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PROFILES

THE CONFIDENT ANXIETY OF RASHID JOHNSON

Rashid Johnson, who is preparing for a major mid-career show at the Guggenheim, explores depths of masculine vulnerability that few of his contemporaries have touched.

By Calvin Tomkins

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“I want to pivot and move and work on multiple things at once, and with that comes a lot of freedom,” Johnson says.
Photograph by Dana Scruggs for The New Yorker

Conceptual art has been with us for more than fifty years, and it still defines the work of a great many contemporary artists. But what is it? The term “concept art” was first used in 1963 by the philosopher Henry Flynt; it quickly morphed into “conceptual art” and was applied to art work in which the idea behind it is as or more important than the work itself. An early example was Joseph Kosuth’s “One and Three Chairs,” which consisted of a straight-backed chair, a photograph of that chair, and a mounted dictionary definition of the word “chair.” The idea was clear enough, and conceptual artists have been struggling ever since to make works that are not as boring as this one. Those who succeed have usually been influenced by Marcel Duchamp, the intellectual father of Conceptualism. Duchamp wanted, as he said, to “put art back in the service of the mind.” Leonardo da Vinci described art as a *cosa mentale*, and that’s what it had been, according to Duchamp, until the nineteenth century, when Gustave Courbet and the Impressionists turned it into something that was purely “retinal,” directed to the eye alone. Rather than attack the retinal consensus, Duchamp, who never bored anyone, undermined it with his “readymades,” common objects (a bicycle wheel, a snow shovel, a bottle-drying rack) transformed into art by the choice of an artist. The readymades defied any attempt to define art, and this turned out to be what contemporary artists needed most—complete freedom to “make it new.” Art became much easier for mediocre artists and a lot harder for good ones. Duchamp spent the last twenty years of his life working in secret on a three-dimensional tableau vivant of a naked, headless female body in a realistic landscape, a strangely disturbing image that is both a summary of his meta-retinal art and a total departure from it.

“I don’t think there’s an artist working today whose head Duchamp hasn’t come into,” Rashid Johnson, an artist in the midst of a groundbreaking career, told me in the spring. “The readymade is part of our critical discourse. When you question art, when you ask the sort of questions that he was able to point us toward, you are forever affected by what he did.”

Johnson, who is forty-seven, grew up in what the curator Naomi Beckwith calls “the first big era of unapologetic Blackness.” His earliest works were made when he was a nineteen-year-old sophomore at Columbia College, in the Chicago suburb of Evanston. Struck by the number of men living on the street in Chicago’s South Side, he would go up to one of them, say what he was doing, ask to take his picture, and offer a few dollars in return. When he had two dozen or so of these images, he took them to the Schneider Gallery in the city and said that he would like to have a show. “I was really cocky,” he remembered. Martha Schneider, the gallery’s owner, looked at the work—closeup portraits of Black men who had withstood decades of hardship and pain—and immediately scheduled an exhibition, called “Seeing in the Dark.” There were no reviews, but the Art Institute of Chicago bought two of the portraits, and the *Reader*, a popular free newspaper in town, published one of them, titled “Jonathan with Eyes Closed.”

After that, he had three shows at the Monique Meloche Gallery, another Chicago

venue, and then, in 2001, the Studio Museum in Harlem put three of his portraits in “Freestyle,” a hugely influential exhibition of work by a new generation of Black artists. Thelma Golden, then the Studio Museum’s chief curator, stirred controversy by describing the “Freestyle” artists as “post-Black,” meaning, as Golden wrote in the show’s catalogue, that these were “artists who were adamant about not being labeled as ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.” (When questioned about the term, Johnson likes to say, “I am currently and presently Black.”) The show included work by Trenton Doyle Hancock, Kojo Griffin, Sanford Biggers, Mark Bradford, Laylah Ali, Julie Mehretu, Camille Norment, and other emerging Black art stars (along with some under-recognized mid-career ones), and it established Johnson as someone to watch. In the years that followed, as Johnson’s work took different forms—videos, sculptures, mosaics, and eventually paintings on canvas—the constant element in all of it was a play of ideas. “I’ve always been more interested in projecting thought into space than in representing the body,” he once said. Using materials and techniques that he invented or rediscovered, he plumbed depths of anxiety and masculine vulnerability that few of his contemporaries had touched, and he did so with full awareness that, in art, ideas went nowhere without compelling visual embodiments that brought them to life.

Rashid Johnson in his Brooklyn studio.
Photograph by Dana Scruggs for The New Yorker

For several years, he made photographs that he set up and posed for himself—sprawled on top of a cenotaph that marks the grave of Jack Johnson (no relation), the first Black heavyweight boxing champion; standing, frontally nude, in the same position that the artist Barkley L. Hendricks had assumed for “Brilliantly Endowed,” a 1977 self-portrait; sitting for a series of mocking “portraits” as a member of a society he had made up, called “The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club.” (One of them reads, “Self-Portrait as the Professor of Astronomy, Miscegenation, and Critical Theory at the New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club Center for Graduate Studies.”) “ ‘The New Negro’ gave me a chance to view the Black experience from a perspective that was not exclusively tragic,” Johnson told me. Poking fun at the Black experience, his own included, was an effective antidote to self-importance.

