The Societal Frame: A Tool To Address Racism in the Galleries

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Michelle Jordan Antonisse, Museum Educator, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

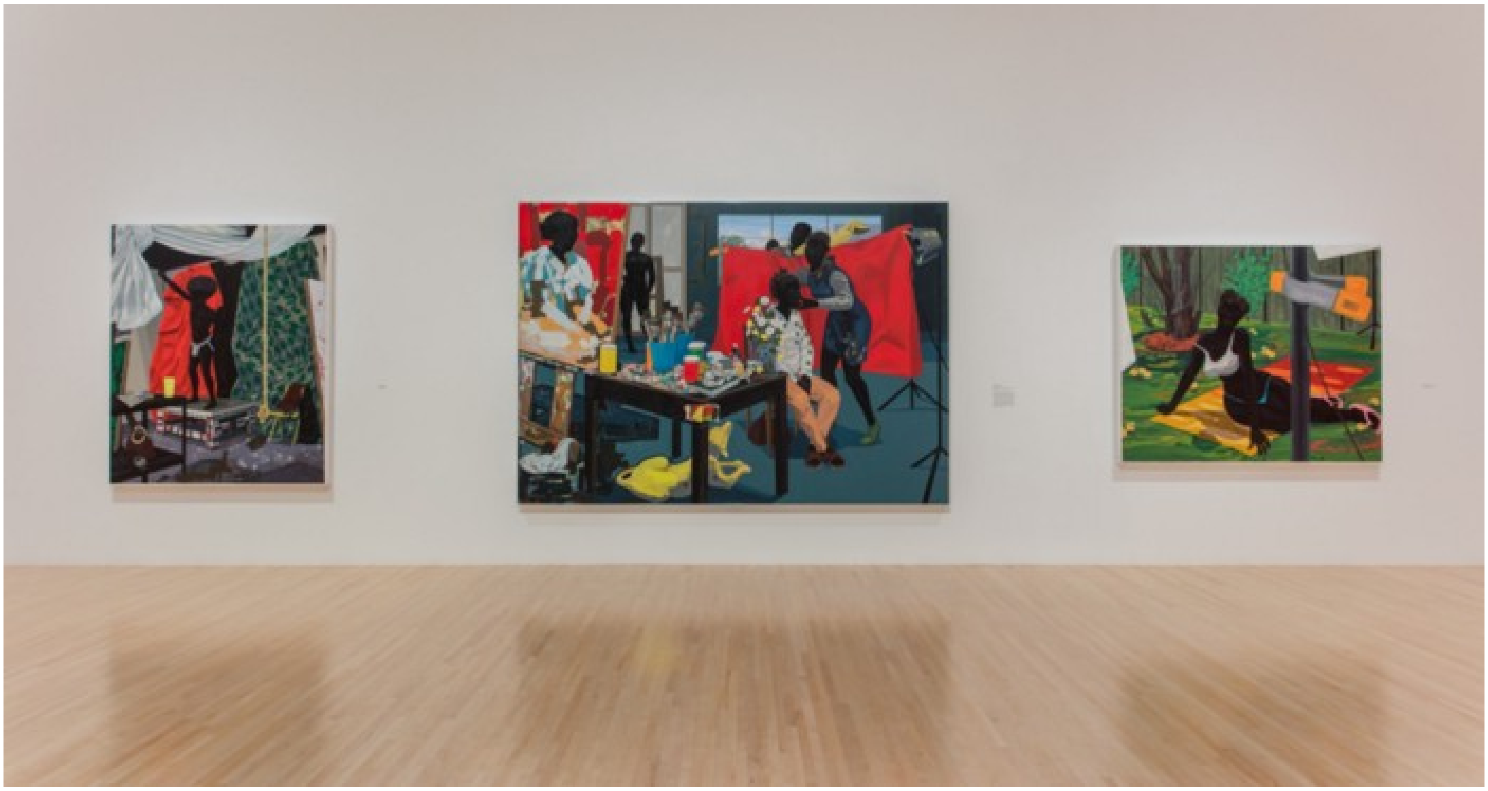


Fig. 1 Installation view of Kerry James Marshall: Mastry, March 12–July 3, 2017 at MOCA Grand Avenue, courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, photo by Brian Forrest

