

‘Rashid Johnson: A Poem for Deep Thinkers’ Review: A Busy Mind at Work at the Guggenheim

The multidisciplinary artist’s retrospective reveals the challenges and rewards of grappling with wide-ranging interests.

By Brian P. Kelly
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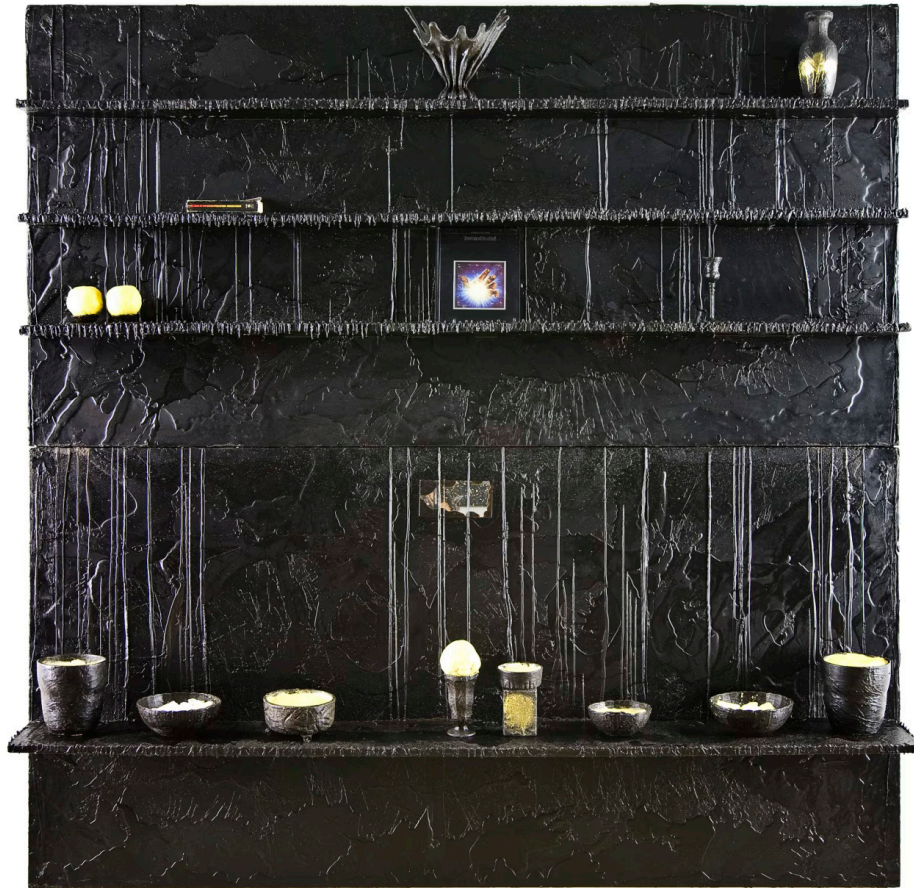
RASHID JOHNSON'S 'THE BROKEN FIVE' (2019).

New York

“A Poem for Deep Thinkers,” Rashid Johnson’s knotty retrospective that just opened at the Guggenheim, draws its title from a work by Amiri Baraka. Like that activist writer, the Chicago-born artist has an omnivorous intellect, one that he proudly displays in this presentation of nearly 90 works from his three-decade career.

Baraka wrote that “We need to use, to use, all the all the skills all the spills and thrills that we conjure, that we construct, that we lay out and put together, to create life as beautiful as we thought it could be.” Mr. Johnson has taken that directive to heart and deploys a dizzying array of references and touchstones in his art—from the jazz of Charles Mingus to the writings of Frantz Fanon, the art of Bruce Nauman and the history of black education in America.

Long before trendy cocktail bars gave new life to the term, artists were the original mixologists—both literally and metaphorically. Carefully blending paint or commingling esoteric symbols, they took the raw components of natural materials and human id and transformed them into something grand: vibrant hues, mind-bending images, works of art. The challenge in performing such alchemy comes from restraint: Too much of it and work becomes unsurprising, soporific; too little, and colors and meanings are muddled.



RASHID JOHNSON'S 'THE CRISIS OF THE NEGRO INTELLECTUAL (THE POWER OF HEALING)' (2008).

