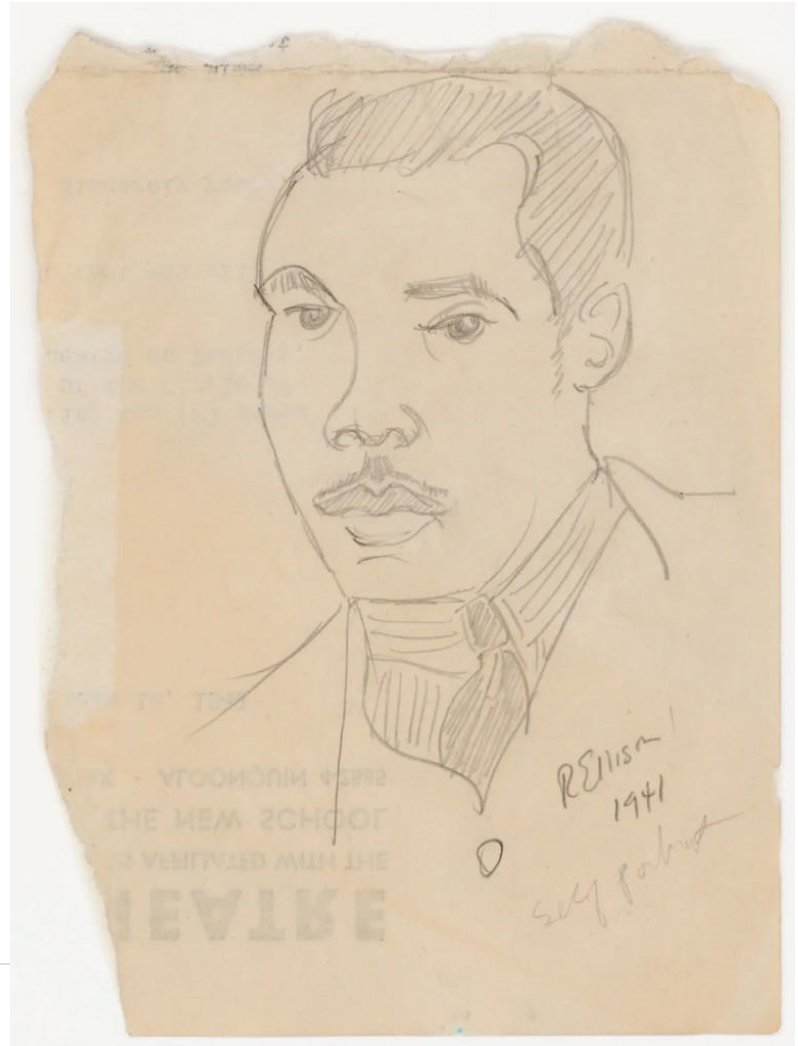




T BOOK CLUB

Nearly 70 Years Later, ‘Invisible Man’ Is Still Inspiring Visual Artists

Ralph Ellison’s classic 1952 novel has influenced not just writers but photographers, sculptors and painters, all grappling with what it means to be seen.



A self-portrait by Ralph Ellison from 1941. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, © The Ralph and Fanny Ellison Charitable Trust

By Nicole Rudick

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This essay is part of T’s Book Club, a series of articles and events dedicated to classic works of American literature. Click [here](#) to R.S.V.P. to a virtual conversation about “Invisible Man,” to be led by Adam Bradley and held on June 17.

In 1952, the photographer Gordon Parks worked with Ralph Ellison to translate the writer’s novel, “Invisible Man,” published earlier that year, into a series of images for Life magazine. One of the photographs depicts the book’s nameless narrator in his retreat beneath the city, amid the 1,369 light bulbs that, he tells the reader, “illuminated the blackness of my invisibility.” In Parks’s photograph, the lights are arrayed on the walls behind the figure in a modernist and rhythmic arrangement that reads as an extension of the music emanating from his two turntables (presumably Louis Armstrong, whom the narrator listens to while eating vanilla ice cream

and sloe gin). The world up above — represented by tiny lights nearly swallowed up by the night — barely exists by comparison. But his clean, well-lighted place is a beginning, not an ending. He is biding his time. “A hibernation,” he says, “is a covert preparation for a more overt action.”