Museums are unique spaces to confront issues of race, identity, fluidity, and intersectionality. Viewers are often asked to describe artworks on view and to implicitly judge, characterize or categorize the subject. With the current political climate, comments may emerge from all points of view, including racist or otherwise prejudiced ideologies. As stewards of these social spaces, museum educators need tools to responsibly deal with these types of statements. This article offers the societal frame **(1)** — the contextualization of a comment within larger social patterns, assumptions and prejudices — as one method for confronting racist statements made in the museum space.

Within the past year, publications, conferences and journals have focused on the theme of race and inclusion in museum education (Brown, Gutierrez, Okmin & McCullough, 2017). Museum educators Keonna Hendrick and Marit Dewhurst (2017) argue that the field has a "responsibility to interrogate the ways in which racism (often unintentionally) manifests in our interactions with exhibitions, audiences and colleagues if we wish to create inclusive spaces where multiple identities are valued equitably" (p. 102). I am mindful of of how my identities as a white woman and contemporary artist influence my role as a museum educator in these shared social spaces. There is often an expectation of the museum educator to be expert or authoritative; this becomes complicated when the conversation turns to issues of identity.

Kerry James Marshall's Work Provides An Opportunity

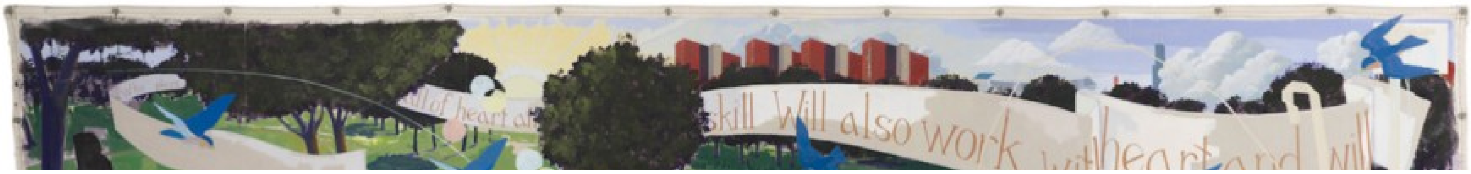
Since artists are often the people processing contemporary themes through their work (Bowley, 2017), the resulting objects or experiences can force people to articulate their own language around issues like race. Museum educators help visitors to process their experience with an artwork and to fold this into a larger conversation. The work of artist Kerry James Marshall requires careful mediation, as it confronts conceptions of black identity. Within the shared social space of the museum, educators have a responsibility to address racist comments this work may elicit.

Marshall (2003) describes the figures as "unequivocally black, emphatically black" (para. 8). Marshall paints the skin of figures with black pigment either straight from the tube, or very subtly mixed to contrast starkly with its surroundings. His representational and deftly painted artworks show black figures in an incredible variety of spaces, indicating many identities and performing many actions. He shows historical figures, cub scouts, barbers and magicians; people are shown sailing, painting, running, cleaning, camping, dancing. In an interview with Dieter Roelstraeter, Marshall (2014) describes his work as a “counter-archive” (p. 28). He says “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” (2014, p. 26). These works complicate traditional representations of blackness, or the lack thereof. Black figures have been historically absent within the museum space, as well as within the larger history of visual representation (Marshall, 2014, p. 23). Marshall’s work creates a new archive of black experiences, and in doing so celebrates black identity and history.

Kerry James Marshall’s artwork came to The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in March 2017 (fig. 1). This exhibition provided much needed space for students to reflect on their own perceptions of race. In my work with K-12 students, they compared the elements of each painting with their perceptions of black identity and representation. They reflected on the action of stereotyping and the history of under-representation of people of color, expressing awe and excitement that the galleries were filled with black figures. Many black and non-black students discussed ways that the work fulfilled and challenged expectations. They often noticed within this conversation that they had a narrow perception of black identity despite the incredible diversity of black people around the world.

