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Rashid Johnson and the Fine Art of Anxiety



Erik Tanner for TIME

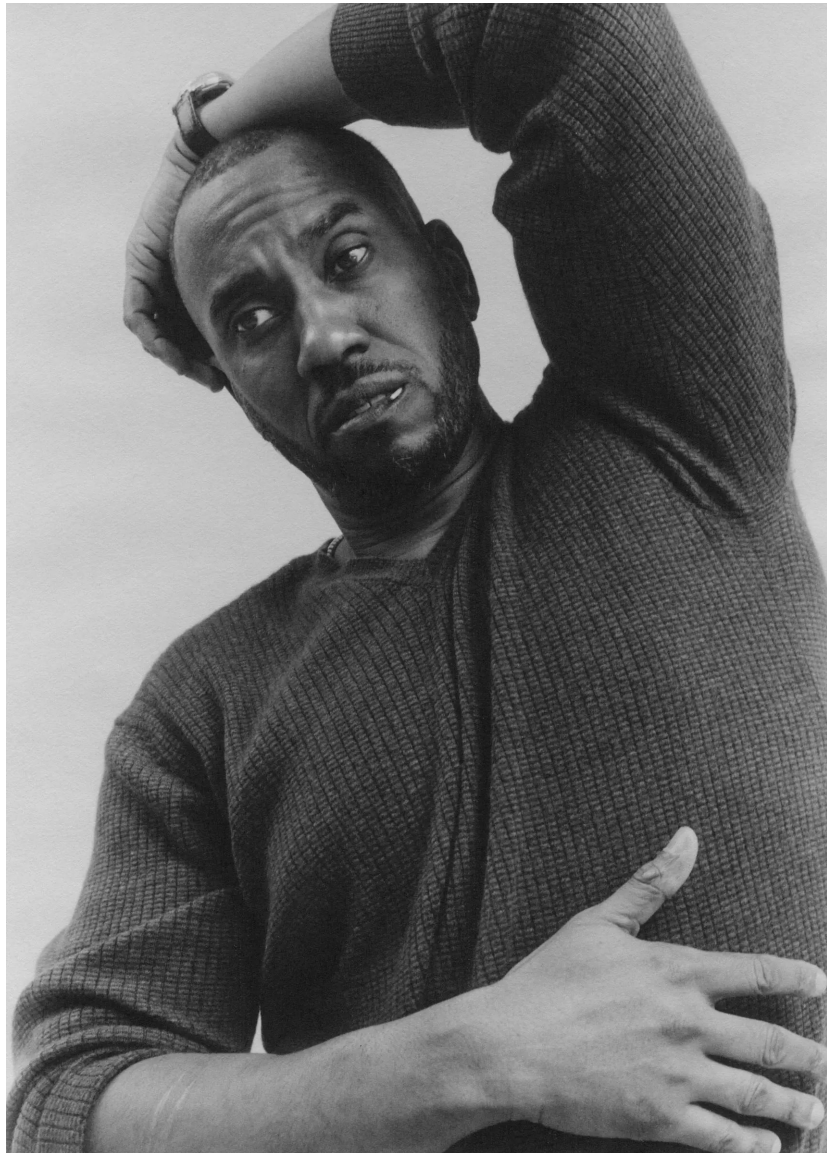
by **Belinda Luscombe**
EDITOR AT LARGE

Jan. 28, 1986, was a day that changed Rashid Johnson. He remembers the TV set being rolled into his elementary-school classroom in Evanston, Ill. He remembers watching with his classmates as the space shuttle *Challenger* flew into the air and transformed into a stream of white cloud. "I remember how that affected my thinking, recognizing that failure was possible amongst adults, amongst folks who we were supposed to trust," says the artist, sitting in his spacious Brooklyn studio, surrounded by works that are being prepared for a massive midcareer survey at the Guggenheim in New York City. "That was a big one for me."

Seeing the footage of Rodney King being beaten by police in Los Angeles in 1991 also loomed large in Johnson's life, as well as the acquittal of those officers of any wrongdoing, and the riots that followed. "I was in my young teenage years at that point," says Johnson, now 47. "And becoming aware of the angst and anxiety and frustration of Black folks in America against the backdrop of what absolutely felt like incredibly unfair decisionmaking by the collective."

The artist has lived through joyous moments in history too—two days before the *Challenger* explosion, the Bears won their first and only Super Bowl—but it's the alarming ones that made the biggest impression. "I was an anxious kid," he says. "I think what we're exposed to at different stages in our lives absolutely informs how we see the world."