This sort of creative overlap wasn’t unusual for Ellison, who occasionally worked as a photographer himself and was steeped in the arts of his day. After leaving the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama (where he studied music and played trumpet) for New York in 1936, he apprenticed with the Black sculptor Richmond Barthé, and by midcentury found himself among a cadre of Black artists and writers, including Langston Hughes, Elizabeth Catlett, Albert Murray, Dorothy West, Richard Wright, Roy DeCarava and Romare Bearden. Bearden’s collages, in particular, represented Ellison’s artistic ideals. In an essay on the artist published in 1968 to accompany an exhibition at the Art Gallery of the State University of New York at Albany, Ellison wrote admiringly of the way Bearden’s work gives voice to the Black experience while also exploring the possibilities of form. The artist’s magisterial treatment of image and technique — in his textural collage-paintings and projections expressive of jazz and blues, Southern rural life and Northern cities, ritual and myth — allowed him, Ellison wrote, “to express the tragic predicament of his people without violating his passionate dedication to art as a fundamental and transcendent agency for confronting and revealing the world.”



Ellison, circa 1950, in New York City's St. Nicholas Park, photographed by his wife, Fanny McConnell Ellison.

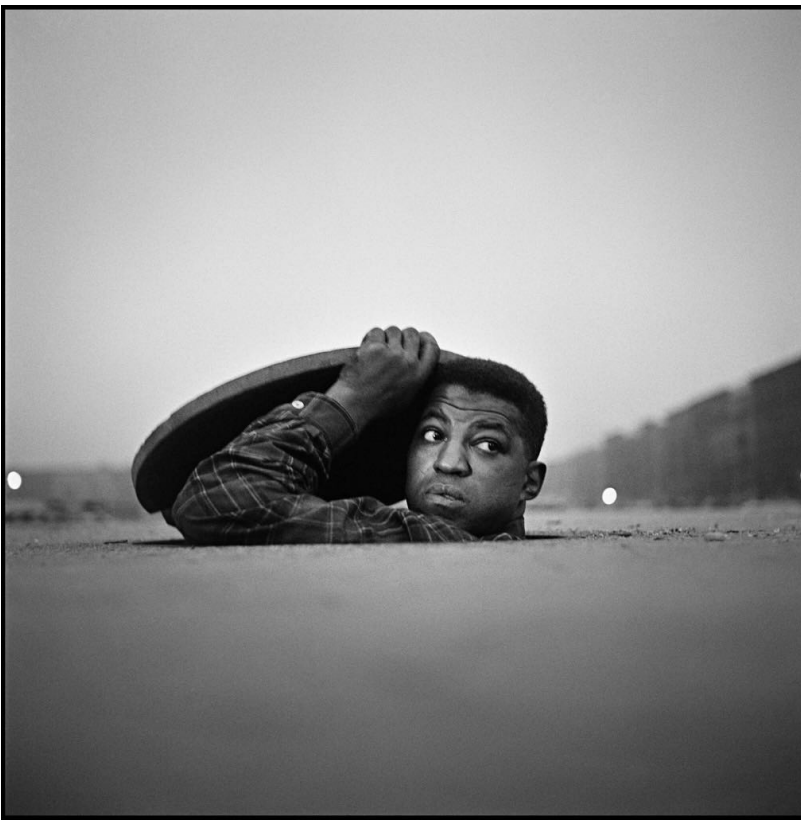
Fanny McConnell Ellison, Ralph Ellison
Papers, Prints and Photographs Division,
Library of Congress. © The Ralph and Fanny
Ellison Charitable Trust

Ellison rejected art as sociological study or as a means for strictly realist representation. Instead, he looked for a lyricism that could capture the many facets of Black life. Much like Bearden’s artwork, Ellison’s “Invisible Man” — for which he is best known (the novel appeared on the New York Times best-seller list for 13 weeks in 1952 and won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1953, making Ellison the first Black writer to receive the distinction) — also gives air to the Black experience in America. His Everyman narrator has come to represent the way Black people have been obscured, silenced, made invisible throughout the history of the United States:

“Why is my work ignored?” the photographer Roy DeCarava asked in an interview in 1988. “Do they sit around at night saying, ‘What are we *not* going to do for Roy DeCarava?’ I don’t know but I do feel like Ralph Ellison’s ‘Invisible Man.’”