Our Existing Pedagogy Proves Limited

At MOCA, we use Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) a conversation-based teaching technique developed by Philip Yenawine and Abigail Housen, to promote multi-layered and open-ended conversations about works of art (Yenawine, 2013). In this pedagogy, a facilitator paraphrases each comment in a conversation, without adding unsolicited information. The educator is encouraged to frame modes of thinking while labeling metacognition (e.g. “You are noticing the materials.”, “You are questioning the intention of the artist.”). However, when teaching from Kerry James Marshall’s recent exhibition, VTS did not confront or address racist statements made by visitors. In fact, my colleagues and I quickly found that our seemingly neutral **(2)** paraphrasing of students’ comments perpetuated anti-black stereotypes.



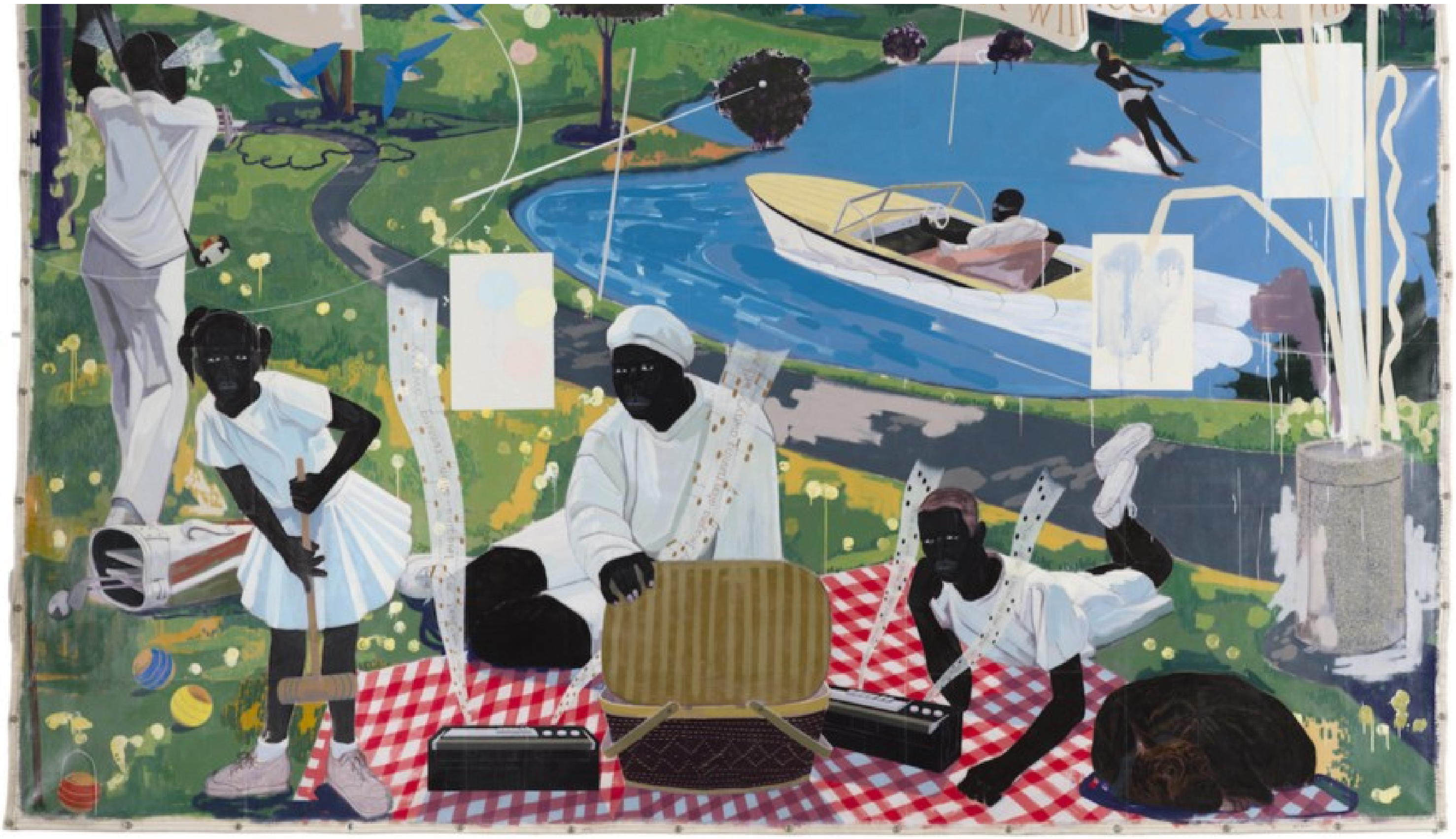


Fig. 2 Past Times, 1997, 1997, Acrylic and collage on unstretched canvas, 114 x 156 in., photo by Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago, Chicago

Visitors generated racist interpretations of Marshall's work, particularly *Past Times, 1997* (fig. 2) which depicts figures picnicking, playing golf and water skiing. In one such conversation during a professional development workshop, a teacher stated that the figures looked like "new money" and seemed uncomfortable in a bourgeois space. Her comment suggested the figures were ostentatiously over-performing their economic status, and without family ties to wealth. In other conversations, students saw the space as unrealistic, "post-racist," or like some kind of "Eden." They were surprised at the black figures playing golf and lounging in what many identified as a country club. Although these comments recognize the existence of systemic racial and economic barriers to black Americans, they also perpetuate racial and classist stereotypes that suggest black people do not play golf, water ski, picnic or belong in the leisure spaces depicted.

If the educator directly confronted the stereotypes inherent in these comments, they might run the risk of shaming the participant, which can block the process of learning (Cushman, 2016). If the comment is not addressed, but repeated neutrally in a paraphrase, the educator risks perpetuating the stereotype, or non-truth. They would misrepresent these non-truths