE WORK. IF YOU DON’T, YOU’RE EFFECTIVELY NOT RECKONING WITH THE HISTORY OF THIS COUNTRY.

—SARAH LEWIS
HARVARD UNIVERSITY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
“There are all these narrative tropes, stereotypes, mythologies that we live with. Some are very overt, some are parading around in broad daylight, some are unconscious fantasies, fears, wishes, loathings, anxieties. My approach in making art doesn’t know what the rules are or what can and can’t be said.”

–Kara Walker, Artist
Think about a moment in history to which you feel connected. Perhaps this is because your ancestors played a pivotal role in the events of that time? Or maybe, you pick a moment you've heard very little about, either because it wasn't taught in school, or you feel the history books didn't tell the full story?

Spend some time researching that period, either online or at your local library. Go deep! Tap into different types of source material: letters, photographs, newspaper clippings, you name it!

Make note of the people and places that feel central to the story. Also make note of who's been omitted from the narrative.
FEATURED: "Insurrection! (Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On)", Kara Walker, 2000. Photo Credit: Courtesy HBO
• Using your research as source material, visualize the protagonists from your historical narrative. Sketch simple silhouettes, or outlines, on a piece of blank paper. Draw only the outermost edges of your figure, not the details. Don’t forget about the power of body language and gesture to tell a story!

• Once you have final sketches for all of your protagonists, transfer your drawings onto your adhesive vinyl or construction paper. You can simply cut out your figures, place them atop your adhesive vinyl, and trace the edges. Or you can play around with scale by using a scanner, projector, or light box. If you are feeling really bold, you can draw directly on the back of your vinyl, understanding that the final image will be reversed.

• Use scissors or an X-Acto blade to cut out your figures. You’ll move faster with scissors, but you’ll be able to go into more detailed edge work with the blade.

• As a final step, assemble your silhouettes in relation to one another to create a narrative scene. Play around with compositions before you peel the back off your vinyl and make your final placements!
I THINK THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT THE BLACK COMMUNITY THAT FEELS WE HAVE OWNERSHIP OF THESE STORIES BECAUSE THEY COME OUT OF US, THEY COME THROUGH US, THEY'RE ABOUT US, BUT AGAIN, WE'RE NOT A MONOLITH EITHER. WE ARE A COMPOSITE OF MANY DIFFERENT HISTORIES COMING TOGETHER.

—VALERIE CASSEL OLIVER
CURATOR, VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS
Which stories do you feel ownership over?

Where do those stories fit together, and where do they pull apart?

What has your experience of materializing the subconscious through art been like?