Gordon Parks's "Invisible Man Retreat, Harlem, New York" (1952). © The Gordon Parks Foundation



Parks's "The Invisible Man, Harlem, New York" (1952).
© The Gordon Parks Foundation

Wynton Marsalis, who knew Ellison personally, also sees himself — and his art — in the book. The trumpeter describes the structure of the novel as being akin to the chorus format used in jazz. “Chorus format means you play a song and you just repeat the underlying harmonies of that song over and over again,” he explains, “and the harmonies repeat and you create new melodies on it.” Throughout “Invisible Man,” Ellison “keeps looping back and forth on the subject of identity, of race, of generations.” For Marsalis, who has returned to the book many times since first reading it around age 14, it is this symbolically rich journey of identity that is of primary importance: “At a certain point the narrator realizes how complex he is as a person,” Marsalis says. “That’s the jazziest thing about the book. The jazz musician’s thing is always how difficult it is to achieve your personality and your identity, and then to put your identity in the context of a group. The narrator comes to that understanding in the book ... and the book is the result of his individuality, the result of his understanding.”

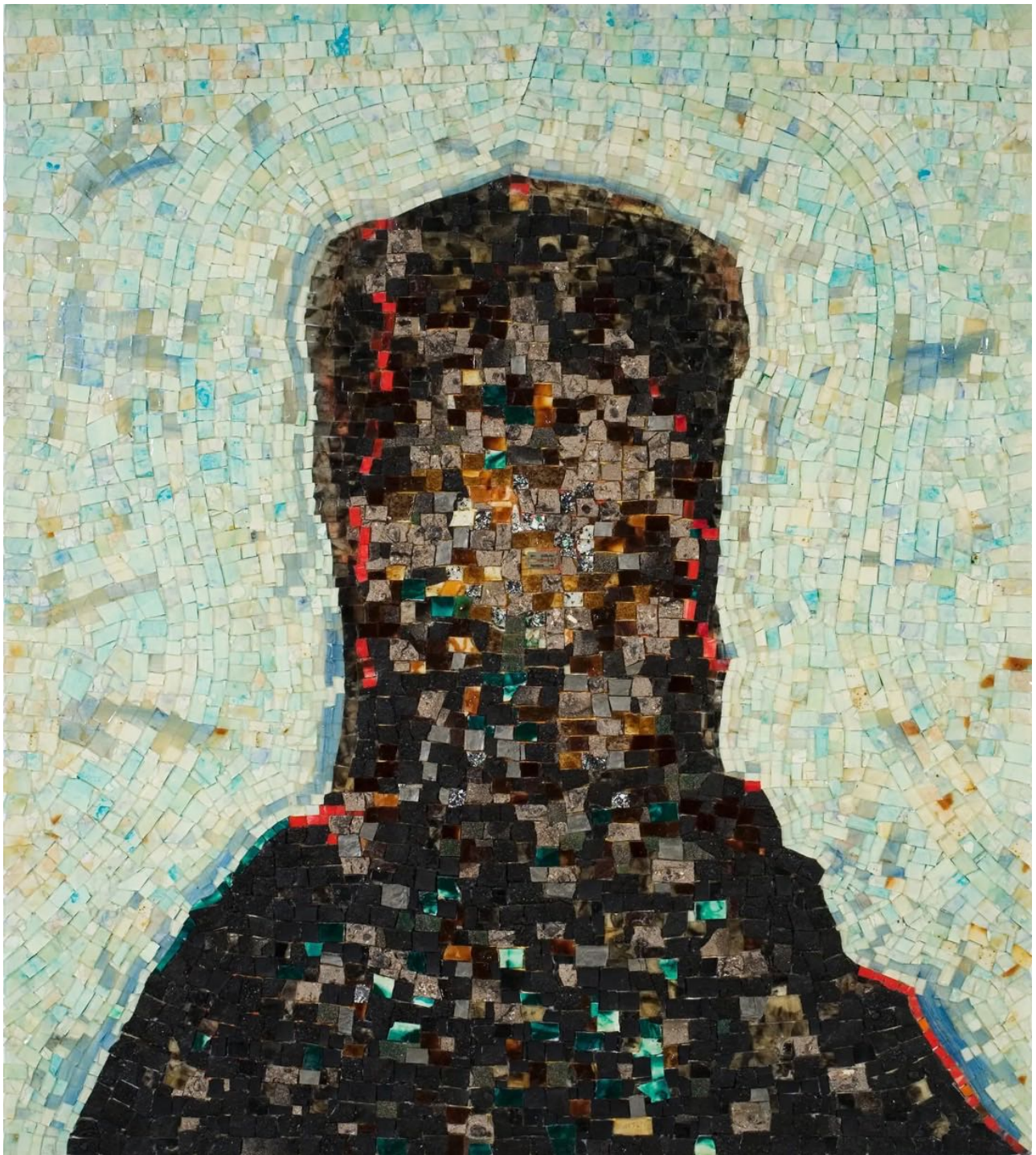
ELLISON BELIEVED IN LITERATURE’S power “to make us recognize again and again the wholeness of the human experience,” and countless writers — Danielle Evans, Clint Smith, Bryan Stevenson, Mychal Denzel Smith and Ottessa Moshfegh, to name a few — have found a creative foothold in the book’s meaning and ideas. What’s perhaps more surprising, though, is how many visual artists have also found the novel to be a potent source of inspiration. Working in painting or photography, sculpture or installation, a long line of artists have explored the theme of rendering the invisible visible and have shown that the need to assert one’s personhood is profound, especially when that personhood has been so thoroughly denied.