as valid observations built on the text of the image. This proves to be a disservice to the process of having conversations about race. By creating this type of prescriptive identity, MOCA educators would limit the students, their imagined possibilities, and potential relationships. Our language would build a system of untrue normalcies or governing rules that the student can or should exist within.

Because of this conflict, we found we could not promise a "safe space," one that promises a freedom from discomfort, harm, or difficulty. This type of safety feigns neutrality in a non-objective world. Instead, we seek to create a brave space (Arao & Clemens, 2013), one that acknowledges the courageous effort needed to honestly unpack our perceptions of these loaded texts.

The Societal Frame Emerges

In order to create a brave space, we aim to arm ourselves with as many tools as possible to handle each nuanced social situation. Since many of the comments we hear are based on implicit racism, we have experimented with paraphrasing the underlying assumptions of the comment. According to educator and theorist Paulo Freire (1970) "to exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming" (p. 88). By overtly naming the assumptions and stereotypes that many of these comments assume, the educator is able to pose the problem of a new reality for the participants. Thus, my colleagues and I developed the societal frame, a paraphrase that mentions cultural constructs inherent in a comment. We have found that the societal frame gently reflects the existence of a deep-seeded non-truth embedded within comments.

Educators using the societal frame listened for comments that contain these non-truths, such as "black people do not play golf." While the educator listened, they would consider the underlying assumptions this statement was based on, in order to reveal them to the speaker. At MOCA, my colleagues and I begin these frames with active language, describing the students' engagement as "considering," "reflecting," or "thinking about" these constructs. We used key words or phrases such as "tendency," "assumption," and "the proliferation of certain images" in order to zoom out on the convention the comment is built on. This language offers the speaker an opportunity to recognize the harmful patterns in society within which they — and their comment — exist.

