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Reclaiming the Nation

Marcus Brutus puts black experience at the heart of America's story



Marcus Brutus, *The UhmERICans* (2018).

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Published 3 July 2019 in [Must See](#)

Every year these four photographs / taught us how English was really a type of trick math: / like the naked Emperor, you could be a King / capable of imagining just one single dream; / or there could be a body, bloody /at your feet—then you could point at the sky; / or you could be a hunched-over cotton-picking shame; / or you could swing from a tree by your neck into the frame.

—Frame by [Robin Coste Lewis](#)

I, too, sing America.

—*I, Too* by [Langston Hughes](#)

Marcus Brutus blends acrylics on canvas as he paints. The fast-drying scenes begin as black-and-white ink sketches, inspired by a mix of pop and internet influences, contemporary reportage with an eye for style, and the fog of history. In 2018, the self-taught artist had America on his mind, and over the course of a month, he created a series of paintings entitled [The UhmERICANS](#), which were shown at Harper's Apartment in New York. The works are modeled on his own experience, identity, and reading of the official accounts of America collected in history books that have often erased black contributions.



Marcus Brutus, *Doc* (2018)

The title is a play on the name of the photographer Robert Frank's seminal photobook *The Americans* (1958). For this series, Brutus rewrote it to place emphasis on the first syllable, which recalls both the speech of some black folks and white women from the valley, evoking dissimilar landscapes, different expanses of identity and memory, giddy pride and pure exasperation. These competing forces, to which *Uhmericans* alludes, illustrate that uneasy, self-contradictory feeling of being of color in America now. When Frank took his black-and-white images as he traveled across the United States by car, he captured on film the hard realities, joys, and everydayness of postwar America. The ethos of Frank's pioneering pictures serves as the conceptual inspiration for Brutus, who channels their spirit to realize an image of America through his eyes.

Who gets to be American?

The series' namesake painting is of two black men. One dons the scarlet uniform of the former football player and kneeling patriot [Colin Kaepernick](#), and the other sports the [Denver Nuggets](#) jersey, over a white cotton shirt, of the retired NBA star [Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf](#). In the 1990s, Abdul-Rauf refused to place hand over heart and stand for the national anthem before games, preferring to use the moment to silently protest American oppression through prayer. In Brutus's painting, the two men, serving as proxies for the feelings of people of color, are stone-faced with their legs crossed, seemingly unfazed by the fans' and the league's reactions and the personal costs of civil disobedience. A large American flag is garishly held up behind them by white hands, framing them for the annals of history. The image suggests that at the heart of Brutus's experimentations is the nagging, age-old inquiry that seems to assert itself in black life during the worst and best of times, where episodes of undemocratic upheaval and entrenchment are constant: Who gets to be American?

Instead of using his canvases as agitprop of overcorrection, or to justify the rightful and humane existence of black Americans at home through representations of black moral uplift, Brutus simply places the black figure at the center of his canvases. The scenes contend with contemporary American history, identity, and art in fabulous and funny narratives, painted to visualize the power to define one's country, culture, and self independent from mainstream norms. There are intimate moments of black love and private defiance, both of which shape blackness as much as any public glory said to represent the entire culture.



Marcus Brutus, *Harlem Meer* (2018)

In some paintings, the settings are filled with anonymous black couples, as in works like *Harlem Meer* or *Jammin' the Blues*. The former portrays a kissing duo and a friend. The latter depicts a couple slow dancing in their living room; inspired by the [1944 jazz documentary](#) it is titled after a [Roy DeCarava](#) black-and-white jazz photograph, which is re-created in a painting on the couple's wall. Such scenes, which situate small, overlooked black histories within grander narratives, are painted from life but not in the traditional sense: Brutus's subjects do not sit for him, holding poses in a studio or on the street. In the manner of the painter [Luc Tuymans](#)—a key figure in rethinking the possibilities of figuration in examining history and memory in the age of new media—Brutus instead finds his subjects in an assemblage of iconic old photographs and references to art, history, film, sports, and fashion.