Radcliffe Bailey, for instance, is another artist who took the narrator’s underground lair as his subject. In 2017, he recreated Parks’s photograph in three dimensions, mounting a life-size environment in the gallery of the Gordon Parks Foundation, in Pleasantville, N.Y. The dark cityscape acts as a proscenium, beyond which are the lights, turntables and a stool, now empty: In his version, the invisible man is gone. Bailey’s work cannily links the novel’s beginning with its ending, where the narrator, his story finished, concedes, “I’ve overstayed my hibernation, since there’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play.”



Jeff Wall's "After 'Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue" (1999-2000). © Jeff Wall, courtesy of Gagosian

The photographer Jeff Wall also depicted the narrator's den, though with a distinctly different aim. In 1999, he began staging the room, filling it with detritus he gleaned from other parts of the novel and covering the ceiling with exactly 1,369 bulbs. His interpretation, "After 'Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue," is one of profusion — not simply in the multitude of bulbs but in the way the narrator visualizes himself through their light. "Photography is also about profusion, if you want it to be," Wall says. "You point a camera at a tree, and you get every leaf. If you were painting it, you might just paint some green areas to represent masses of leaves, but in a photograph, you see them all. It seemed right for this scene, and once you go down that road, of course, then you have to create that profusion grain by grain. I had to make that room."



Jack Whitten's "Black Monolith II (For Ralph Ellison)" (1994). © Jack Whitten, courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum, William K. Jacobs, Jr. Fund, 2014.65. Photo: Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates

INVISIBILITY MAY SEEM ANTITHETICAL to visual art. How can an artist render what isn't there? But plenty of artists have embraced this conceptual challenge, taking up Ellison's theme as their own. In 1994, the year of Ellison's death, Jack Whitten made his mosaic painting "Black Monolith II (For Ralph Ellison)." (The artist's "Black Monolith" series, completed over the course of nearly 30 years, between 1988 and 2017, honors 11 luminaries, including Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, Barbara Jordan, Muhammad Ali and Jacob Lawrence.) To create the mosaic tiles, he mixed acrylic paint with molasses, copper, salt, coal, ash, chocolate, onion, herbs, rust and eggshells. Surrounding the dark, faceless figure at the center of the work are light-colored tiles, their illumination giving the subject form. "'Invisible Man' was the first time that anyone had put into print, for me, the exact dimensions of being Black in America," Whitten said.



