

Excerpts from:

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## **Winold Reiss to Kara Walker: The Silhouette in Black American Art**

### **The Silhouette in Contemporary Black American Art**

Since the 1990s a cavalcade of cut, painted and photographed silhouettes have figured in the work of dozens of artists who, like Walker, summon its reductive economy of form to interrogate similarly reductive racial stereotypes. Artists like Laylah Ali, Lorna Simpson, Kerry James Marshall and Michael Ray Charles (to name but a few) have appropriated the pictorial idiom of the silhouette to investigate the ways in which the Black American body has been literally and metaphorically reduced to a mere shadow of its physical and historical referent. (p. 289)

Whereas Walker and Simpson consciously address the ways in which silhouettes are implicated in the historical construction of racial stereotypes, the unmodulated two-dimensionality of the work of artists like Marshall, Charles and Ali is equally indebted to comics, American advertising and graphic novels. Such diverse influences notwithstanding, these artists employ flat, reductive, crisply delineated figures in order to explore the history of the visual representation of race in the United States. (p. 290)

In contradistinction to Ali and Charles, Kerry James Marshall favors the silhouetted form for its ability to emphasize blackness in a more collective, arguably positive manner. Marshall's 1994-95 untitled Garden series, for example, depicts clean-cut, young urban Blacks in epic cityscapes of urban housing projects that include the word "Garden" in their name (Altgeld Gardens, Rockwell Gardens, Wentworth Gardens, etc.). The disparity between the edenic names of the projects and their impoverished reality as spaces that demarcate the marginalization and decay of Black urban culture is heightened by the matte blackness and formality of Marshall's figures. Though they are not silhouettes in the strictest sense (there is some subtle three-dimensional modeling in the faces and black-and-white clothing), the figures' rich black tones, outlines and poses function in a manner visually similar to that of traditional silhouettes. Of his development of the "unequivocally black, emphatically black figure," Marshall explains that he flattens, darkens and minimizes their forms to heighten their rhetorical function and notes that he is "very conscious" of the resistance to extreme representations of blackness within the Black community. His reduction of the "complex variations of tone to a rhetorical dimension" of blackness, Marshall argues, recalls more familiar negative stereotyping but "is never laughable." The difficulty, as he explains it, was to

[...] make them as flat as I possibly could, while maintaining a sense of dimension. That was the challenge: I was trying to see how solidly I could make those figures resonate without putting a lot of definition into them. I tried to figure out a way to construct the silhouette of the silhouette. (Marshall 90)

(p. 290-291)

See full essay here:

[https://www.academia.edu/12542524/ Winold Reiss to Kara Walker The Silhouette in Black American Art](https://www.academia.edu/12542524/Winold_Reiss_to_Kara_Walker_The_Silhouette_in_Black_American_Art)

For more information on silhouette portraits see:

<https://m.theartstory.org/movement-harlem-renaissance-history-and-concepts.htm>