

## Sound Thoughts on Art – Season 1, Episode 4

### **Jasiri X and *Untitled (Man)***

National Gallery of Art

CELESTE HEADLEE: The music in this episode contains language that some listeners may find offensive. Listener discretion is advised.

Welcome to *Sound Thoughts on Art*, a podcast from the National Gallery of Art. I'm your host, Celeste Headlee.

Art can engage all of our senses. We hear music. We see a photo. We walk around a sculpture. We taste fine food. Standing close to a favorite painting, we can even smell the wood or oil paint. But it's when our senses work together that things get really interesting. When we listen, what do we see in our mind's eye? When we stand in front of a painting, what do we hear? This podcast lives in that convergence.

In every episode, you'll learn about a work in the National Gallery's collection, from someone who knows the art and its context. You'll also hear a musician respond to that work through sound, creating a dialogue between the visual art and music. *Sound Thoughts on Art* tells the stories of how we experience art and how it connects us.

In this episode, we explore what it means to be an activist. To be an activist in 2021 could entail any number of actions, on scales massive and tiny. For artist Kerry James Marshall, it means creating pieces of art that depict Black Americans, and particularly black men, with complexity and beauty—both traits that traditionally are more often ascribed to white artists and subjects.

*Untitled (Man)*, a woodcutting he created in 2017, is just one example in a decades-long catalog of work. Though carved and inked with careful precision, the titular man raises more questions than he gives answers. His face could be smiling or grimacing. He could be hugging himself out of self-love or protecting his body. He could be in bondage.

Musician and activist Jasiri X sees himself in the *Untitled (Man)*. And like many people of color, he sees several versions of himself—the one he presents to the world and the one that feels most authentic.

And when Jasiri looks at the *Untitled (Man)*, he revisits a long-standing internal debate. Are artists too inherently privileged to be true activists? And if not, should an activist ever really take a vacation? When we asked Jasiri to respond to *Untitled (Man)* in music, he revisited these questions—and some music he wrote when they were front and center in his mind.

Tell me about this particular work of art and what you thought of, I guess, when you first saw it.

JASIRI X: Yeah. So this is a piece by Kerry James Marshall called *Untitled*. And when I saw it, I saw depth in it. I mean, it's a piece of a Black man. But I kind of saw this, I guess, duality in it. You can interpret it in different ways.

You can interpret it as somebody smiling. You could interpret it as somebody kind of going through some things. It wasn't something that you just looked at and was like, OK, this means this. It was different layers to the piece. And that's what really, I guess, struck me about it.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

[MUSIC - JASIRI X, "LIVE FROM CAPTIVA"]

(SINGING) I'm just breaking in they shoes, saying peace, even *As-Salaam Alaikum* to the fools. Look up.

[END PLAYBACK]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Before we hear more from Jasiri X, though, let's learn more about Kerry James Marshall and *Untitled (Man)*, from the National Gallery's own James Meyer.

JAMES MEYER: *Untitled (Man)* is an image of a single person of African descent. His arms are clasped by his hands in a kind of crossing way. And he is staring out at a viewer. And his mouth is open. We can see his teeth. And he's staring at us.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Can you give us the context of this particular work? And what do you think of the year and the time in which he made this?

JAMES MEYER: Well, the Black Lives Matter movement had been underway for several years—thinking, of course, about police violence against persons of color, particularly against Black men. So I think that that's the timely context for this work in 2017.

But the artist has long been depicting Black men in different states of being—really, throughout his career, going back to the 1980s. So we have to think about this work within a longer arc of his career.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Do you think this piece looks modern? If you had just seen it without knowing who had done it, would you know when?

JASIRI X: No! I would not. And to be honest, like, I would not think it was modern. You know what I'm saying? Off top. Like, as I look closely at it, I can say, yeah. But to me, that's the power of this piece. I think this piece can exist—you could kind of say, oh, this might be like a black-and-white photo from the '20s or '30s or '40s.

But I think the sentiment that I get from this picture is timeless. To me, it encapsulates the experience of a Black man in America, in my interpretation. So the sentiment is timeless. So you can take this and put it where? Put it in the '20s, the '30s, the '40s.

There hasn't been an era yet—we hope to create one—where we can be completely free and liberated. And so you can put that in any era at that point.

CELESTE HEADLEE: I wonder if you've tried putting your arms in the same position as this guy's arms are. And the reason I ask that is because, when I tried to recreate that position, it forces you to hold yourself quite tightly. And I wonder what you think of that body language. How are we to interpret the way he's holding himself?

