



Seated left to right, Ronnie Nichols, Ulysses Jenkins, Kerry James Marshall and Greg Pitts, 1978.

Higher Learning

by Kerry James Marshall

IN 1978, Ronnie Nichols, Ulysses Jenkins, Greg Pitts and myself were the only black students at what was then called the Otis Art Institute of Los Angeles County. I started the year before, in January 1977; I was an undergrad and the rest of these guys were grad students. I knew of Ulysses because he was a mural painter before he went to art school. I used to see him painting on the Department of Motor Vehicles building off the Harbor Freeway. Greg was the first person I met on campus, in the parking lot after I dropped off my portfolio.

We were the Black Student Union! In '78 we were collaborating on an exhibition at the student gallery. Greg knew about a shoe-shine stand on Figueroa Street, and he suggested we go down there to take a picture for the announcement. I set up the camera and pushed the shutter button and jumped back into my seat before the timer ran out.

The show, "Two Zone Transfer," was based on Ulysses's complicated feelings about identity. Whenever he started talking about things that were really important to him, people would start laughing. He was asking, "When I start to talk about myself and the issues that are relevant to my community, what's funny about that?" The performance piece was broken up into three

dream sequences: a minstrel show, a sermon in a church and a version of James Brown's album *Live at the Apollo*. Ulysses was playing James Brown, of course; Ronnie, Greg and I were the Famous Flames. We made a video of the performance, which Ulysses used to apply for a \$20,000 NEA grant; he was the first artist I knew personally to get one.

Aside from being in Ulysses's performance, I showed a series of drawings based on seeing something in your peripheral vision. The notion of visibility versus invisibility was starting to take shape in my work. I also made some sculptures using dolls to represent children who had been assaulted or sexually abused or murdered. There had been a rash of news stories in L.A. at the time. The work I made was somewhere between social realism and social activism.

It was a really dynamic time. What I miss is that there seemed to be a lot at stake in what we were doing at art school. Where you stood in terms of politics and representation mattered. The kind of work you made mattered. And people were less invested in their position in the market. We had no expectation that we'd participate in anything *like* an art market. So much was in flux. ○

—As told to Leigh Anne Miller

OPENING SOON
"Kerry James Marshall: Mastry," at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Apr. 23–Sept. 25, 2016; Met Breuer, New York, Oct. 25, 2016–Jan. 29, 2017; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Mar. 12–July 2, 2017.

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