In addition to photographs, he made short videos, sometimes with professional dancers, among them “The New Black Yoga,” in 2011. He also made abstract paintings, employing such materials as African black soap mixed with melted wax, which he daubed on ceramic bathroom tiles or on mirrored panels. Some of the panels had shelves, on which he placed books, record albums, jars, ceramic bowls, and other items. For a few years, he produced what he called Cosmic Slops, by pouring the black-soap-and-wax mixture into shallow trays and then carving into the thick soup with a stick as it dried. (He liked the idea of making art by removing something.) Johnson burned, branded, and scarified oak or redwood floorboards, and hung them on walls. He made text paintings, using spray enamel to spell out messages like “Fly Away” and “Run,” and he created abstract sculptures, one of which, “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos,” from 2008, was eventually acquired by the Whitney Museum.

A major survey of his work—“Rashid Johnson: A Poem for Deep Thinkers”—will open at the Guggenheim Museum this April. Curated by Beckwith, who is now a deputy director and the chief curator at the Guggenheim, it will cover the whole range of his practice, from the homeless-men photographs to largely abstract sculptures and oil-on-canvas paintings. Johnson and Beckwith have much in common. They are about the same age, they grew up in Chicago, and they were raised by academics who were aligned with the Black Power movement. Beckwith described her parents and Johnson’s to me as being “very clear about the fact that when you step out into the world you are not just representing yourself—you are representing your family, your community, and in some ways the Black race.” She went on, “Is it an oversized responsibility? Probably. I think this is a great source of confidence, and also of anxiety.”

In the spring, I went to see Johnson in the Bushwick studio that he had been using for the past two years and was about to leave. He had recently bought a two-story building nearby that formerly housed the Brooklyn branch of the Luhring Augustine gallery and was renovating its large, high-ceilinged rooms to serve his expanding needs. Johnson, who is six feet three and powerfully built, is at ease with himself in a way that puts others at ease. A year or so before, he had

cut off his shoulder-length dreadlocks, which had been growing since two young girls braided them on a trip that he made to Senegal when he was nineteen. “Wearing them had felt important, but they’d become, like, a relic of my youth,” he told me. He answered my questions without hesitation, often at length, while chewing a toothpick and occasionally giving his nose a vigorous rubbing. “I don’t self-protect when I open myself up to someone else,” he said. “I try not to because I believe that most people are good.”

The studio was full of new paintings for the Guggenheim exhibition and for a show he was having in October at Hauser & Wirth’s Paris gallery. His work had changed radically in 2020, when, for the first time in his career, he began painting with oil on canvas. Many of the paintings for the Paris show, with semi-abstract patterns, were surprisingly beautiful. There was also a bronze sculpture that resembled a small tree. The new work, he explained, had allowed him to explore “a sense of interior space,” something that he had long been aware of but had never developed. “These are the ‘Seascape’ paintings,” he said, pointing to two canvases on which a simplified, boat-shaped image was repeated again and again. “Some of the motifs have become more gender-specific, with images that are almost breastlike. The boat is also a smile, or an escape vessel, or eyes—it serves many gods.”

The paintings struck me as a long step away from the multidisciplinary works in ceramic, wax, soap, wood, and other materials that he was known for, and a step closer to figurative art, which he had always avoided. “I see myself as a post-medium artist,” he explained. “I don’t have the skills to represent most things well. I used the camera lens when I wanted legibility, but the lens doesn’t capture my need for gesture in the way painting does. Sculpture is a space for play and tactility. I use these methods to serve different purposes, and some of the results come from my abilities, and some”—he was laughing now—“from my limitations.”

He walked me through rooms where recently finished paintings hung on the walls, and young studio assistants—he has about a dozen of them—waved or stopped him to ask a question. In his new studio, he told me, he plans to eventually set aside several rooms for “my foundation.” One room will have a permanent display of his own work across many decades. Another will be for temporary exhibitions by artists who have been important to him. That an artist in his forties would be thinking about his legacy seemed a bit startling, but Johnson, who sometimes struck me as being egoless, understands his own significance. “I think almost everything I make has some version of failure,” he said, fiercely rubbing his nose. (Johnson’s idea of failure, I came to understand, is not the same as yours or mine; it can apply to something that may be very good over all but has one or two aspects that didn’t quite live up to his expectations.) “There is no purity for me, no absolute success or failure, and no room for the masterpiece,” he added. “When I see artists who have made works that are recognized as masterpieces, I see them having to chase those works for the rest of their careers, and I just don’t want that axe to grind. I would rather be seen as an acceptable failure, as the guy that failed consistently and kept going, kept trying, kept exploring. I

want to pivot and move and work on multiple things at once, and with that comes a lot of freedom. I think the whole mystery of making art is about choices that are bold.”

As a young child, Johnson was fascinated by books. There were a lot of them in his mother’s library—poetry and fiction and history and criticism—and at first, before he learned to read, he saw them as mysterious objects. His mother, Cheryl Johnson-Odim, was a published poet and a professor of African history at Northwestern University, in Evanston. When Johnson was ten, he became obsessed with a book in his mother’s library called “The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual,” by the social critic Harold Cruse. “I didn’t read it until I was nineteen or twenty,” he told me, “but long before that I remember thinking, What is this crisis, and what the hell am I expected to do about it? My mother is an intellectual, and I thought that’s what being an adult meant.”