JAMES MEYER: Well, an artist, of course, arranges a body sometimes in ways that are not naturalistic, realistic to capture some kind of meaning or feeling. Certainly, you can grab your arms in this way, if you

want to. But it's an unusual position. It's not something we do. It seems defensive. It seems like he's being attacked. It seems like he's under duress.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

[MUSIC - JASIRI X, "BAY HOUSE 1"]

(SINGING) The artist surreal, the code that broke the seal, the embodiment of God in the physical.

[END PLAYBACK]

CELESTE HEADLEE: So how do you see this piece, then? I mean, do you think he is smiling?

JASIRI X: So I see it several ways. I think you can look at it—and this is what I like about it—I think you can interpret it several ways. So I see like almost like a smile through hardship and trials. That's kind of glassy. You know what I'm saying? So I see kind of like a resilience to it.

And even how he has his hands positioned, it's almost like—to me, it's a resemblance of like a straitjacket. What I saw into it was this struggle of a Black man in a system that seeks to criminalize us, that seeks to kind of hold us back to where we can't really be our full, true, authentic selves. Because to be that would be—to some people, it would be scary. To some people would be, it would be disrespectful or too flamboyant or too loud or whatever.

How he's standing and kind of like where his arms—like, that's not necessarily a natural, where you have your arms like that. You know what I'm saying? To me, that's symbolic of being kind of restrained. And so to me, it's like how somebody will say like, "How are you doing today?" "Oh, it's all good. I'm good." But like you might be fighting inside, you know what I'm saying?

And you don't want to take the time to say, well, really this is how it's happening. Let me sit you down and tell you how I really feel. And so to me, I look at that as that's that face that you put on. When I occupy spaces that are—particularly, art spaces are very white—very white and privileged.

I don't know necessarily if I want to use the word impress, but you want to make these connections, because of what it could mean to your career. And so that's kind of what I see. And that's a little bit of what I've experienced, personally.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So, James, not every artist is also an activist, right? But that is definitely true of Marshall, who has been pretty vocal about political issues and his activism through his art. How does his activism influence what he chooses to create?

JAMES MEYER: It's important to understand that Kerry Marshall is of an age where he saw a great deal of activism as a child. He was born in 1955 in Birmingham, Alabama. And as a child, he was in a city where the civil rights movement really expressed itself, quite famously. He was there when the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed.

His family moves to California, to Los Angeles, in 1963, when he's eight years old. And he sees the Watts riots with his own eyes in 1965. He also saw the Black Panthers in his neighborhood. They had their headquarters in South Central Los Angeles where he lived.

So he grew up with a very keen awareness of activism. And that has informed his work iconographically—there's paintings about the civil rights era, about civil rights memory—but also in

terms of his own attitude of sort of getting his images into the world, into the museum, but beyond the museum—images of Black people where they are often absent.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So tell me about the pieces that you've chosen to accompany this work. And maybe we could start with "Bay House"—why this particular piece goes well with this piece from Kerry James Marshall.

JASIRI X: Right. So it's a couple of reasons. I think the first reason I kind of looked at this set of music is because this was actually music I created at a residency I did with the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. So it was kind of connected to art in a way. It was the first time I was really able to go and worry about creating art. Most of the time, I'm creating art in the midst of trying to do 101 other things, you know?

And so that was one thing that made me think about it. But also I think, in both pieces, I kind of talk about this duality of kind of being able to do what I love to do, but then kind of that internal fight. So "Bay House 1" for me was about me kind of talking about this internal fight.

And so that was actually the first song that I wrote at the Rauschenberg residency. That was the name of my room.

So it's different houses. There's the beach house. There's the print house. And so I was in the bay house, and my room number was 1.

So one of the things that inspired this song for me was, inside of my room—Robert Rauschenberg liked to read, so he would have bookcases all over the different properties. So inside my room, I had this bookcase. It was just all these unique different books—from books on dreams, or books on art.

So he also had the book *Without Sanctuary*, which is photography of lynchings in America. And so all of these things kind of came together as I started writing. And I was by myself. Like, I was by myself a lot.

So being there kind of alone with my thoughts with these books. And that's what I produced.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Here's "Bay House" by Jasiri X, uninterrupted.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

[MUSIC - JASIRI X, "BAY HOUSE 1"]

(SINGING) Thoughts of a prophet inside a mind that's diabolic,  
The relationship can be described as symbiotic.  
Rap's Rauschenberg throwaways are Jackson Pollocks,  
Blinded every time I decided to face my promise.  
Posting highlights, ESPN *Sportscenter* of my life,  
They never see me dancing with the devil in the twilight,  
They only see me chilling turning lemons into limelight.  
Always given opinions, every asshole's got hindsight.

