

Activity: Observe and Interpret

*Artists make choices in communicating ideas. How does *SOB, SOB* provoke the viewer to reflect on the African American experience of the past, present, and future? What details does Kerry James Marshall include for us to consider in our reflection? Observing details and analyzing components of the painting, then putting them in historical context, enables the viewer to interpret the overall message of the work of art.*

Observation: What do you see?

What do you notice about the figure in the painting, her pose, expression, and where she is positioned in her setting?

The female figure lies awkwardly on the floor in a room at the top of a flight of stairs. She seems hemmed in by the railing and the enclosed space of the room, while she gazes out the window. While her face remains



contemplative, her fist and claw-like open hand register strong emotion, possibly anger over what she has just read.

What book is the young woman reading? What others are on her bookshelf?

The book on the floor is *Africa Since 1413*, an account of the effects of European colonization on the African continent, its cultures and peoples. The bookshelf is full of other volumes on African history.

Think about the title of the work, *SOB, SOB*.

A sob is a deep cry of despair. Here, written in capital letters in thought bubbles, it might also refer to a pointed expression of anger.



[SOB, SOB](#), 2003, Kerry James Marshall, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Interpretation: What does it mean?

Kerry James Marshall is known for his monumental images of African American history and culture. In *SOB, SOB*, we see a figure who is very much aware of her cultural history and deeply affected by it.

The artist based the young woman's pose on that of the female figure in *Christina's World*, a painting by Andrew Wyeth, in which a young paralyzed woman faces a physical challenge in getting up a hill. Marshall has taken *Christina's* pose and completely reversed it; the young black girl is shown from the front, not the back and she is indoors, not outdoors. How does this inversion imply looking to a past instead of a future like in *Christina's World*? What connection can you make between the two figures' inner thoughts and struggles? How do you think their past experiences and cultural history have shaped the figures' lives and views of the future? Based on the black girl's cultural history, what challenges might she expect to find as she moves forward in her life?



[Christina's World](#), 1948, Andrew Wyeth, oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art (MOMA)

SOB, SOB evokes Marshall's intellectual journey over the last fifty years beginning with his boyhood visits to the local library. According to the artist, by the third and fourth grades he knew "every single art book in the library," and by the seventh grade he was taking summer classes at the Otis Art Institute. He was greatly influenced by reading and books as a young man and his art today is an ongoing exploration of African American history. How do you think the books on this shelf inform the reader and her perspective on life? How might they be valuable, weighty, or empowering to her?

The woman, her expression, and her future are as ambiguous as the title of this painting. Where can this woman go in her world – be it the one in the painting, or the one experienced by African Americans in this country? Will her life become another volume of struggle like those on her bookshelf? Or will their histories empower her?