

**KERRY JAMES MARSHALL**

American, born Birmingham, AL, 1955

*Brownie*, 1995

Color lithograph on paper, 19 3/4 x 15 1/8 inches

1996.5

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For forty years, Kerry James Marshall has built an illustrious, media-spanning body of work celebrating Black life in the United States. With *Brownie*, Marshall offers a portrait of a young Girl Scout on the cusp of adolescence. Her contemplative visage is crowned with a burst of light resembling a halo, a symbol reserved for saints and deities in the Western art historical tradition. Here Marshall endows this venerative symbol upon a contemporary, everyday person. In her portrait, the young girl wears her uniform with a solemn sense of duty and pride and looks slightly upward toward someone or something out of the frame. The title *Brownie* is a double entendre: on the surface it is a designation of achievement, though it can also be read as a racist slur. The rich red of the title's letters, coupled with the forest-green background and the sitter's opaque jet-black skin, evoke Marcus Garvey's Pan-African flag, a visual symbol that Marshall likely saw as a young person growing up in Watts, Los Angeles, mere blocks from the Black Panther Party's headquarters.

Marshall's reflection on the inherent optimism and majesty of youth and its attendant rituals, however mundane they might seem, brings a vital message that speaks to our Northwestern community today. In the spring of 2019, stickers were found in multiple public locations across the university's Evanston campus with the white-supremacist slogan-cum-dog whistle, "It's okay to be white," one of many examples of the insurgent white nationalism and race-baiting that characterizes our contemporary moment. The United States may have progressed since the Civil Rights era into which Marshall was born, but the idea we are post-racial is a myth. Despite the historic and ongoing violent conditions of white supremacy in the United States, Marshall consistently and ardently demonstrates that Black life matters, Black lives matter, and asks us to reconsider not only our entrenched historical narratives, but our present actions, responsibilities, and possibilities for the future.

—Meghan Clare Considine '20, Art History and Performance Studies

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