A strength of VTS is that, many times, an observation is worked through as the speaker is articulating their own thoughts. When the facilitator paraphrases, it is mirrored back to the speaker. The fact that comments often bely racist or prejudiced belief systems is inevitable, when we know that many of these beliefs are constantly perpetuated by an unjust, white supremacist society within which we all exist (hooks, 1999, p. 113). One way to deal with a relationship to systemic racism is to deprogram deeply entrenched stereotypes by noticing them. In bell hooks' essay, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination" (1992), she describes the process of examining and decoding the impact of racial representations. She says, "deconstructing it, we both name racism's impact and help break its hold. We decolonize our minds and our imaginations" (p. 178). We continue to use the structure of VTS and couple it with societal frame so that we can name the impact of racism directly.

My colleagues and I use the societal frame often in the gallery when teaching from Kerry James Marshall's artworks. At *Past Times* (1997), many visitors described the work as unrealistic. To address these assumptions, we would say something like "You are thinking about how and where black people are often depicted, and noticing that this image bucks those patterns." Another example comes from a conversation about Marshall's *Our Town* (1995) (fig. 3). This painting shows two children, one on a bike and one running; they move towards the viewer through a suburban-looking environment that is partially covered in dark, abstract shadows. During a tour with a class of 5th graders, one student said that "the skin is all black and there is black on the ground too; the badness of the people is infecting the land, like how we litter." I paraphrased his comment by saying "you are thinking about how we as a society often falsely identify black as bad; you are noticing that it is being used here as the pigment of skin as well as on the ground. Perhaps this artwork is referencing the environment."

Fig. 3 Our Town, 1995, Acrylic and printed paper collage on canvas, 100 x 142 in.

There may, at times, be resistance to the societal frame, as students may be attached to their original interpretation or expect to just have their comment rephrased. One time, to confront a comment describing *Past Times* (1997) as full of criminals, I said "you are thinking about how we as a society stereotype black people as criminals or wrongdoers." The boy who had spoken struggled to hold onto his beliefs by attempting to support them with visual information, insisting there were clues alluding to violence. This is a reaction that can sometimes be expected. As Yale professor John Dovidio puts it, "Prejudice is embedded in the way people think, which makes it insidious" (Mitchell, 2015). However, as educators we can elucidate this and hope that, even if the speaker does not "hear" or agree with this interpretation of their speech in the moment, it may permeate their self-image at a later time.

In preparation for using the societal frame, educators must have the context and language to reference social issues, themes and patterns addressed by visitors' comments. Months before the Kerry James Marshall exhibition opened, the Education Department at MOCA explored anti-racist education philosophies, attended workshops, and read writings by Ta-Nehisi Coates, bell hooks and James Baldwin. Once tours began, our staff met weekly to share any problematic comments we encountered and to workshop responses. The possible consequences of each response were imagined and we openly discussed our concerns. We modeled the brave space that we hoped to create in the tours by honestly and vulnerably talking about our identities and experiences. We hoped to "decolonize our minds and imagination" (hooks, 1992, p. 178), or at least begin this process, in preparation for teaching in the galleries.

Reflections, Recommendations and Conclusions

I was grateful for the space to research the issues and to read many perspectives, but, as in so many spiraling spaces of learning, copious research and attempts to aggregate knowledge did not in fact cement the most useful lessons. Only by layering on conversation, experimentation, vulnerable self-expression and reflection, did we find the most effective teaching tools for these works. Through implementing the societal frame — a reminder of the assumptions or cultural constructs within a comment — I was able to facilitate critical reflection for visitors and myself. I have become more aware of the judgments that I make, within the galleries as well as in my outside life. Through noticing my own cultural assumptions, I found myself in the process of "naming racism's impact" and "breaking its hold" (hooks, 1992, p. 178).