If life was just inside a booth in front of live mics,  
I would be Christ-like.  
The white knight of the nightlife,  
Enveloped in darkness without a night light.

The walking dead look lifelike, its zeitgeist.  
Big city, bright lights, Las Vegas on fight night.  
I travel through the chaos like Muhammad in night flight,  
Vampires, fright night, Black Death, and white flight.  
No pen and pad, I typewrite.

The art of surreal, the code that broke the seal.  
The embodiment of God in the physical, on the wheel.  
Soldiers that's in the field, the kings behind the shield  
When icons turn into pythons and start to peel.  
I'm the product of the pain of seeing my parents killed,  
Vigilante Carlito Bringante, hand me the steel.  
When the highest of the tyrants and giants are made to kneel,  
At last, I can take off my mask and be revealed.

Write in Coptic, not hyperbolic, it's hydroponic,  
Kid's conscious like Dap Dunlap at Mission College.  
It's Adonis after 400 years of hidden knowledge.  
I stand before man as a god, not mythologic.  
Light up the horizon, a living comet.  
Luxury, money, good homes, and friendships—I live His promise,  
So my blood and my sweat and my tears are written doctrine,  
The glory of Allah and the sin of a risen prophet. It's I.

Is it split personality or man's duality  
Or human fallacy to just assume the analogy?  
If my true mentality is to be in tune with the galaxy,  
Why should I be satisfied with a view and a salary?  
Would you love what's in hip-hop if you knew the reality?  
When they turn the cameras off and start removing the batteries,  
I try to tell myself what I'm pursuing is mastery  
And hope that I'm not losing my sanity.

[END PLAYBACK]

CELESTE HEADLEE: What do you think the feeling is of "Bay House 1"? Like, what's the emotion?

JASIRI X: I think it's very, like, reflective. For me it's kind of the struggle between my best self, in a sense, of this artistic part that I feel like, man, I'm very well at, and then maybe you would say my worst self, which is some of the things I struggle with personally. And I think when you're by yourself in isolation, there's a tendency to do that self-introspection.

So I definitely think the music—it's sort of up-tempo, but it's a feeling that the music gives you, to me. I write to the production. Like, I normally don't come up with an idea until I hear what the beat is saying and the emotion the beat is giving me. And so that was like—the melody and the music calls me to write, I would say, introspectively.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: So let's talk about the next piece, "Live from Captiva"?

JASIRI X: Yes.

CELESTE HEADLEE: How is that one different emotionally from the "Bay House" piece?

JASIRI X: So "Live from Captiva"—so Captiva is actually where Robert Rauschenberg—that's the name of the town, is Captiva, Florida. If you kind of look—and like I said, my interpretation of the expression of the *Untitled (Man)* was kind of like how I felt in Captiva.

There was a part of me that was really—of course, I'm honored to be there. I'm down there. It's a beautiful estate. I have access to everything that I want or need. I can kind of just focus on music. We had like a chef. So like, lunch and dinner was like—that was the only requirement was, like, for you to come in lunch and dinner. It was all these other amazing artists that were there.

But there was another part of me that felt guilty being there—that felt like, man, I'm here, and I'm in this kind of paradise situation. And folks back where I'm from—I live in a place called Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh is one of the poorest inner-city Black communities in the country.

So I'm like, man, I'm on this beach, you know what I mean? I'm like, I have all this access. And it's like the majority of people in my community will never see anything like this, don't have access to this, don't have access to these opportunities. So it was also a feeling of, like, guilt being there. I don't know if you understand that. You know what I'm saying?

CELESTE HEADLEE: I do understand that.

JASIRI X: Right. So there's a line in "Live from Captiva" where I'm like, "Did Dr. King have a vacay? Did the Black Panthers have a play day?" You know what I mean? So I'm asking, like, is it OK, almost, to take this time to just kind of have this experience? And I think as an artist, it gives you access to these places and spaces that a lot of people just never have access to.

So I often feel that when I walk in, that I'm not there just representing myself, that I'm representing a community. And part of my responsibility is to not only take that experience back—in some way, help to open the doors for other people in my community to have those same experiences.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So connect that back for me to the piece of art. And something made you think of both your own piece, which is talking about, I guess, the guilt of enjoying something that's essentially good—

JASIRI X: Right.

CELESTE HEADLEE: —to this piece by Marshall. Why?

JASIRI X: So like I said, what I see is—and to me that's what I really like about this piece, because I think it's open to interpretation. It's like to what you see. To me this is what dope art is. It's like, you look at it, and it gives you an emotion.

So for me, it's almost like a mirror, in a sense. Like I said, what I see is kind of a reflective expression. But at the same time, the position of the hands in the piece kind of show me almost like you're trapped in. It's like society in a sense won't let you break through and be kind of like your full self.