Johnson has spent his career exploring, via his hands, what it means to be unsettled and what it means to be Black and what it means to be male and what it



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means to be Rashid Johnson, using whatever medium he finds inspiring at the time. His artworks, which include paintings, sculptures, mixed-media assemblages, mosaics, photographs, and film, are full of mood and foreboding. There's beauty, humor, and exuberance as well. But it is the anxiety, especially as represented by a square-headed figure with whirlpool eyes and a frantically scribbled mouth, for which he is best known.

These days Johnson manages his anxiety in many ways. He's extremely punctual. He works out daily. He goes to the Russian baths a couple of times a week. He has given up alcohol, is a regular at AA meetings, and frequently deploys the Serenity Prayer. He recently decided that he can trust the things he can't control to God. Even so, as we speak he breaks out a packet of high-end Daneson toothpicks and chews on one. "This is born of an oral fixation after I quit smoking six years ago," he says.

He also works that anxiety out through his art, in series with such titles as *Anxious Men*, *Broken Men*, *Anxious Red*, *Surrender Paintings*, and *Bruise Paintings*. The first of these was made in 2014, during the Black Lives Matter protests. He was a father by then and newly sober, so his reasons to worry increased just as he cut off access to his go-to liquid soothers. "I was thinking about my anxiety," he says, "and kind of almost humorously depicting this character of anxiety, or trying to illustrate what anxiety might look like, through a set of wild gestures."

The motif became newly relevant during the pandemic amid the stay-at-home measures and the increase in police-brutality videos that surfaced after George Floyd's murder. "When people were taking ownership of it," he says, "I began to make crowds and groups of anxious men, because I recognized that it was a collective position." Now the Anxious Man has become one of his signatures. And like Keith Haring's Radiant Baby or Jean-Michel Basquiat's crown, it has attained totem status; it's on T-shirts, plates, and jewelry. Not only does Kendall Roy wear a \$30,000 dog-tag pendant with the image on it during his "progressive" phase in *Succession*, the actor who plays him, Jeremy Strong, owns another version of the necklace, with his daughters' names and birthdays engraved on the back.

One thing Johnson has rarely had to worry about is critical or commercial support. His solo show at the Guggenheim, "Rashid Johnson: A Poem for Deep Thinkers," opens April 18, and will feature some 25 years of work, including photos he took in his early 20s, which were selected for Thelma Golden's seminal "Freestyle" show at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2001. He has pieces in galleries and public spaces across the globe and has had solo shows on nearly every continent. His work is prized by collectors and keeps getting more valuable. (In November, a triptych of *Anxious Men* paintings sold for \$2.7 million at Christie's.) He and his wife, the artist Sheree Hovsepian, have swoon-worthy houses in Manhattan's Gramercy Park and the beach town of East Hampton. On the day TIME visits his studio, he is wearing a \$4,000 cashmere tracksuit and a

\$200,000-plus Rolex Daytona Le Mans, which isn't even his fanciest watch.

Golden exhibited Johnson's photographs of homeless men, which he'd printed using a 19th century technique known as Van Dyke brown, because she recognized "these deeply intimate and engaged portraits that felt old while they were at the very same time, very new," she says. "Van Dyke prints often indicate to us a certain sense of historic photography. Rashid, as a young artist, was taking that on in a way that I felt also showed how much he had looked at the history of photography and portraiture as a base."

Golden wasn't the only person who intuited Johnson's success early. McArthur Binion, a painter who took Johnson under his wing in the graduate program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, noticed right away that he had all the ingredients to make it big. "You have to have the right brain cells and the right support. Rashid is fourth-generation college-educated, and as a Black person in America, that's amazing," says Binion. But it wasn't just the education. "Pardon my French, but he has balls. He's smart. He's good-looking," says Binion. "He has a level of patience; he allows things to come to him."



Untitled (Shea Butter Table), 2016 Martin Parsekian—Courtesy Rashid Johnson

Binion used to meet former students at a bar every second Wednesday. At one of those soirées a few years after Johnson graduated, Binion told him he could see his future. "I told him, 'Next year you are gonna make at least \$100,000 from your art.' And he laughed at me. He said, 'No way,'" says Binion. "And he made \$200,000."



Untitled (Shea Butter Table), 2016 Martin Parsekian—Courtesy Rashid Johnson

"I've been rewarded in ways that I would never have expected to be rewarded as an artist," says Johnson, who grew up more or less middle class. His mother Cheryl Johnson-Odim was a history professor and anti-apartheid activist in Chicago and is still a poet, and his father Jimmy Johnson owned an electronics company. "I'm grateful every time a work of mine is acquired," he says. But he feels no obligation to feed the art market. "I don't have to pander to that wealth creation."