Jimmy Johnson, his father, is an original—not an intellectual, but smart, talkative, and happy-go-lucky. Born in a suburb of Memphis, Tennessee, he grew up in Youngstown, Ohio. He enlisted in the Army (“because I had no sense”) and served two hitches in Vietnam. He met Cheryl afterward, when they were students at Youngstown State University. After graduating from college in 1972, he married Cheryl; Rashid was born in 1975. The marriage ended in the early eighties. Eventually, following an amicable divorce, Jimmy moved to a house one street away from Cheryl’s, and he remained an important presence in Rashid’s life. Cheryl earned her Ph.D. while she raised three children. Chaka Patterson, her first, is nine years older than Rashid; a graduate of Amherst College and Harvard Law School, he is now a lawyer at a big Chicago firm. Maya Odim, whose father is a Nigerian American lawyer, is ten years younger. She recently received an M.F.A. in poetry from the Art Institute of Chicago, and she writes and teaches poetry and dance theory at local colleges.

Until high school, Johnson did well academically, and he excelled at sports, especially baseball, where he played shortstop and pitched. “Rashid was always the best player on any team,” Patterson told me. He was deeply interested in all kinds of music—particularly hip-hop and experimental jazz. “I was an amateur rapper in school,” Johnson said. “I had a keen sense of awareness about the world we were going to inhabit.” Midway through high school, he began hanging out with kids who drank, smoked weed, and tagged public spaces with graffiti. “I wanted to make art, but I had no natural talent for drawing,” he said. “I liked to draw with my whole arm, and graffiti gave me access to the spray can and the big marker. I was trying to figure out how to become a creative person, but I was running around skipping classes and tagging stuff and getting arrested.”

Johnson came close to dropping out; what stopped him was realizing that he would be the first person in three generations of his family not to get a college degree. “I kind of righted the ship, just in time,” he said. He got his high-school diploma and applied to Columbia College in Chicago, which had good art and film

A work from Johnson’s series “Anxious Men” (2015) which employs ceramic tile, black soap, and wax. Art Work by Rashid Johnson; Photograph by Martin Parsekian / Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

programs. Johnson had held a summer job working for a wedding photographer, and this gave him the idea that art photography could be a path for him. Worried that the other art students at Columbia would be way ahead of him, he spent the summer before his freshman year in the Chicago public library, studying the history of photography and, in the process, learning a fair amount about Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Franz Kline, and other vanguard American artists of the nineteen-fifties. “As a result, when I got to college I knew a lot about picture-making, but I didn’t know what being an artist was,” he said.

McArthur Binion, an artist who taught studio art at Columbia College, filled him in on that score. “He was the first person to explain to me that there was an art world, with galleries and museums and exhibitions,” Johnson said. “I took every course I could with McArthur, but he told me not to come to class. ‘You know

what you’re doing,’ he’d say. ‘Just make stuff, and we can meet later and talk.’ And so I started making photographs and having exhibitions when I was nineteen.” Johnson had persuaded his mother to buy him a Hasselblad reflex camera before he started college, but he rarely used it. When he began taking his pictures of homeless Black men on Chicago’s South Side, the portraits were made with a rented, eight-by-ten-inch Deardorff view camera whose high-resolution lens captures far more detail than the Hasselblad does. Working in the college darkroom, Johnson printed some of them using a nineteenth-century process known as Van Dyke brown, which requires coating the negative with photosensitive chemicals and exposing it to ultraviolet light. This method gave the photographs a warm, antique gloss that made them look more like gouaches. These were the ones Thelma Golden showed in “Freestyle.” “Their absolute stillness gave them a sense of the past,” Golden remembered. “They also seemed to be about history and to offer a huge amount of knowledge. But I saw something in them that would continue in Rashid’s work—that he was exploring ideas on liberation and freedom.”

When “Freestyle” opened, in 2001, Johnson was twenty-two; he had graduated from college two years earlier. Several gallery owners offered to represent him, but he turned them down. Seeing the work of other artists in the show made him realize how much he still had to learn. “I just was not ready,” he said. For the next two years, living in Chicago and supporting himself with odd jobs and the occasional sale of a photograph, he experimented with different materials and techniques, trying to figure out what kind of artist he could become. His lack of drawing skill, combined with his knowledge of what had been achieved in five hundred years of Western painting, seemed to rule out any attempt to paint on canvas in a traditional sense. Inspired, like many Black artists, by the radical innovations of David Hammons, he made paintings by sprinkling rice, beans, and chicken bones on light-sensitive paper, spraying paint over them, and, when the paint dried, removing the beans and bones. “For a couple of years, I just worked on my own,” he said, “and let all the things I was doing bleed together. But something was missing. I had done a lot of reading in critical theory and philosophy, but, to be honest, I needed someone to talk to about it.” In 2002, he married a writer who was just out of graduate school and looking for a teaching job. “She was a year or so older than me,” he said. “I’d always dated slightly older women, interestingly. She left me after two years, thank God. I’d never felt that kind of rejection, but I learned a lot from the experience.”