Elizabeth Catlett's memorial for Ellison, unveiled in New York City's Riverside Park in 2003. *Brittany Newman/The New York Times*

Nine years later, Elizabeth Catlett unveiled a 15-foot-tall bronze monolith for Ellison's memorial at 150th Street and Riverside Drive in Manhattan. From the metal slab, she excised the silhouette of a striding figure. But this invisible man isn't empty space — after all, the narrator's invisibility isn't physical but psychological and phenomenological. Through the cutout, one can see the trees and sky beyond, a view Ellison enjoyed from his longtime residence across the street, at 730 Riverside Drive.

The play in works like Catlett's and Whitten's of presence and absence is also evident in one of the images from Ming Smith's "Invisible Man" series, some 50 black-and-white photographs taken between 1988 and 1991, which similarly situates a figure among the shifting fields of dark and light. A lone man walks down a bright street, the upper half of his body almost disappearing into the shadow cast on the building behind him. He appears blurred, blending into his surroundings as though camouflaged by the world around him. How can he, like Ellison's narrator, exist at once in the glaring light and in the depthless dark?



Ming Smith's "Invisible Man, Somewhere, Everywhere" (1991). © Ming Smith, courtesy of the artist



Smith's "August Blues, Harlem, New York" (1991). © Ming Smith, courtesy of the artist

Though Smith's "Invisible Man" series isn't a literal interpretation of the novel, as Parks's is, she was inspired by Ellison's exploration of visibility, and shared his belief that art, in any form, can be a way of articulating cultural experience. In 1972, Smith became the first female member of the Harlem-based African American photography collective Kamoinge, and in the ensuing decades she worked amid a larger community of elders and contemporaries, including Bearden, DeCarava, August Wilson, Sun Ra and Grace Jones. "The writers, the painters, the actors, the musicians — they all just lead me, they're just part of me," she says. "I don't really specifically think of anyone when I go to shoot. I work from instinct. I'm a continuum."

TOWARD THE END of "Invisible Man," after his friend Tod Clifton is shot by the police, the narrator wanders into the subway, trying to make sense of what it means to be outside of history: "All things, it is said, are duly recorded," he writes, "all things of importance, that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keepers keep their power by ... Where were the historians today? And how would they put it down?" The artists who have found ways of expressing life through "Invisible Man" are some of today's historians, recording Black experience, which, in all its varied complexity, also says something about human life writ large.



Kerry James Marshall's "A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self" (1980). © Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

