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Rashid Johnson Comes Home With an MCA Retrospective

"A Poem for Deep Thinkers" looks at almost 30 years of the artist's vaunted work.



The artist in his Brooklyn studio (Jeremy Liebman/for Chicago Magazine)

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Rashid Johnson's face relaxes into a sheepish smile, the kind of grin born of a brief pause, a moment to reflect. "There are very few jobs in life," he says, "in which you get to what people consider the middle of it, and they ask you to put down your pen and look at everything you did."

Johnson, 49, is preparing for the Chicago launch of *A Poem for Deep Thinkers*, his mid-career retrospective opening November 7 at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Surveying nearly 30 years of work, the exhibition reflects an artist's nuanced evolution from a young photographer shooting in Chicago's South Loop to an internationally renowned Brooklyn-based creator of large-form paintings and sculptures. "This experience of flattening your life," he continues, "it's really radical and really complicated, but also simultaneously really rewarding."

Johnson split his childhood between Evanston, where his mother was assistant director of Northwestern's African studies program, and Wicker Park, where his father ran an electronics shop. He cut his teeth as an artist at Columbia College Chicago, majoring in photography; he then pursued an MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His art is a reflection of the city's Black experience: a vibrant culture alongside deeply established segregation. "Chicago continues to be a place that teaches lessons that are hard to learn sometimes," he says.



The exhibition "A Poem for Deep Thinkers" features Johnson's photography, including the 2008 self-portrait "The Reader" (courtesy of Dr. Kenneth Montague, the Wedge Collection, and Monique Meloche Gallery)

In Johnson's early work, his world was distinctly local. In 1998, a series of portraits of homeless men in the South Loop, photographed with an unflinching gaze, launched his career. "As a younger artist, because you have less experience, the thing you often have at your disposal is the world outside of you," Johnson notes. "I think oftentimes we're trying to understand the puzzle of the world."

What this retrospective does — as all good ones do — is show the growth not only of the art but of the artist. "These are the ideas of a 22-year-old man next to the ideas of a 48-year-old man," Johnson says. After a move to New York's Lower East Side in 2005, he began to turn his eye inward. For many of his later works, it's the man himself who becomes the material. In *Sanguine*, a recent short film, Johnson moves through the world with his father and son as they spend time together and care for each other.

Much has been noted about the media Johnson employs in his art, from the traditional (film, paint, canvas) to the unexpected (shea butter, black soap, potted plants). "I've said that anything can be a medium," Johnson says. "Empathy can be a medium. If you're able to conjure it into a space, it becomes an active ingredient in the way that an artwork is read and able to be translated."



Mixed-media work "Falling Man" (Martin Parsekian/courtesy of Marguerite Steed Hoffman)

So it makes sense that Chicago — as a city, as a cultural nexus, as a hometown — takes its place in Johnson's wide and varied palette. While this isn't the first or last stop of *A Poem for Deep Thinkers* (it began at the Guggenheim in New York City last year and, after more than five months at the MCA, will travel to Berkeley, California), this iteration is singular in its Chicagoness. There's the location — the exhibition is redesigned to fit the unique galleries of the MCA — but also the audience. Johnson cites one piece in particular, Antoine's Organ, an installation that includes a piano among foliage, with an invitation for local musicians to play it. The possibilities excite him: "There are so many brilliant and exciting performers in Chicago."

There's also the universal truth about a homecoming, which initiates a tender alchemy between nostalgia and the present. Everything he has done in his career, Johnson says, "I see it all as one project" — a personal, decades-long undertaking that examines the world and the man, made more intimate this fall by its new yet familiar surroundings. As if to say, *Welcome home, Rashid*.

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