Across this exhibition we can see Mr. Johnson struggling with this balance. A series of spray-painted text-works fall flat— “Death,” “Run,” “Fly Away” they cry out, but despite their charged messages they are empty of any cautionary or motivational power. Elsewhere his creations are overstuffed. A pair of white sleds, one broken and one intact, create a striking juxtaposition, but as a wall text tries to untangle their meaning it brings up the history of women’s rights in Nigeria, Fela Kuti, Chinua Achebe, Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys. Conceptual art has a bad reputation when it comes to opacity, but the best of it requires only a gentle nudge for viewer engagement; several of Mr. Johnson’s works feel like they require a doctorate.

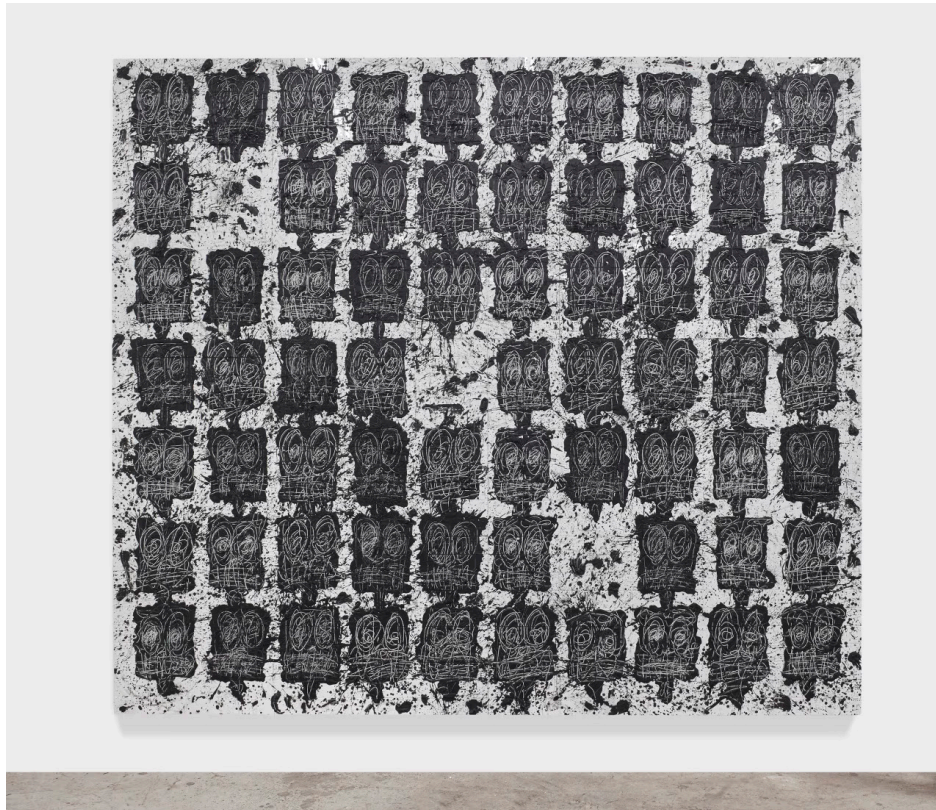
If that’s to say that Mr. Johnson often makes scholarly art, it’s not to dismiss all such creations out of hand. His wall-hung “shelf” pieces are arguably as esoteric, yet they are incredibly captivating. His “The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (The Power of Healing)” (2008) is a haunting and haunted 8-by-8 foot assemblage that’s part bookcase, part altar, part shrine. Coated in his signature (and unconventional) materials—wax and black soap—a Time Life book inspiring the parenthetical title rests on a shelf high above, close to a copy of Harold Cruse’s book that lends the work its primary title. Below, ceremonial vessels hold shea butter, and a mirror is embedded in the surface: We bow down to peer into it and see ourselves reflected, honoring the totems before us and becoming part of this memorial to black history and thought.



RASHID JOHNSON'S 'UNTITLED (SHEA BUTTER TABLE)' (2016).