In 2003, he enrolled in the M.F.A. photography program at the Art Institute of Chicago. “It’s a great school,” he said. “It had a lot of the things I was interested in, such as an emphasis on critical theory.” In his first weeks there, he met Sheree Hovsepian, an Iranian-born woman who had recently graduated from the same program, at a bar in the city. “She was with a guy I had known in high school, and he introduced us,” Johnson told me. The next day, she sent an e-mail to his school account, but he didn’t see it. “At that time, I didn’t e-mail,” he told me. “I ran into her a few days later, though, and we hung out, and we’ve been hanging out for the last twenty years.”

On their first date, she asked him how old he was, and he astonished her by saying that he was twenty-six. (Hovsepian was twenty-nine.) “I really thought he was five or six years older than me,” she said. “I don’t know if ‘mature’ is the right word, but he had a way about him that didn’t seem like a twenty-six-year-old. He was just so easy to talk with, so on the ball and in charge and charismatic and fun.”

In 1976, when Hovsepian was two, she had moved from Isfahan, Iran, to Minneapolis with her parents and her younger sister. Her parents divorced two years after that, and she and her sister were raised in Toledo, Ohio, where their mother was studying at a medical college. (A few years later, her mother married Jerier Hovsepian, a nurse of Armenian descent.) “I grew up with people who were not like me, and art—which I was naturally good at—was often a refuge,” Hovsepian told me. She majored in fine arts and art history at the University of Toledo before getting her M.F.A. Her work—photo-based images of the human body combined with abstract forms—has been widely exhibited, and is in the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Guggenheim, and the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Johnson dropped out of the Institute in his second year. He’d gone to Italy for the opening of a show of his work in Naples and decided that it was time to start building his career. He moved to New York in 2005; Hovsepian joined him there a year later. They married in 2010. “I’m not good at life,” Johnson told me. “I mean, at things like mailing letters, paying bills, or paying off school loans.” Hovsepian took care of those things for him, quietly and without complaint. They have been actively supportive of each other’s work. She edited his early videos, and snapped the shutter for most of the photographs that he set up and posed for. He helped her navigate the art market and went to Venice when she had work in the 2022 Biennale.

This past June, Johnson celebrated Hovsepian’s fiftieth birthday with a surprise party for a hundred and eighty friends and relatives at the Pool, a Manhattan restaurant in the space that used to be the pool room of the Four Seasons. (He has a small share in it.) Johnson, who prepared for the event by taking private voice lessons for several weeks, welcomed the guests by warbling “Moody’s Mood for Love,” by the jazz singer Eddie Jefferson. He strolled around the room, holding the microphone like a seasoned lounge singer. My wife and I were there, and when the cheering and clapping subsided he pointed to us in the audience. “Those two ask me a lot of questions, one of which is why am I so self-confident,” he said. “I’m not, really, but I’ve surrounded myself with so many amazing, beautiful, thoughtful, intelligent, courageous people, and I believe in them, and most of all I believe in my wife, Sheree. She convinced me that I could do anything.”

In an era when contemporary art has become an asset class, Rashid Johnson’s level of success is impressive, and apparently rock solid. A recent decline in auction prices for some artists has not affected him. His paintings bring from five

hundred thousand to more than a million dollars on the primary market, and in 2022 one of the white “Surrender Paintings” that he had introduced earlier that year went for three million at auction. He, Hovsepian, and Julius, their thirteen-year-old son, live in a town house in Gramercy Park; not long ago, they bought a palatial summer house in East Hampton and a vacation place on Minorca, in the Balearic Islands. All this real estate allows Johnson, who calls himself a “homebody,” to spend a lot of his time at home.

For the first decade of Johnson’s career, there was no indication that anything like this would happen. “Rashid was famous long before he was rich,” Patterson, his half brother, told me. When Johnson and Hovsepian moved to New York, they lived in a two-room apartment on the Lower East Side. There was no closet in their tiny bedroom, so they hung their clothes on a rod over the bed. Johnson worked in a roach-infested basement studio in Chinatown. Their only regular income came from Hovsepian’s job as a bartender at the Good World Bar and Grill, an artists’ hangout on Orchard Street. Both of them taught at the Pratt Institute (sporadically, in Johnson’s case), and he continued to find temporary jobs that helped pay the rent. His studio was under a Greek restaurant that featured belly dancers, and for a reduction in the studio rent he let the dancers change clothes there.

“The Broken Five” (2019) was inspired by the Central Park Five. Art Work by Rashid Johnson / Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

Alex Ernst met Johnson in 2007, when she was a twenty-year-old art student at Pratt. After taking a photography class of his, she asked whether she could intern with him, and Johnson, who had no regular studio help at the time and was preparing for his first solo show in New York, at the Nicole Klagsbrun gallery, looked at her portfolio and said yes. They bonded immediately. “We spent hours talking, and not just about art,” Ernst said. “When I was starting to intern for him, I made a giant mistake. He asked me to load the eight-by-ten film slides for his camera—something I had done many times—and I loaded them all backward. I didn’t find out until I was in the darkroom, and he was so calm about it. He taught me how to fix the problem myself. I got a master’s degree in psychology while I was working for Rashid, but in the end I was so engaged and so happy working there that I wanted to stay.” She now runs his studio and is his business partner and principal confidante.

