

“Art is Always Around Us”: The Cultural Stewardship of BBF Family Services



Installation view, *Kerry James Marshall: Untitled (Circulation)*, at BBF Family Services, 2021.

Photo by Nathan Keay

A conversation with Joseph Kellman Family Foundation art advisor Clinee Hedspeth

In celebration of Kerry James Marshall's *Untitled (Circulation)* on view at BBF Family Services as part of the ongoing *Toward Common Cause: Art, Social Change, and the MacArthur Fellows Program at 40*, we spoke with Kellman Family Foundation art advisor Clinee Hedspeth about the development and importance of this work. Joseph Kellman, who founded both

the Kellman Family Foundation and BBF Family Services, has played a crucial role in ongoing community and philanthropic efforts across Chicago.

As part of *Toward Common Cause*, the [Smart Museum](#) has partnered with organizations and venues across Chicago. We are thrilled to be working with BBF Family Services and look forward to continued partnership and collaboration to conceive and deliver arts programs that reach and engage audiences on the South Side and citywide.

What role does art play in the mission of BBF Family Services?

BBF is a reflection of the community—and the community, North Lawndale, has a longstanding history of artmaking as a way to express their unique culture and lived experiences. Before it was predominantly African American, the neighborhood was primarily a Jewish residential community which produced craftsmen and artisans in significant numbers. Since its inception, BBF has had an art component—and by art component, I don't just mean after-school arts and crafts. I mean holding artist talks, hosting temporary exhibitions, and taking students to museums and galleries. Art has always been part of the BBF program. BBF was also home to the Lamont Zeno Theater, an award-winning theater arts program that showcased the talents of North Lawndale's youth.

I'm curious about the balance at BBF—is the focus more on presenting artwork to the community or participating in artwork?

I think it's both. There are the services they provide—these

amazing wraparound services, services really developing and encouraging the growth of young people and the entire community. The way BBF provides a space where art is seen as an everyday experience is what I think is just fantastic. A lot of times you introduce art formally, but art is always around us—it's just a matter of whether we recognize it or define it as such. BBF makes art very commonplace. If you show the program participants art as an everyday experience, then it almost saturates the mind and hopefully the essence of their experience there.

How does the work of Kerry James Marshall fit in at BBF? Why this partnership?

Beyond the obvious—he's an artist that the kids can identify with, and the kids can identify visually with his work—the mission of BBF is one of excellence, and demanding excellence, and being a staple in the community. Like the Smart Museum of Art, it's also a space of knowledge transfer and cultural stewardship.

I think museums ultimately are about cultural stewardship. Most people might not think of BBF as being cultural stewards, but “cultural steward” doesn't mean just being great preservers and interpreters of art. It means actually encouraging people to engage with art and culture and giving them the opportunity to do that.

Can you tell me a bit about the collaboration between BBF and the Smart Museum?

Oftentimes with partnerships, there seems to be more of a

dominant hierarchy, and I haven't experienced that with the Smart, and I don't think anyone from BBF or the Kellman Foundation has experienced that either. Even the planning of the installation enhanced the success of the actual experience for a lot of the viewers—to know that it was a conversation between the organizations and that all parties are advocating for this really amazing experience for the community.

Kerry James Marshall has built this exhibition around the BBF building, which is a departure from the traditional gallery setup of art presentation. How has the structure shaped the process and the art itself?

The building is very unique, there's nothing like it in the area. When Joseph Kellman was building it, the critics said, "Why would you build so much glass in *this* neighborhood?" And clearly they didn't do their research, because that's where Joseph had grown up. He made his business success in the glass business. So why not? Why not put something so very transparent and encouraging and inviting and yet fragile in this neighborhood?

There's this beautiful courtyard inside—it's glass all the way up, and it's green, and it encompasses the entire building, and the building is wrapped around that courtyard. The installation is vinyl on the windows, which I think, if Joseph Kellman were still alive, he would appreciate. When the kids come out of classrooms or meeting rooms, and even the Kellman Foundation offices, you have to see it. I think that's going to be very interesting because seeing something over and over—that's going to do something to your mind and your

brain.

How is this exhibition significant to the art conversation in Chicago and beyond?

I think it's historic. Many people know Kerry James Marshall's name and work; I think some will be shocked that his work is in this space. I think the placement of the work here is going to cause people to really listen to how Kerry talks about his work. It's going to highlight how layered he is as an artist and how layered his work is.

And for people to go to North Lawndale—a lot of people don't even know where North Lawndale is, they don't know the history of the space. They're going to be in a community that was occupied by at least two groups that have had horrific historical experiences and trauma. And to have something there by an artist who is, in my opinion, one of the most important artists of our time... They're seeing that in a space where people are essentially suffering from a system that does not value them. And that's historic.

And it's not done in a way that's voyeuristic. It's not encouraging people to come look at this beautiful art in this very dark space in this suffering community. It's showing that this is what comes out of these communities, this is the creativity and the awesomeness and the beauty that comes out of these communities. And so, yes, you get to see it in your spaces, downtown, the Gold Coast, and elsewhere, but this work wouldn't be where it is today if it wasn't for these communities, these neighborhoods, and these experiences.

This interview has been edited and condensed for publication.

Kerry James Marshall's Untitled (Circulation) opened at BBF Family Services on September 29, 2021. BBF is open Monday through Friday from 10am to 2pm; groups of more than 6 people must call to make arrangements. [Learn more and plan your visit.](#)

Written by Ellen Wiese

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