Things were different when he showed at Nicole Klagsbrun's Manhattan gallery in 2008. A few days before the exhibit came down, nothing much had sold. The show was mostly photographs from Johnson's *The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club* series, faux-historical portraits of sharply dressed Black men one might find in an old-school club lounge, with names that evoke Black history such as Emmett and Thurgood. There was also a crosshair sculpture that referenced the logo of the band Public Enemy.

It seemed an unlikely venue for a breakthrough. "Nicole was located, like, on the sixth floor of some monster building," says Mera Rubell, an influential collector and the co-founder of the Rubell museums. "You know, you get off the elevator and walk three miles inside the building to get to a door." Rubell may be foggy on the location, but she has a crystal-clear recall of what she found behind that door.

"We walked in and we said, 'Wait a minute. How is this possible, that this work is available?'" she says of the visit with her husband and co-founder Don and her son Jason, who works with them. "We just were kind of blown away. This is a talent that we didn't know, which is what we live for." They bought six pieces for their show "30 Americans," which traveled to 17 other galleries, and they put one of Johnson's photographs on the cover of the catalog. (They now own 22.) There's never just one big break in an art career, but that was a good-size one.

Both Golden and the Rubells were drawn in by the work, but what really sealed the deal was meeting the artist. "He's far more educated and sophisticated than most artists," says Don, unable to resist jumping in on his wife's speakerphone call from Miami. Johnson has a serious but friendly way of bringing people into his vision. "I've always tried to be really attentive to answering questions," he says, "so that if there's an audience in the future and they have the curiosity and the ambition and the enthusiasm to search out what I was thinking about around it, I'd provide the language."



Art handlers hold a painting by Johnson titled *Untitled Anxious Audience* at Christie's in London on June 20, 2023. Wiktor Szymanowicz—Future Publishing/Getty Images

And while Johnson grew up around "wordy people"—his younger sister is also a poet and his older brother is a lawyer—he's not precious about the way his art is talked about. "I really don't like the idea that my project, even with all of its diversity and complexity, is opaque," he says. "I want people to feel agency to talk about it, say what they feel when they see it, and to trust themselves."

The Guggenheim is something of a homecoming for Johnson; he served on its board for seven years until 2023. ("While the idea of organizing an exhibition has been in progress for a long time, plans did not proceed until after Rashid's tenure on the board was over," says a museum spokesperson.) As he's revisited his work and figured out how to display it best in the museum's famous curved ramp, he's had a chance to reflect on the many paths he's explored.

These paths have included, so far, working with hair lotion, shea-butter soap, wax, shelving, at least one piano, mirrors, tiles, vinyl records, and old wooden floors as well as such conventional art products as oil paint and canvas. "My interests happen to consider both the aesthetic sensibility of an art object, how it can be rewarding to witness, and how it can be rewarding to think about in a more critical way," he says. "That dichotomy is very specific to how I think."

Take shea butter, for instance. Johnson grew up using the soap in his home. He saw it for sale in Afrocentric stores or on the street. "It became this tool that was understood as a representation of an Africanness," he says. "But it also has a utility, it moisturizes your body. Some people, historically, would cook with it. So I became really interested in the material, and I found ways to deploy it."

The show is also allowing him to revisit some old ideas, and to play with them. "There's a body of work called *Cosmic Slops* that I was making around 2008 that were about incising and the removal of material and how you create lines," he says. He points to two cream paintings in front of him. "These works, which I'm calling *Quiet Paintings*, are actually the children of those. They were finished yesterday."

He seems to be relishing the opportunity to get away from just being the Anxious Man. "I'm also a person filled with joy. I have an endless number of positive interactions and family and experiences and things that make me, you know, happy," he says. "I think the Guggenheim show will kind of amplify that, like, this sh-t to me is sometimes very funny."

Johnson has the kind of success people dream of. He's wealthy beyond his wildest imagination. He has enough influence that he can—and does—shine a light on other artists. He and his L.A. art dealer David Kordansky have resurrected the careers of several overlooked Black artists, including Sam Gilliam before he died. But asked when he knew that he was going to make it as an artist, Johnson can't quite get there. "I've always been a person who aspired to the freedom of the

idea that I would at some point have the resources and enthusiasm of an audience that would allow me to do this in perpetuity. That's absolutely something I aspire to," he says. "I think I'm getting closer."