Johnson’s Klagsbrun show in 2008 was a turning point. The fourteen works on view included the sculpture “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos,” done earlier that year, two of the “New Negro” photos, a black-soap-and-wax shelf piece, and six of the Cosmic Slops. Only two photographs had been sold during the exhibition’s four-week run, until, in the final days, the collectors Mera Rubell, her husband, Don, and their son, Jason, came in and bought four pieces. Mera and Don had built a contemporary-art collection by buying work from future stars—Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Damien Hirst, Kara Walker, Charles Ray, and others—early in their careers. They had not seen Johnson’s work before, and, as Mera said to me, “We were astonished that so many things were not sold.” The Rubells were putting together an exhibition in Miami of Black artists whose work they owned. Johnson became the thirtieth, and his photograph “The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club (Thurgood)” is on the cover of “30 Americans,” the show’s hardcover catalogue. Until then, Johnson told me, selling a work for a modest sum was a major event—it meant that he could pay his rent that month. “And suddenly I had a check from Klagsbrun for about twenty-five thousand dollars, which was a fortune to me,” he said. “We moved into a slightly larger apartment in the same building, with a little back yard. From that point, I started to have more resources, but I never felt more wealthy than I did with that twenty-five thousand dollars.”

Johnson’s art was finding new buyers. In 2011, he and Hovsepian bought a house near the ocean in Bellport, on Long Island. They had been married there the year before, at the home of his uncle, an investment banker, who urged them to buy a house nearby, and to get professional financial advice. Soon after that, Vito Schnabel, an engaging young art dealer and the son of the artist Julian Schnabel, introduced them to the basketball superstar LeBron James and his business partner, Maverick Carter, both of whom had recently started collecting Johnson’s work. Carter arranged for his friend Paul Wachter to become the couple’s financial adviser. “To make that kind of money was intimidating,” Johnson told me, “and even more intimidating was the success.” Becoming well known brought a new form of anxiety: he worried that success would interfere with his freedom to do what he wanted.

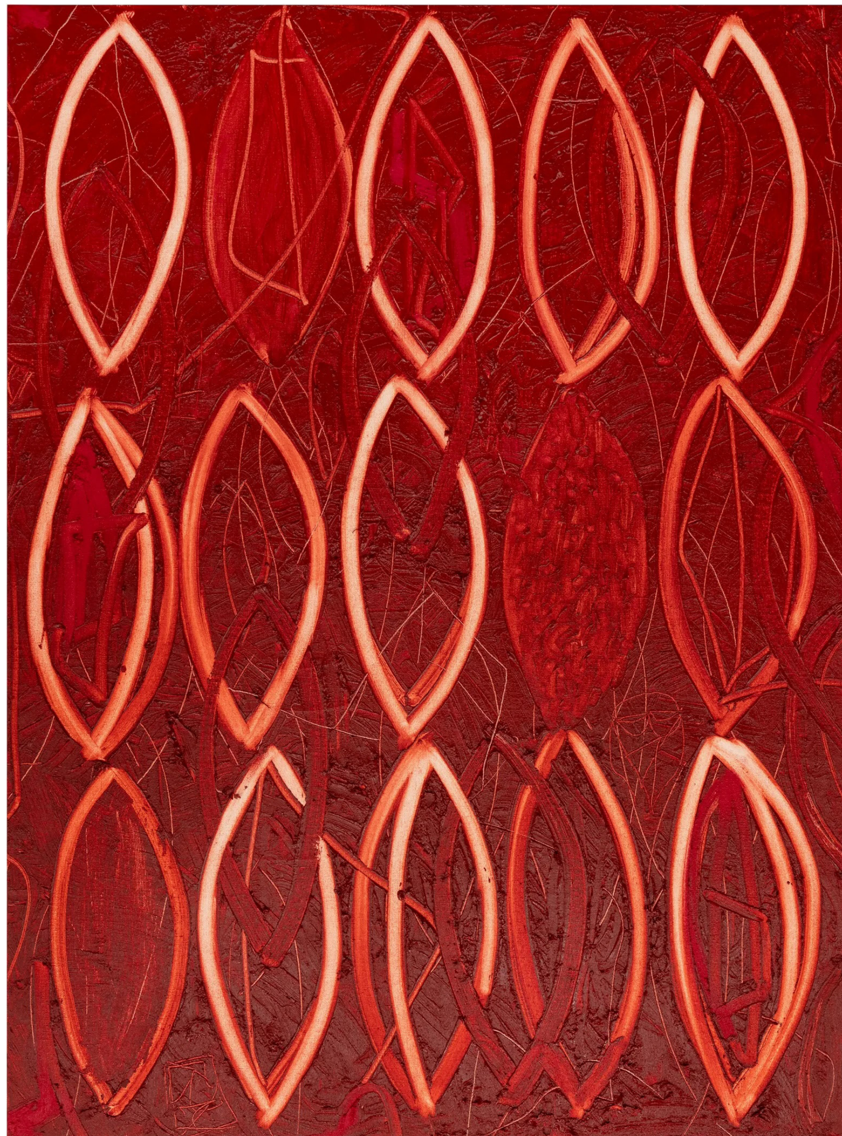
Johnson had a drinking problem, although for years hardly anyone thought that it was a problem. He never slurred words, or fell down, or failed to function at his usual high level. “We would all hang out in bars after work and drink Jack Daniel’s, which was sort of synonymous with Rashid,” said Rob Davis, an artist and an old friend who had become, with Alex Ernst, one of Johnson’s two main assistants. He added that Johnson eventually switched to tequila and red wine. “I drank often, consistently, and every day,” Johnson said. The drinking had started when he was fifteen, cutting classes to tag walls and trains with spray paint. “By the time I got to college, I was a veteran drinker and drug taker, cocaine mostly,” he said. It became harder and harder for him to pretend that this was not a big deal. The drinking increased, as it usually does. “It had started to take a toll on him physically. He was feeling sick a lot,” Ernst said. Hovsepian told him that the drinking had to stop, and Johnson kept saying he was going to stop, but nothing changed until Julius was born, in 2011. Johnson wanted desperately to be a good father, and he came to realize that unless he quit drinking he would lose any hope of that, and everything else he had built his life around. He went into rehab for several weeks in 2012, at the Canyon treatment center, in Malibu, where he was introduced to Alcoholics Anonymous. After two months of sobriety, he started drinking again, with predictable results. But, this time, he didn’t need rehab. He made a full commitment to A.A., and he has been sober ever since. He has also helped persuade countless others to make the same commitment.