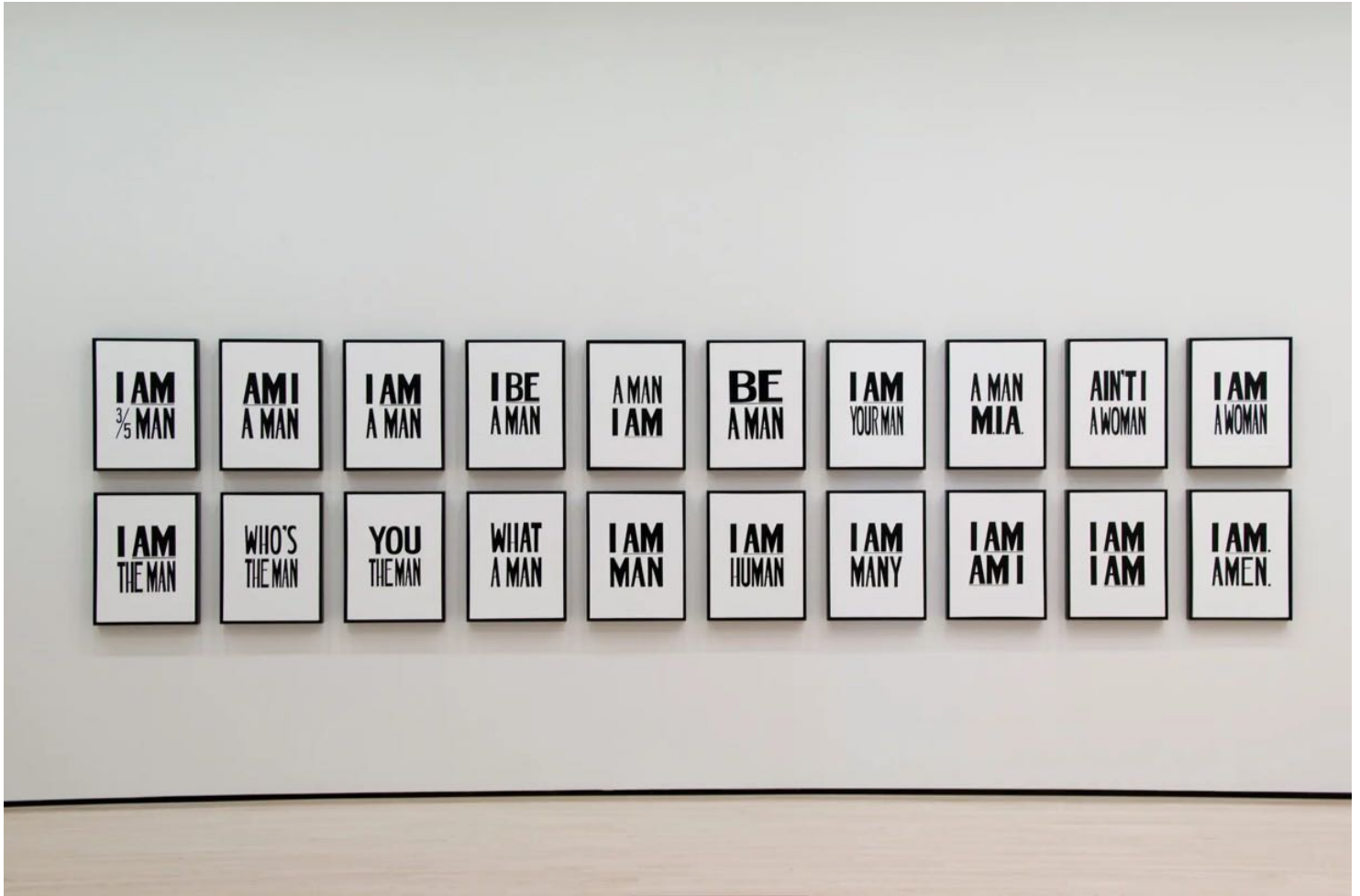


Marshall's "Invisible Man" (1986). © Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Consider Kerry James Marshall's painting "A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self" (1980). It depicts a Black figure with a broad, toothy grin set against a black backdrop. He is at once a part of the background and distinct from it, receding into the darkness and emerging from it. Marshall has spoken about the absence of Black bodies and subjects from life-drawing classes, museums and art books and of the way that, once noticed, this absence becomes visible. Beginning with "A Portrait of the Artist," he set out to prioritize Black subjects, to bring them back into the visible artistic spectrum. "The condition of Blackness in the paintings would be more absolute, not provisional," he has said. In his 1986 painting "Invisible Man," Marshall again renders a Black man disappearing into the background. Only the exaggerated caricature of his face remains clearly visible.

The connection Ellison saw between the oral tradition of the past and the more contemporary "literary rendering of American experience" was significant for him. In a speech in 1975 at the dedication of the Ralph Ellison Library in his hometown of Oklahoma City, he said, "This function of language makes it possible for men and women to project the future, control their environment. It offers feedback." The narrator's opening line — "I am an invisible man" — has provided just that kind of feedback, acting as a textual link between various historical and art-historical moments. The sentence is echoed in the slogan "I am a man," used by 1,300 striking Black sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968. Ernest C. Withers's March 28 photograph is among the most famous images of the protest, showing a throng of strikers in the street, a sea of placards over their heads, like

speech balloons. By omitting the word “invisible,” the workers demanded recognition — demanded to be seen, and regarded, as human beings. Their statement also works as a response to a question posed during the fight for abolition in the 18th century: “Am I not a man and a brother?” In 1857, the question “Am I not a man?” was at the heart of *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, which asked whether the Constitution allowed Black people to hold American citizenship and be accorded the associated rights and privileges; in its decision, the U.S. Supreme Court answered with a resounding no.

