

228 HOT! MARCUS JAHMAL WHEN NIGHT COMES, WE SEE MORE CLEARLY

TEXT BY
LOÏC LE GALL

A black police officer appears to be brandishing an object. It is not identifiable and disappears from the frame, evading the gaze of the viewer. It is, one assumes, a weapon. The man in uniform is screaming, his head covered by a strange hat. The description of the scene stops there, a vast colored background enclosing the scene.

We are looking at a painting by Marcus Jahmal titled *Black and Blue*. An indication of colors which, for an Anglophone, immediately calls to mind a violent beating. A question arises: is this man an allegory of oppression or of courage? Is he defending someone, or aggressing them? In the collective imagination, the American police officer is a deeply ambiguous figure. Rendered heroic after 9/11, the figure has, in the United States of Donald Trump, once again lost its aura, evoking racism, clumsiness, and abuse of power. Worldwide, the image of the police officer aiding the wounded, streaked with soot after the fall of the Twin Towers, has given way to the image of those who killed Trayvon Martin, or of the white Texas officers on horseback pulling a black suspect at the end of a rope, linking a whole movement—Black Lives Matter—to this collective imagery. However, in Marcus Jahmal's painting, the police officer is black. The work neither denounces nor magnifies its subject matter; it observes the symptoms of an ambivalent daily life and addresses the serious matters underlying it. The spectator thus adds their experiences to and projects their own ideals onto Jahmal's figures. For the most part, Marcus Jahmal draws his subjects

from the streets of Brooklyn where he was raised. He surveyed the vast New York neighborhood extensively, which over the years has gradually become an inexhaustible catalogue of pop culture and gentrification. Very early on, he joined the ranks of the New York graffiti artists, considering from a personal viewpoint the design of the city, its architecture, and, of course, its population. This seminal experience marked his approach to painting. Generally working illegally, a street artist is forced to create quickly, and is often obliged to schematize his or her compositions. The first time that one sees a work by Marcus Jahmal, one is struck by these characteristics—the rapidity of execution and the search for the quintessence of form—as well as by its impetuous quality of style. Bright tones, clear contours, and large blocks of color give an impression of spontaneity and of passionate engagement. It is a type of painting from which calculation is absent, rushing instead into a sincere sensitivity. It is necessary to underline an essential particularity, one that has become rare in the hyper-professionalized and internationalized world of contemporary art: Marcus Jahmal, autodidact, has never attended an art class. He trained his eye at the Brooklyn Museum, tirelessly visiting the institution that stands next to his childhood neighborhood, where he paid particular attention to the exhibitions of Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, but also those of Takashi Murakami. Among the work of these three artists, he was particularly struck by the figures of humans and hybrids. Jahmal's figures fix the viewer in an attitude of expectation and transition. He often paints



Black and Blue, 2018
All images Courtesy: the artist and Almine Rech Gallery



Bowler hat, 2017 (opposite) Solid Ghost, 2018 (p. 231)





Gato salvaje, 2018 (p. 232) Iron and Copper, 2017 (opposite)



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people walking, masculine figures that could be likened to self-portraits, and characters with composite faces. He combines a perennial humanity with a petrification, generated by the utilization of masks of all kinds, rendered more striking by his distinct use of color. The theme of the hybrid stems from this explosion of the human form. Marcus Jahmal presents us with an incredible bestiary, astonishing not in its choice of animals but rather in their combination with the human figure and in the mythologies that are thus evoked. Jackal heads call to mind as much Anubis, the half-human, half-animal god of the Egyptian pantheon, as figures evoking Incan masks. If, according to Jahmal, the fragmentation of the human aims to “play down the notion of human superiority to animals,” it also acts as a testament to a desire for experimentation. The improvisation and fragmentation in Jahmal’s work resonates with that of jazz music. Sound and music play an important role in both the artist’s creative process and in his choice of themes. Jazz and its history are intimately associated with that of Jahmal’s; his grandfather was a professional trumpet player who was often on tour with musicians such as B.B. King. Earlier on, Jahmal presented musical staves in his paintings, as well as using drums in humanized, ready-made sculptures. Recently, during his solo exhibition at CAC Passerelle in Brest, he paid tribute to Fats Domino and to New Orleans Creole culture. If the influence of jazz culture is apparent in Jahmal’s work, that of Creole culture is even more significant. The artist attests to the importance of Creole cultural heritage in his practice, specifically that of Louisiana. However, rather than assimilating the notions of “Creole” or of “Voodoo,” Jahmal plays with their codes, utilizing an iconography close to that of Voodoo, presenting scenes of incantation or skulls, as well as titles like *Trippy Bayou* or *VooDoo floater*. The skull motif has returned frequently over the years, calling as much to mind Mexican customs such as the celebrated festival of *Día de muertos*—a holiday with which he is well acquainted, having grown up on a block populated primarily by Latinos—as the ancestral tradition of vanities, as well as Christian symbols such as the apparition of the skull of Adam on Mount Golgotha. In this respect, the painting *Our Ancestors Were Here* is emblematic. A black foot vigorously squashes a skull in a Surrealist landscape; from this image, diverse interpretations may be drawn, from a symbol of the black struggle against oppression to the death of religion. In the same vein, Marcus Jahmal presents skeletons, often in joyful attitudes, drinking in the street or charming animals, in a reinvented tradition of the Voodoo iconography of Baron Samedi, a loving and entertaining spirit who guides the dead towards another life.

In his youth, Jahmal worked for a video-game company. It was there that he discovered the work of Federico Fellini, which would go on to have a profound and lasting influence on his practice. When business at the video-game company began to flounder, Jahmal was forced to leave his job, taking with him a copy of a work that had fascinated him: Fellini’s *Il Libro dei Sogni* [The Book of Dreams]. Today, it is one of the first books that one notices in his studio. It is an unusual collection; in it, the Italian filmmaker, following a psychologist’s advice, recorded his dreams, writing them down or drawing them for more than thirty years. The result is a sketchbook revealing a catalogue of fears and fantasies, resembling a large comic book. Marcus Jahmal’s painting bears the same type of stigma as this atypical work, vacillating between obsession and fascination. Often, the subjects and the forms of the American painter are repeated, redrawn or erased. His practice generates a large number of *pentimenti*, which is explained on the one hand by the absence of preparatory drawings, and on the other, by the impulsive creativity that sets him apart. It is not uncommon to leave the artist in his studio at night in the process of finishing a large figure, only to return in the morning to discover a uniform background in its place, revealing a vague ghost. Another personality, not often cited in the world of contemporary art, also arises in Jahmal’s discourse and in certain forms seen in his work: that of the French writer-illustrator Roland Topor. Both artists share a taste for a fantastical banality and borrow an inventive vocabulary that recalls the concepts of Surrealism. In his *Pense-bêtes*, Topor wrote that “when night comes, we see more clearly.”¹ This idea brings to light an essential facet of Marcus Jahmal’s art: that which is underlying and hidden will inevitably emerge.

1. “la nuit venue, on y verra plus clair.” Roland Topor, *Pense-bêtes*, 1992.