Joel Mesler, an artist and art dealer who idolized Johnson when they were drinking buddies on the Lower East Side, was, as he put it, “kind of scared” to hear his friend say that he needed help to get sober, that he couldn’t have done it on his own. “I always thought he could do anything,” Mesler told me. Mesler kept on drinking, and getting sicker, until a year later, when he was hired as a visiting artist in the Hunter College art program. “They were going to pay me two hundred dollars per diem, and the night before it started I drank way too much and had a lot of cocaine,” he recalled. “I was having breakfast with Rashid the next day, shaking all over and wondering how I could talk to these kids, and he said he was coming with me. It ended with me in the toilet throwing up and Rashid talking to the students. After that, Rashid made me call the therapist who had helped him. I had two sessions with her, joined A.A., and haven’t had a drink since.”

In July, 2014, Johnson, Hovsepian, and a two-year-old Julius were lying on the beach in Turks and Caicos. A lot had happened in the past three years. Johnson had had his first solo museum show, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. He was now represented by the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, and globally by Hauser & Wirth, which was becoming one of the big four international super-galleries. “Rashid was the quarterback of our American program,” Iwan Wirth told me. “He and Mark Bradford, who came soon after him, helped us build a community of African American artists. His work was tough, not at all commercial”—these were the years of the black-soap paintings and the Cosmic Slops—“but it sold very well in the U.S. and in Europe, at prices from thirty to fif-

ty thousand dollars, and we had several collectors for every painting.” The *Times* critic Roberta Smith, who had panned Johnson’s 2012 Hauser & Wirth show (“his work has become slicker and emptier, losing its rough edges and layered meanings”), devoted a full page to a glowing review of his “Fly Away” exhibition, in 2016: “He sometimes walks a fine, angry line between art-making and something like vandalism, creating and destroying.”

Johnson and Hovsepian had moved out of the Lower East Side, first to Brooklyn, and two years later to a town house on Twenty-ninth Street and Lexington Avenue. On the beach in Turks and Caicos, Johnson thought about the “higher power” that A.A. told its acolytes they had to believe in. “They don’t say what it is,” he told me. “It doesn’t even have to be spiritual. Your higher power can be an elephant or a cobweb in a corner. You just have to believe in something bigger than you. I’d never had any sort of engagement with religion. My father was a strict



“The Baths” (2024), part of Johnson’s series “God Paintings.” Art Work by Rashid Johnson; Photograph by Stephanie Powell / Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

atheist, and my mother was agnostic. My first instinct was to ask, 'What does this higher being look like? How do you imagine it?' Lying there on the beach, with my son and my wife, I remember closing my eyes and feeling really quiet and peaceful. There was a reddish light coming through my eyelids, and I thought, I'm just going to call that God. Something happened during this trip. I was looking for guidance, and it all kind of jelled for me at that moment, this surrender to something bigger than I was."

The first works in a series called "Anxious Men" appeared soon after Turks and Caicos. Painted on white tiles with melted wax and black soap, they showed a semi-abstract, anguished-looking human face—the same face over and over, with slight variations—in fiercely scribbled lines. There were small images on single tiles and larger ones on many tiles joined together. "Sobriety had amplified my own anxiety," Johnson said. "I was trying to navigate a world in which I didn't have alcohol as a crutch, and I was a new father who was going to have to explain to his son the complexities of America's issue with race. In a lot of ways, those paintings were a catharsis." They débuted in a solo show at the Drawing Center, in 2015. (A *Times* review said, "Mr. Johnson's handling of materials is visceral; the quasi-faces fill their white frames in a way that feels unavoidable, necessary.") Johnson was showing new sculptures now, too—cagelike steel boxes—in solo exhibitions on the High Line, on Manhattan's West Side, and at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, in Moscow. Shea butter, a natural oil that his mother brought back from trips to Africa, made frequent appearances in the sculptures. Derived from the seeds of African shea trees, it has long been a popular moisturizer there; Johnson remembered thinking that it was like putting Africa on your body. Rectangular yellow blocks resembling the butter, some of them carved into heads or busts, turned up in the steel boxes that he stacked and transformed into large structures, filled with growing plants in clay pots he had made, along with books by Black authors, radios, television sets, and watering systems for the plants.