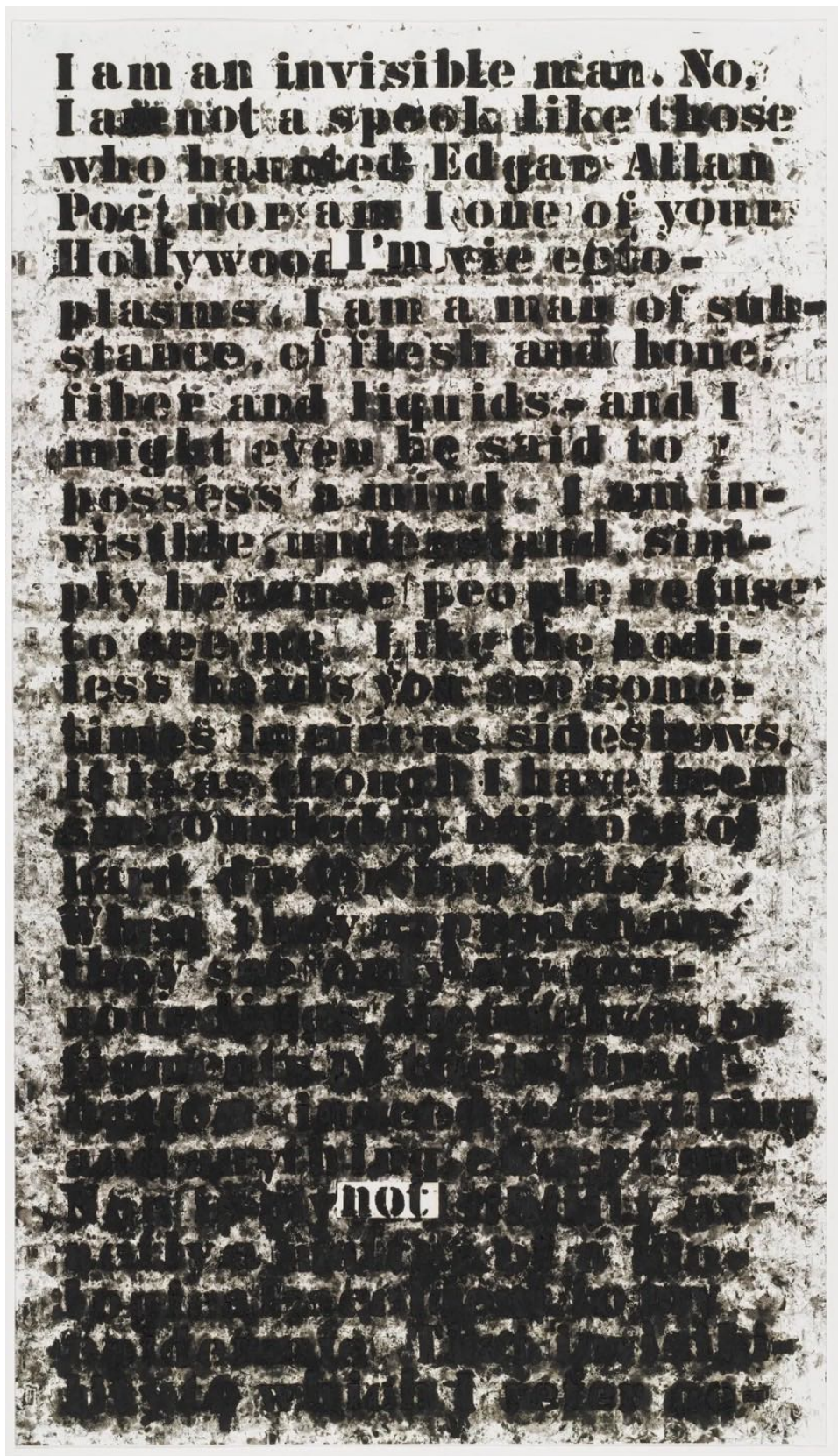


Hank Willis Thomas's “I Am a Man” (2009). © Hank Willis Thomas, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