The societal frame allows us to facilitate that reflection in the galleries and to shine a light into the dark corners that racism and systematic oppression create. Educators working with any artworks that explore identity and fluidity are invited to try out this method. Those who seek to use the societal frame should employ the following approaches and considerations:

- The societal frame prioritizes anti-oppressive ideas and language — it dispels the myth of neutrality while calling people into discussion.
- Employ this technique if a comment is based on or assumes a non-truth that is deep-seeded in or impacts the fabric of our society.
- Examine your own biases and assumptions through open-ended engagement with peers. Read many perspectives on the issue and discuss this language with your colleagues.
- Recognize that these conversations are ongoing, and time for reflection is essential. Your opinions, contributions and voice will change as your experiences unfold.
- The societal frame should come from a genuine desire to help someone reflect on their assumptions and expand their cultural perceptions, without attaching shame or blame to them. As with any conversation, the nuances of tone and intent are important and transparent to participants.

Museum educators Wendy Ng, Marcus Ware and Alyssa Greenberg (2017) write that part of the ethical motive of our profession is to create "meaningful experiences across lines of social difference… this capacity is widely understood as central to the social value of museums" (p. 142). Museum educators help viewers to knit together multiple perspectives into rich interpretations of often very complicated objects or experiences. This work is crucially important, when the safety and rights of many peoples are threatened by bigoted and prejudicial speech, actions and policies. There is an opportunity within the galleries to foster reflection, to name the deeply entrenched racist, sexist and classist structures that hinder the freedom of all viewers, and to move on to the problems of a new reality.

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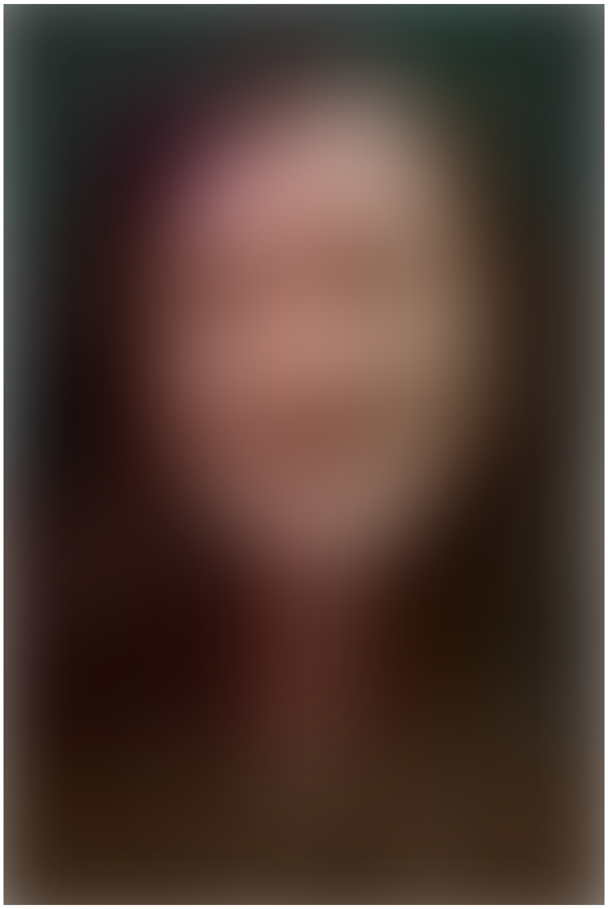

Michelle Jordan Antonisse

Michelle Antonisse is a practicing artist, a museum educator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, (MOCA) LA, a Teaching Artist for Norton Simon Museum and an Artist in Residence with Angels Gate Cultural Center's Artists in Classrooms program. Michelle has *taught in Honduras, West Virginia, China, Brooklyn, Washington, DC and all over the city of Los Angeles. She is has a B.A in Art History from Bard College.*

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Footnotes

(1) This pedagogy formed in collaboration with MOCA educators Alice Bebbington, Madison Brookshire, Jorge Espinosa, Kai Monet, Raquel Rojas, Kabir Singh, Melissa Tran, Jenny Ziomek, and Associate Director of Education Jeanne Hoel.

(2) To read more about the myth of neutrality within museum spaces, see “Museums Are Not Neutral” by Anabel Roque Rodriguez or “Beyond Neutrality” by The Center for the Future of Museums

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