The "Anxious Men" evolved into "Broken Men" in 2016. At first, they were done the same way, with black pigment on white tiles, but the medium soon changed to mosaics—multicolored shards of mirrored and ceramic tiles, wax, and other materials, set in gray grout and painted over with an oil stick and spray enamel. (On a recent trip to Spain, Johnson had been struck by the mosaics in Barcelona.) Over the next five years, Johnson's mosaics, assembled with the help of studio assistants, grew larger and more ambitious. "The Broken Five," from 2019, is eight and a half feet tall by fourteen feet wide—a vivid, teeming assemblage of abstract but unmistakably human figures. It was inspired by the Central Park Five, the name given to the Black and Latino teen-agers who in 1989 were wrongly accused of attacking and raping a white woman in Central Park. (Donald Trump subsequently bought advertisements in New York City's major newspapers, including the *Times*, calling for the revival of the death penalty, but, after serving thirteen years in prison, the boys were exonerated and released.) "The Broken Five," which comes dangerously close to being a masterpiece, is now owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

For many years, Johnson had wanted to make a feature film, and in 2018 he signed a contract to direct an adaptation of “Native Son,” Richard Wright’s 1940 novel. “My mother gave me the book when I was young, with the caveat that she didn’t like it,” he told me. “She was really disturbed by the protagonist, Bigger Thomas. She thought Wright had created a wildly complicated Black character who was without empathy.” Johnson had been thinking about the story for a long time. He wanted to make Bigger even more complicated—“a person invested in anger and transgression, but living a life that allows you to see his kaleidoscopic experience of Blackness.”

Once he decided to make the movie, there was no lack of people ready to help him. Two producers for the film raised four million dollars—not a lot by Hollywood standards but enough for the picture he had in mind. Johnson’s friend Suzan-Lori Parks, the Pulitzer-winning playwright, agreed to write the screenplay, and his indispensable studio assistant Ernst served as a working producer. “I loved the process and I hated it,” Johnson said. “The collaborative aspect was new to me, and it was a steep learning curve—like being a general in the Latvian Army without speaking Latvian. But we sold the film to HBO, and it was quite successful, with a lot of positive reactions and a lot of non-positive ones, mainly by people who didn’t like tampering with a classic.” One of the main deviations from Wright’s book came in the character of Bigger Thomas. In the book, he is a monster who murders two young women, shows no remorse, and tries to pin the blame on the first victim’s white Communist boyfriend. He accidentally suffocates a girl with a pillow while trying to keep her quiet so that her blind mother won’t realize she’s not alone in her room. Johnson and Parks recast him as a far more tragic figure. “You’re so handsome,” the girl giggles, minutes before her death. She has fallen in love with him. I had trouble believing that Bigger Thomas could have accidentally suffocated the girl in thirty seconds, as he does in the film, but I kept thinking about that scene and others long after I saw them.

“I learned a tremendous amount from ‘Native Son,’ ” Johnson told me. This was evident in a seven-minute video that he made soon afterward, called “The Hikers.” In it, two young Black men wearing masks, both of them dancers, meet on a mountain trail in Aspen. One is climbing, struggling with every step; the other, who is descending, moves freely and proudly. Their meeting lasts about a minute, and in Johnson’s virtuoso handling it conveys surprise, suspicion, gratitude, and brotherhood. “I just tried to imagine what the inner reactions to such a meeting would be for two Black men in that magnificent wilderness, using dance and movement and the African masks I created,” Johnson said. His most recent video, “Sanguine,” had its début at his Paris show in October. The five-minute work shows Julius, Jimmy Johnson, and Rashid walking on a beach, rubbing sunscreen on one another’s backs, playing chess, reading, engaged with and taking care of each other. “I’d been thinking about being simultaneously a father and a son,” he explained. “The word ‘sanguine’ is meant to include both its definitions—the color and the idea of optimism.” He is currently working on his second full-length feature. He owns the film rights to Percival Everett’s “So Much Blue,”

a novel about an artist. “We have a script that we’re really comfortable with,” Johnson told me at the end of October.

The pandemic, which profoundly changed so many lives, “opened a whole new opportunity for me as a painter,” Johnson said. He and Hovsepian moved out of the city in 2020, to a house they had bought in Bridgehampton, on the eastern end of Long Island, where they homeschooled Julius (whose New York school had closed) and worked in their studios at night. A year later, they moved into the much bigger house they had bought in East Hampton. By then, Johnson, who during the pandemic was without studio assistants or anyone else to help him move large mosaics and heavy materials, had started to use oil paint on canvas. “For many years, I’d found ways to make marks and paintings without using traditional means,” he told me. “I just didn’t think I had anything to add to

“Summer Days” (2024), a work in Johnson’s “Soul Paintings” series. Art Work by Rashid Johnson; Photograph by Stephanie Powell / Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

the history of painting. But I was always a painter, in a way, and now I saw how accessible and direct and immediate traditional painting was." Johnson no longer thinks that he can't draw. "I'm actually quite good at drawing," he told me recently. "Just not in the way some people would feel is valuable."