With his novel, Ellison offered a different answer: an adamant affirmation. Nearly 40 years after the Memphis protest, Glenn Ligon reproduced the strikers’ placard in the painting “Untitled (I Am a Man)” (1988), subtly rearranging text and typography to bring this historical artifact forward in time — remaking it, so to speak, for the continuing struggle. For the work “I Am a Man” (2009), Hank Willis Thomas created 20 painted variations of the phrase that read like a timeline of civil rights history. Beginning with “I Am $\frac{3}{5}$ Man,” the work moves through “Ain’t I a Woman” and “You the Man” before ending conclusively with “I Am Amen.”

Ligon returned to “Invisible Man” in 1991, stenciling with black oilstick onto a white background a passage from the book’s prologue. (In each of a pair of etchings from a quartet made in 1992, Ligon reproduced variations of the same Ellison quotation in black on a black background, the subtle tonal differentiation akin to that of Marshall’s “A Portrait of the Artist.”) The letters are smudged and the last third of the paragraph is nearly

illegible. What is lost is not simply a view of the words but what they stand for: the voice of the writer and the language of representation. Yet Ligon rescues two words from obscurity: “I’m” and “not.” Together, the words reject any insistence that he is invisible: “I’m not.”



Glenn Ligon's "Untitled (I Am an Invisible Man)" (1991). © Glenn Ligon, courtesy of the artist; Hauser & Wirth, New York; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; Thomas Dane Gallery, London; and Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA, via Art Resource, N.Y.

ELLISON BELIEVED THE FIELD of culture was wide open, a place of limitless freedom, where the artist, writer, poet and musician could express the fullness and complexity of Black life and imagine a world undivided by social injustice. That so many visual artists have found fertile ground in the pages of “Invisible Man” is a testament to that belief, and to the novel’s power and truth. That the book continues to hold sway is perhaps also proof that the equal and just world that Ellison had hoped would one day come has not yet arrived. Ellison describes terrifying scenes of violence and police brutality. He evokes the weight, too, that preconceived ideas have on Black identity. “Even today,” says the painter Calida Rawles, “it’s very difficult to have that basic element of humanity given to us, of being seen, respected and acknowledged, of being fully human, with brilliance and flaws.”



Calida Rawles's “North & Penn (For Freddie Gray)” (2018). Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London



Rawles's "New Day Coming" (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London

Rawles paints large canvases depicting bodies suspended in bright, often blue pools. In 2018, she made "North & Penn (For Freddie Gray)," in which a figure is nearly fully submerged, broken into parts by the turbulent water's refraction, with only the fingers of one hand breaking through the pool's surface. "In my fantasy world, I can grab his hand and get him out," Rawles says. In another one of her works, "New Day Coming" (2020), a woman in a white dress floats serenely, her head hidden from view by a rippling distortion: The surface of the water reflects her body, sending a series of echoes of the image wafting toward the top of the canvas, like a dream taking flight. The sparkle of sunlight is the last element Rawles paints, and its addition to each work is significant: "When I see a shimmer in these light patterns," she says, "that pop — there's just so much beauty in that. What a metaphor, that in itself. The light is one of the most important elements in the water — it's just magic."

"Invisible Man" is among Rawles's favorite books, one she returns to again and again. While at work on the paintings for her forthcoming solo show at Lehmann Maupin in New York this fall, she wrote the words "seen and unseen" on the wall of her studio. "At the end of the day," she says, "everyone just wants to be seen, heard and respected."

Nicole Rudick's book on the French-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle, "What Is Now Known Was Once Only Imagined," will be published in February 2022 by Siglio Press.