Allowing for something new on the picture plane

These images have visually and symbolically defined the realities of both black and white life, and Brutus uses them to create new ways of seeing America. The figures are often composites of high and low references, realized on canvas but formed in the artist's imagination. If the scene features the likeness of a historical figure, the subject is always painted by Brutus into fresh, imaginary settings, obliterating their original context and meaning, allowing for something new on the picture plane.



Marcus Brutus, *Self-Portrait #2: An Aggregation of Aesthetics* (2018)

In referencing images we hold close—relying on them as visual shorthands of the real and unreal America, and those we have all but forgotten—Brutus’s series portrays the multiplicity of race, power and identity. It also explores the constructed nature of photography and painting, and the media’s outsize influence on how we recall the past. In purposefully confronting and contradicting the limits of portraiture and thus history, his paintings impel us to confront many people, events, and places at once, in the expanse of a single canvas.

This is seen, for instance, in *Sylvette*, a portrait of a black female figure who is named after Picasso’s muse. Her blonde hair is styled in the popular 1960s “beehive” updo, which made an iconic comeback in the comedy *B*A*P*S* (1997) atop the black actor Halle Berry’s head. In Brutus’s canvas, *Sylvette* is painted as a brown-skin modern Venus of 1990s rave culture, admired for her beauty while she sucks on a pacifier. The painting is one of many where Brutus takes on a familiar America, canonized in political, sport, music, film and art history, as a way to consider how he can enhance, obscure, or toy with the popular images of blackness—and whiteness—to force a new dialogue. He is interested in questions that seem long settled, such as why, when we think collectively of Americanness, do we think of whiteness? Brutus’s works distort the automatic nature of our thoughts, desires, and notions of home.

This remaking of what we know or thought we knew about the images we depend on as default symbols of who we are makes Brutus’s paintings of black cultural figures and private citizens about more than the likenesses they suggest. It seems that Brutus is less interested in the power of the portrait to do the work of telling a symbolic story of a people, though he handles the rendering of every man and woman with a caring and sensitive approach that evokes the paint play of Henry Taylor.

Using his own body as a metaphor for the navigation of spaces

Brutus's meticulously constructed new narratives allude to [Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's](#) expansive and dreamlike oils of playact blackness. Within *The Uhmericans*, Brutus includes several paintings of himself, such as *Self-Portrait*, where Brutus is seen on a ski trip in the historically black vacation enclave of Idlewild, Michigan, and *Self-Portrait #2: An Aggregation of Aesthetics*, a portrayal of himself as the German artist [Martin Kippenberger](#) with a smaller portrait of the former Egyptian president [Gamal Abdel Nasser](#), a black fist, and his own name written in the style of a [Joseph Beuys](#) logo on the wall behind him. These vignettes, interlaying self and society, could be seen as representations of a young black artist trying to find his place in the lineage of art and America. In them, he uses his own body as a metaphor for the navigation of spaces, both psychic and physical, between popular black representation, self-representation, and the truth.



Jordan Downs Raised an Olympian (2018)

Throughout these unfixed and unfolding narratives, which include *Jordan Downs Raised an Olympian*, featuring the uniformed track-and-field star [Florence “Flo-Jo” Griffith-Joyner](#) pridefully parading Old Glory—transposed in a full-circle moment—into a courtyard of the public housing projects where she was raised, Brutus celebrates the complexity of African American lives, beliefs, art, and labor. His portraits privilege black style as a marker of personhood, a way of distinguishing and decorating the space of the body with what it does not have but lusts for. In *Doc*, for instance, the ballplayer Dock Ellis, rendered in a soft palette of browns, is seen standing on the block. His hair is rolled in curlers, which he famously wore in an act of resistance at work on the pitcher's mound, where he once threw a no-hitter strung out on LSD. The yellow, body-hugging cotton T-shirt he sports bears in black ink a slogan taken from a popular 1970s song that became a communal affirmation: “Every Nigger Is a Star.” The phrase is superimposed from another found image of the athlete that Brutus liberally used to heighten the symbolism of his scene. The gesture is one way of amending the cultural records, putting blackness where it had long been excluded, said to not exist at all. In marshaling found imagery, paint, and language, Brutus further unburdens us of the spurious notion that black people were not significant players in every aspect of the American story.

This essay is drawn from the monograph, “[Marcus Brutus: The Uhmericans](#)” which will shortly be published

by Harper's Books