



UNTITLED (DRAW ME), 2012
ACRYLIC ON WOOD
160 X 80 CM

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GAINES: *I'd like to dig deeper into your thoughts on the relationship between form and meaning and how you deploy those things in articulating issues of race, racism and identity. I'm thinking about your painting Believed to be a Portrait of David Walker (circa 1830) (2009), an example of using painting to archive significant events in the history of racial discourse, and also the painting, Red (If they come in the morning), a work that comments on Barnett Newman's abstract language in ways that call up the debate between Reinhardt and Taylor on the colour black. To me they both react to the absence of black representation in the history of art. I'm particularly interested in this in relation to a comment that you made in an article in Frieze magazine about the use of history as a narrative structure that can reveal how racism unfolds in time.⁷ There's a pedagogical implication in this statement, which is the idea of using history as a way of providing a deeper understanding. Also, you said you use the history of art to comment on the lack of representation of black people, and at the same time your work contributes positively to this history by representing black people. Or that's how I interpreted what you said. Do you use painting to deepen our understanding of race, or do you use race to deepen our understanding of painting? Fully respecting what you said earlier about the inability of art to effect social change, how can we square that with the pedagogical impulse to broaden our understanding of racism in order, presumably, to improve society? Or is it not about societal improvement but something else?*

MARSHALL: Well in the end, only in context. For what I'm doing, it only generates this deeper understanding in context, because it's in relation to other things that people already know about. In particular, it's only because of other pictures that people know about. The value of the work in some ways, apart from establishing what you could call a presence, is only able to be considered in relation to other things that are like it, things that fit into the general understanding of art history that we already have. But going back to the way you started the question, when I think about it, what I'm not doing is making work that addresses the idea of racism. What I am doing is establishing a presence, a black presence that isn't traumatically conditioned by its relationship to a practice or structure called racism. If we think of the idea of racism as a set of relationships that have to do with power and powerlessness, it has an uneven effect on its perpetrators and victims. That makes it particularly difficult to address as a concept and as a practice, because we recognize that there are ways in which racism works or exists unconsciously. Racism is one of these meta-ideas that can be too amorphous to get a real handle on. Because of that, I avoid thinking of what I'm doing through a lens that addresses racism as a phenomenon that can be palpable in works of art; that can be made into a thing or seen as a thing.

GAINES: *I want to be clear that the idea that racism as a set of social practices of exclusion and marginalization based on race is not what's under dispute. The problem is identifying an instance or example of the idea.*

MARSHALL: I don't even think I'm representing that idea per se.

GAINES: *Because of your subject matter, there's clearly something that compels you to believe that the experience of race is important. So there seems to be a fissure between what the nature of that experience is and how it accords to a set of social practices. For you in your position as an artist, there's somehow a fissure between those two positions.*

MARSHALL: Regarding this, we can refer back to my experience as a young person during the Watts riots. When you're defining racism as a set of social practices around the idea of exclusion, discrimination and subjugation based on race, you have to recognize the power that accepting the idea as absolute can wield. If you internalize

UNTITLED (LOVERS), 2015
ACRYLIC ON PVC PANEL
152 X 122 X 7 CM



UNTITLED (PLAYGROUND), 2015
ACRYLIC ON PVC PANEL
152 X 122 X 7 CM



