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KERRY
JAMES
MARSHALL

b.1955

Study for Past Times

signed with the artist's initials and dated 1997
acrylic, felt-tip pen and graphite on paper
mounted on board
19 7/8 by 27 3/8 in. 50.5 by 69.5 cm.

PROVENANCE

Acquired directly from the artist by the present
owner

\$ 900,000-1,200,000





KERRY JAMES MARSHALL

STUDY FOR PAST TIMES

RESPLENDENT WITH METICULOUS graphic detail and an encyclopedic use of material and form, *Study for Past Times* grants rare access into Kerry James Marshall's artistic process. The intimate composition is rich with minute painterly elements and preparatory investigations, affirming Marshall's uncommon sensitivity to his subject matter through the level of workmanship he is able to achieve on the page. Completed in the aftermath of Marshall's now iconic *Garden Project* series, *Study for Past Times* expands on the artist's investigation into African American subjects in various states of repose, engaging in leisurely recreational activities more associated with wealthy suburbia than Chicago's urban landscape. The present work offers an extremely rare opportunity as it is coming from the collection of Joel Straus, the art advisor who curated the monumental *Past Times* into the McCormick Public Art

Collection. Mr. Straus felt so strongly that *Study for Past Times* allowed a rare insight into Marshall's work, that he aspired for it to be in his family's personal collection and acquired it from the artist directly. Twenty years after its purchase, *Past Times* was sold at Sotheby's in May 2018 for \$21.1 million, breaking a long-held barrier and making history as the most expensive work of art by a living African American artist sold at auction. *Study for Past Times* embodies the genesis of this later work, incorporating an art historical visual vocabulary with a vital social message, culminating in a composition that stands on its own as a proxy for Marshall's artistic ethos.

Study for Past Times exemplifies Marshall's artistic mastery over the intrinsic tenets of image making. The composition engages multiple perspectival strategies, oscillating between compressed space and implied depth while remaining highly legible.

Detail of the acetate grid overlay included with the present work.



“a presence, a black presence that isn’t traumatically conditioned by its relationship to a practice or a structure called racism”

The artist in conversation with Charles Gaines in “Interview,” in *Kerry James Marshall*, London 2017, p. 32.

A group of figures dominates the lower register of the work; Marshall’s subjects rest on a punctiliously delineated gingham blanket, staring out of the picture plane, presenting symbols of prosperity and leisure as if to confront or invite participation from a passerby. As the landscape recedes into the middle ground, the trailing line of a speeding golf ball and the tether of a water-skier on the lake evoke the guidelines of one-point perspective. Rather than adhering to this system, Marshall layers his composition. A rippling ribbon which reads, “Who plays...all of heart and....skill / Will also work with heart and will,” flies overhead, weaving around trees and through hills, covered in turn by a translucent spray of water emanating from a fountain in the foreground. The hills meander into the distance, stacked against housing projects and a setting sun looming on the horizon. Despite

the sheer quantity of subject matter in the composition, Marshall finds paths for entry, carefully laying out a spread of activity and scenery to craft a self-contained world. Marshall is able to forge this fully realized world through a concerted focus on the fundamental qualities of composition, which not only underlay the present work but Marshall’s artistic career as a whole. Summarizing his view on the foundational values and development of artmaking, Marshall explains, “After Abstract Expressionism, a lot of artists haven’t been trained to manipulate material. Instead, they’ve been taught that what they’re supposed to manipulate is concepts or ideas. To me, this is absolutely responsible for a lot of weaknesses in artist’s production at this point. I’m an advocate of a return to very fundamental, very basic studio practices,

which means that you first spend a lot simply trying to figure out what materials will do, and in the process of figuring that out; you figure out what to do with them” (The artist in conversation with Arthur Jafa in “Plates”, *Kerry James Marshall*, New York, 2000, p. 29). Indeed, the perimeter of Marshall’s work is lined with numbers scaling from one to thirteen, which refers to the grid system that Marshall used to scale the painting. Thus, the study is perfectly proportioned to the canvas as Marshall used an arithmetical preparatory approach to planning his scene. Countering this exactitude, Marshall preserves marks which lay out the development of the scene from idea to execution; faint lines ensconce his figures, outlining the metamorphosis of his leftmost subject’s elegant contrapposto and the central foreshortened arm. *Study for Past Times* conflates these moments of deliberate

premeditation with exploratory mark-making, countering every ruled line with a splash of expressionistic color and concerted revision.