In 2020, he began a series that he called "Anxious Red Paintings." Although clearly related to his black-and-white "Anxious Men," the red paintings—laid down with oil sticks (not brushes) over several layers of titanium-zinc white—had a sense of urgency that came from the paint itself, a bright crimson that he had developed with a paint company in upstate New York, and also from the murder of George Floyd. "Outside the history of public lynchings, watching a human being have his life drained away was devastating," Johnson told me. "Anxious Red Paintings" came about after that. They were followed, in 2021, by a series of dark-blue "Bruise Paintings" (the color of "blunt-force trauma," as he described it, and also of healing) and, a year later, by white "Surrender Paintings," whose title refers to the "higher power" that A.A. wants its acolytes to find. In the course of the next few years, he produced a galaxy of new works—"Seascape Paintings," "God Paintings" (with deep-red backgrounds), "Soul Paintings." Most of these are large canvases in which a small, single motif—a boat, a skeletal human torso—is repeated again and again, on a background of subtle, atmospheric color. Not until the "Soul" series, in 2022, did he use traditional brushes, and the way he used them was decidedly nontraditional.

"I'm not accustomed to softness in mark-making," he explained. "I use the end of the brush as much as the brush side, and I use it to grind the material into the canvas. My marking strategy tends to be quite brutal." The new paintings are often beautiful in more familiar ways than his previous ones, and at the same time throbbing with internal energy. There is a powerful sense of Johnson reaching for new and bolder challenges in his ongoing dialogues with reality and metaphysical thinking, material and idea.

In November, a gigantic public art work by Johnson, "Village of the Sun," opened in a park in front of the old Doha International Airport, in Qatar. On four eighty-foot-long-by-fifteen-foot-high walls, mosaics with images that resemble those found in his "Broken Men" series tell their perplexing and sometimes ominous stories. It is by far the largest thing he has done, and it arrived two years late—the work was supposed to welcome visitors to the opening of the Fifa World Cup in 2022. "The site wasn't finished in time, but that was a blessing in disguise," Johnson said. "It got its own stage, separate from the World Cup."

The survey of Johnson's work at the Guggenheim next year will be the largest and most ambitious exhibition of his career to date. He described it as "a before-and-after situation," an opportunity to see where he is after twenty-eight years as a practicing artist. It will occupy the whole museum and cover every aspect of his work—"full-frontal nudity," as he jokingly called it. "I'm a Guggenheim artist," he said to me in the spring. "My project is deeply rooted in what the Gug-

genheim does—critical thinking and theory, abstraction married to philosophy and aesthetics.” Johnson served on the museum’s board of trustees from 2016 to 2022. He was the first artist to do so (unless you count Hilla von Rebay, a portrait painter who became the Guggenheim’s founding director). Racial tensions had been building up in the museum world, and Nancy Spector and several of the other Guggenheim curators convinced Richard Armstrong, then the institution’s director (he retired in 2023), that putting Johnson on the board would be a useful move.

Johnson’s “New Poetry” (2023), which extends from the Whitney Museum of American Art’s lobby to its front plaza. Art Work by Rashid Johnson / Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art

“For the first year or so, Rashid didn’t say much in board meetings,” Armstrong recalled, “but then, in the crisis around George Floyd, everyone began asking, ‘What do you think?’ ” He was put on the executive committee of the board, and “he really rose to the occasion.” Naomi Beckwith, the curator, told me, “Rashid was an incredibly effective trustee. His voice was essential during the pandemic, not just on aesthetic issues but on questions of social justice and leadership.” Eyebrows were raised when the museum scheduled Johnson’s survey exhibition

soon after he stepped down from the board. (The preferred sequence is for an artist to have the big show before being invited to a board.) “It was kind of understood very early that the Guggenheim wanted to work with me as an artist,” Johnson explained. “At the time, I was too young for a big ambitious exhibition, so I guess we kind of put the cart before the horse.” He is also on the board of Performa, the performing-arts foundation based in New York, and Ballroom Marfa, a non-collecting contemporary-art space in West Texas. He enjoys taking on these public responsibilities. Generous by nature, he has always helped younger artists by buying their work, recommending it to galleries and collectors, and including it in shows that he curates. “I’m an artist and I’m going to make art, but I’m also trying to be thoughtful and helpful and present,” he told me.

He goes to the Guggenheim every week when he’s in town, often on Sundays. “I just walk around by myself,” he said. “I’m trying to learn more about the history of the place. The other day, I saw this great picture of John Coltrane inside the museum—one of my heroes—walking up and down the circular ramps. It was iconic. I love the opportunity to be part of that history.”

There are almost ninety works in his Guggenheim show. Since he began using oil on canvas, his paintings have become increasingly traditional in their effect, if not in their making, and this led me to ask him whether he still considered himself a conceptual artist. He thought about this, and said, “No, I don’t. I just don’t need that anymore. I don’t need defining language.” He rubbed his nose. “I probably misunderstood Duchamp,” he added. “I recognize now that Duchamp, for all his beautiful, sinister, strange, intellectual, and engaged thought, was also a man who just wanted to make art.” ♦

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