And so that's kind of how I related to—a lot of times when I walk into these experiences, even going down there, it's like I have to be reserved in even how I interact with the artists around me. You know what I'm saying?

If I'm my real, full, authentic self, somebody might get offended, or somebody might take it the wrong way, or somebody might see me as a threat—or I might mess up this opportunity for another artist coming from behind me. So I have to be reserved. Like, I have to hold myself back in a sense. You feel me?

CELESTE HEADLEE: Yeah.

JASIRI X: And that's kind of what I saw in this piece.

CELESTE HEADLEE: What are we to make of the Black person, the Black American, especially, through Marshall's eyes?

JAMES MEYER: I would say he's interested in Black subjects as a whole, including diasporic subjects, not just Americans, and representing a range of subjectivities and feelings—duress and trauma, but also a kind of satisfaction. Later on in his career, he did images of couples walking on the beach, looking sort of rather contented. So a range of responses, a range of subjects, not just one traumatized subject.

He's trying to reach different audiences. And he's also, of course, trying to reach the museum. He sees the museum as the destination of his art because museums have too few images of Black individuals on their walls.

JASIRI X: When you're Black in America in certain spaces—you know, when I left college, I was a mortgage broker. My given name is Jasiri. But I felt like if I used my name Jasiri—most of the time, you're talking to people on the phone. They were automatically kind of like, oh, I'm ethnic—what is that? What does that mean? So I just use J period.

So then you don't know. You don't have those—when you hear Jasiri, it's automatically like, oh, that's foreign sounding. That's exotic sounding.

CELESTE HEADLEE: What did that feel like? What did it feel like to replace your name with J?

JASIRI X: Well, I mean, it's kind of like the brother in the picture. It's like, you got to hold yourself back. And I think that's been a lot of the experience—not even just Black people. Like, I'm sure there's cases of women in certain environments, where you feel like you got to put on a certain face. And in the Black community, we call it a code switching.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Yeah.

JASIRI X: And so it's like, I can't come into the environment. I can't dress the way I want. I can't speak the way I want. I can't be fully, authentically me because somebody might take it in a different way. And so, like I said, I see—particularly the positions of his hands almost I see it as, like, to me, it's symbolic of like a straitjacket, and like you gotta hold yourself back.

To me, the expression is like, I'm alive. I'm here. I'm blessed to be here. However, I can't be my full and true self. And that's what I interpret in this piece.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Here's "Live from Captiva" by Jasiri X, one more time, uninterrupted.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

[MUSIC - JASIRI X, "LIVE FROM CAPTIVA"]

(SINGING) My cup runneth over me,  
Blessings leaving stains over the upholstery.  
Feeling guilty seeing the pain of those close to me,  
Hopefully, they'll feel this like it was dopamine.  
APDTA for looking over me  
Gave me food, I still had to cook the groceries,  
Pushing deep inside those universal ovaries,  
Sowing seeds, 10 years later I'm still growing dreams.

This is live from Captiva.  
Who else got a fellowship from spitting that either  
Black preacher adapt to crack speaker  
If you haven't struck gold then you need to rap deeper.  
You can take it as a jewel,  
It's just universal law, I'm not making up the rules.  
No, I'm not a prophet, I'm just breaking in they shoes,  
Saying peace, even *As-Salaam Alaikum* to the fools.  
Look up.

Did Malcolm X take a vacay?  
Did Dr. King have a play day?  
Did the Panthers throw BBQs in their heyday,  
Where everybody partied no need for the AK?  
Wading in the waves, but my minds on the struggle.  
Relax? All I know is the grind and the hustle.  
Wanna bring me where it's safe to make me blind to the trouble  
Domesticate a nigga, take the lion out the jungle.

This is live from Captiva  
Where I'm from, it's cold, to survive they blast heaters.  
Let them guns blow and then ride like fast cheetahs,  
In my hood, them souls don't die from bad fevers.  
This is for my sister Janese  
And all those that we lost in the streets.  
Is the cost for peace more or less than the cost for a piece  
And will I start a riot when I let it off at the beach?  
Blow.



[END PLAYBACK]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Thanks once again to Jasiri X for joining us. You can relisten to the music he shared with us on our website. Just go to [nga.gov/podcast](https://nga.gov/podcast).

*Sound Thoughts on Art* is a production of the National Gallery of Arts Music Department. The show was created by Danielle DeSwert Hahn, the National Gallery's head of music programs, and mixed and produced by Maura Currie. You can find more information about everything in today's episode at the National Gallery's website, [nga.gov/podcast](https://nga.gov/podcast).

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