Marshall uses this unique concoction of fastidious preparation and more unbridled expression to advance his interpretation of grand pastoral scenes, which in his view, have been canonized and made exclusive by generations of European artists. In *Study for Past Times*, the seemingly innocuous tableau is activated by Marshall’s broader cultural and political aims. Marshall invokes the abstract notion of the American Dream and positions himself as an inheritor of illustrious artistic traditions, using his forceful presence to highlight the exclusion of black Americans from those cultural ideals. The present work is a defiant portrayal of black people, which with his insistence on quotidian normalcy, establishes, in the words of Marshall, “a presence, a Black presence that isn’t traumatically conditioned by its relationship to a practice or a structure called racism” (The artist in conversation with Charles Gaines in “Interview,” in *Kerry James Marshall*, London 2017, p. 32).

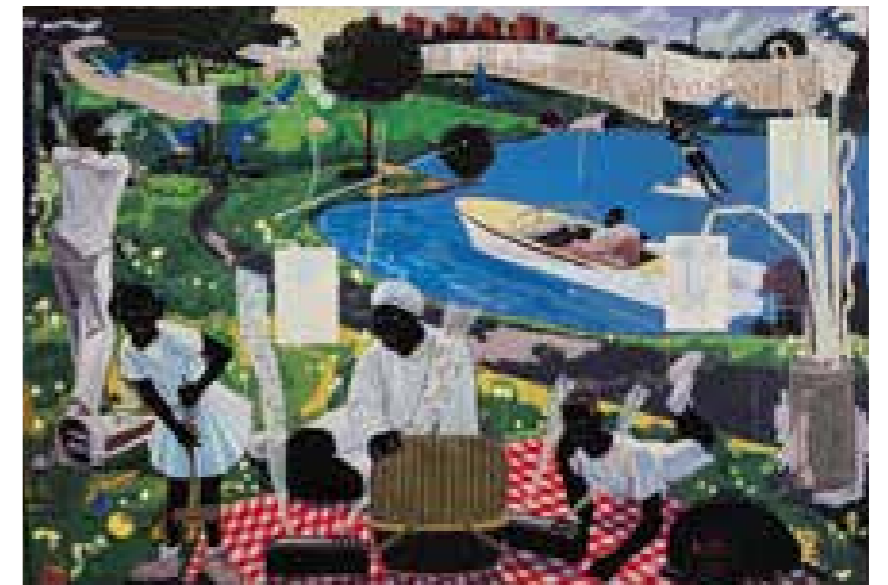
Study for Past Times combines the most thought-provoking and aesthetically engaging features of Marshall’s most epic and celebrated larger scale paintings with a level of access to the artist’s compositional and conceptual developments rarely afforded by those grander examples. Summarizing his conceptual aim, Marshall explains, “The overarching principle is still to move the black figure from the periphery to the center and, secondly, to have these figures operate in a wide range of historical genres and stylistic modes culled from the history of painting. Those really are my two overarching conceptual motivations. I am using African American cultural and social history as a catalyst for what kind of pictures to make. What I’m trying to do in my work is address Absence with a capital A.” (The artist in conversation with Dieter Roelstraete in “An Argument for Something Else,” in Ed., Nav Haq, *Kerry James Marshall: Painting and Other Stuff*, Ghent 2014, p. 26). *Study for Past Times* bears witness to Marshall addressing this absence, unleashing his artistic repertoire to forge a completely new chapter in the canon.



Georges Pierre Seurat, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, 1884-86
Image © The Art Institute of Chicago, IL, USA / Bridgeman Images



Edouard Manet, *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, 1863
Image © Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France / Bridgeman Images



Kerry James Marshall, *Past Times*, 1997
Private Collection, Sold Sotheby's New York, May 2018