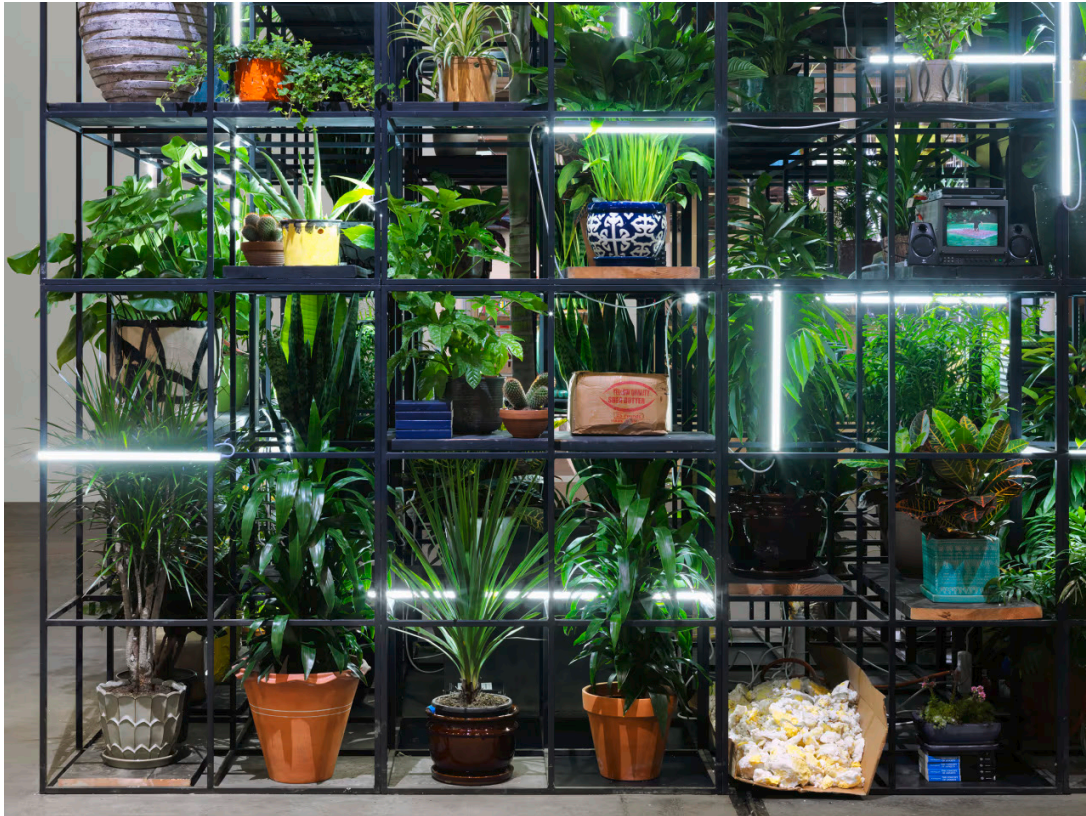
Mr. Johnson’s catholic tastes extend beyond his inspirations and into his materials and processes. Shea butter, wax and black soap recur throughout his oeuvre, but we also see him working in mosaic; creating on tiles (a nod to a bathhouse where he spent many hours); branding wood and rugs; shooting photos; printing in Van Dyke brown; and creating videos, collages, ceramics and traditional paintings.

There is much to laud in his wide-ranging practice. His pictures of homeless men are touching portraits that humanize and eulogize his subjects without pathologizing them. His films featuring “Black Yoga” upend the ancient Indian practice and its adoption by a largely white audience in the West, transforming it into energetic freestyle dance and martial arts. Head-like ceramic planters recall the work of David Drake and enslaved potters in the American South who created face vessels. A large walnut table covered in brands is draped in a Persian rug and topped with 12 blocks of shea butter, roughly carved into human visages—a nod to the Last Supper. We are left to wonder where the 13th figure is, and who is missing. Are we a stand-in for Jesus? For Judas?



RASHID JOHNSON'S 'UNTITLED ANXIOUS AUDIENCE' (2019).

Some of the strongest work here grapples with emotion, especially anxiety. “The Broken Five” (2019) is a hefty mosaic with a quintet of figures that taps into the history of violence common to the black experience throughout American history. But its bright colors offer hope to the shattered individuals who make up the composition, suggesting that trauma is not the end of beauty. And his monumental wall work that greets visitors as they enter and leave the show, “Untitled Anxious Audience” (2019), features 67 grimacing faces created by pouring black soap and wax on tiles and then carving away their features. These characters are both embodiments of our pain and a reminder of the hardships those around us experience—and the masks we wear to hide our suffering from the world.



DETAIL OF RASHID JOHNSON'S 'ANTOINE'S ORGAN' (2016).

On the top floor of the show, Mr. Johnson has created a sprawling installation that summarizes everything that has come before as we've climbed the spiraling ramp of the Guggenheim. Packed with plants, books, ceramics, paintings, a film and even a piano, it's practically bursting (while nodding to Marcel Broodthaers's use of flora in some of his work). More plants seem to have exploded from the space, and are suspended midair across the museum's rotunda. It's an apt metaphor for a creative mind overflowing with ideas.

Rashid Johnson: A Poem for Deep Thinkers

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, through Jan. 18, 2026
