DAVID
KORDANSKY
GALLERY

Rashid Johnson

Black and Blue

September 18 – October 30, 2021

press@davidkordanskygallery.com
www.davidkordanskygallery.com
T: 323.935.3030 F: 323.935.3031

DAVID
KORDANSKY
GALLERY

RASHID JOHNSON

born 1977, Chicago IL
lives and works in New York, NY

EDUCATION

2004 MFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
2000 BA, Columbia College, Chicago, IL

SELECTED SOLO / TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS
(* indicates a publication)

2021 *Black and Blue,* David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
The Crisis, Storm King Art Center, New Windsor, NY
Summer Projects: Rashid Johnson, Creative Time, New York, NY
The Bruising: For Jules, The Bird, Jack and Leni, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR
Capsule, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada

2020 *Waves*, Hauser & Wirth, London, England
Stage, *PS1 COURTYARD: an experiment in creative ecologies*, MoMA PS1, Long Island City, NY

2019 *The Hikers*, Museo Tamayo, Mexico City, Mexico
The Hikers, Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO
It Never Entered My Mind, Hauser & Wirth, St. Moritz, Switzerland
Anxious Audience, Fleck Clerestory Commissioning Project, curated by Lauren Barnes, The Power Plant, Toronto, Canada
The Hikers, Hauser & Wirth, New York, NY

2018 **No More Water,* Lismore Castle Arts, Lismore, Ireland
**The Rainbow Sign*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Provocations: Rashid Johnson, Institute for Contemporary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

2017 *Anxious Audience*, organized by Annin Arts, Billboard 8171, London Bridge, England

Stranger, Hauser & Wirth Somerset, Bruton, England
Rashid Johnson: The New Black Yoga and Samuel in Space, McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX
Hail We Now Sing Joy, organized by Erin Dziedzic, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO; Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI

2016 *Fly Away*, Hauser & Wirth, New York, NY
**Within Our Gates*, Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, Russia
**Reasons*, GAMeC Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Bergamo, Italy

2015 **Anxious Men*, curated by Claire Gilman, The Drawing Center, New York, NY
Blocks, The High Line, New York, NY
Smile, Hauser & Wirth, London, England
Shea Wall, Grand Palais, Paris, France

2014 *Three Rooms*, Kunsthalle Winterthur, Switzerland
Islands, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
**Magic Numbers,* The George Economou Collection, Athens, Greece
New Growth, Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, CO

2013 *The gathering*, Hauser & Wirth, Zurich, Switzerland
New Growth, Ballroom Marfa, Marfa, TX
**Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO

2012 **Rashid Johnson: Shelter*, South London Gallery, London, England
Coup d'état, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
**Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL; Miami Art Museum, Miami, FL
Rumble, Hauser & Wirth, New York, NY

2010 *25 days after October*, Galleria Massimo De Carlo, Milan, Italy
Between Nothingness and Eternity, Carlson Gallery, London, England
There are Stranger Villages, Galerie Guido W. Baudach, Berlin, Germany
Our Kind of People, Salon 94, New York, NY
Art 41 Basel: Statements, David Kordansky Gallery, Basel, Switzerland

2009 *Other Aspects*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Smoke and Mirrors, Sculpture Center, Long Island City, NY
The Dead Lecturer: Laboratory, Dojo, and Performance Space, Power House Memphis, Memphis, TN

2008 *Cosmic Slops*, Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago, IL
**Sharpening My Oyster Knife*, Kunstmuseum Kloster Unser Lieben Fauen Magdeburg, Germany
The Dead Lecturer, Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, NY

2007 *Dark Matters*, James Harris Gallery, Seattle, WA

2005 *The Production of Escapism*, Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art, Indianapolis, IN

2003 *The Rise and Fall of the Proper Negro,* Moniquemeloche Gallery, Chicago, IL

2002 *12x12: New Artist/New Work*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
(* indicates a publication)

2021 *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, curated by Okwui Enwezor, New Museum, New York, NY
Promise, Witness, Remembrance, curated by Allison Glenn, Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY
Closer to Life: Drawings and Works on Paper in the Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, NY
Arcimboldo Face to Face, Centre Pompidou-Metz, Metz, France
The Stomach and the Port, 11th edition of The Liverpool Biennial, curated by Manuela Moscoso and Fatoş Üstek, various locations, Liverpool, England
What Is Left Unspoken, Love, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA

2020 *Allied with Power: African and African Diaspora Art from the Jorge M. Pérez Collection*, Pérez Art Museum Miami, Miami, FL
**Psychic Wounds: on Art and Trauma*, The Warehouse, Dallas, TX
Jellyfish, organized by Samantha Glaser-Weiss, Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Friend of Ours, curated by Joel Mesler and Benjamin Godsill, Rental Gallery, East Hampton, NY
100 Drawings from Now, curated by Claire Gilman, Laura Hoptman and Rosario Guiraldes, The Drawing Center, New York, NY
2020 Vision, co-curated by David Kratz, Stephanie Roach and edited by Emma Gilbey Keller, The New York Academy of Art residency, Southampton Arts Center, Southampton, NY

Contemporary Art + Design: New Acquisitions, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX
A Possible Horizon, de la Cruz Collection, Miami, FL
Artists for New York, Hauser & Wirth, New York, NY
Show Me the Signs, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, CA

2019 *Unbroken Current,* curated by Rachel Moore, Helen Day Art Center, Stowe, VT
Garden of Earthly Delights, curated by Stephanie Rosenthal with Clara Meister, Gropius Bau, Berlin, Germany
How it looks to be you in Egyptian Cotton, 214 Projects, Dallas, TX
30 Americans, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO; The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA
The Seventh Continent, 16th Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey
Lexicon: The Language of Gesture in 25 Years at Kemper Museum, curated by Erin Dziedzic, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO
Detroit Collects: Selections of African American Art from Private Collections, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI
The Hidden Pulse, Vivid LIVE 2019, Sydney Opera House, Sydney, Australia
A Time Capsule Continued, Parkett Exhibition Space, Zurich, Switzerland
New Age, New Age: Strategies for Survival, DePaul Art Museum, DePaul University, Chicago, IL
Grace Wales Bonner: A Time for New Dreams, Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London, England
**Amulet or He calls it chaos,* curated by Bob Linder, David Ireland House, 500 Capp Street, San Francisco, CA
Yorkshire Sculpture International, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, England; Leeds Art Gallery, Leeds, England; The Hepworth Wakefield, Wakefield, England; Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, England
Fatherhood, Over The Influence, Los Angeles, CA
Michael Jackson: On the Wall, Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn, Germany; Espoo Museum of Modern Art (EMMA), Espoo, Finland
From Day to Day, de la Cruz Collection, Miami, FL
Inaugural exhibition, Rubell Museum, Miami, FL
Friends & Family, curated by Keith Mayerson, Peter Mendenhall Gallery, Pasadena, CA

2018 *Groundings,* Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL
Zombies: Pay Attention!, curated by Heidi Zuckerman, Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO
MORE / LESS, de la Cruz Collection, Miami, FL
50 State Initiative, organized by For Freedoms, 111 South La Brea Avenue Billboard, Los Angeles, CA

White I Black, Acquavella Galleries, New York, NY
Expanding Narratives: The Figure and the Ground, Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL
Sky Above Clouds, curated by Meredith Darrow and Olivia Davis, Performance Ski, Aspen, CO
Transformative Space: The N'Namdi Collection, August Wilson Center, Pittsburgh PA
Selections from the Marciano Collection, Marciano Art Foundation, Los Angeles, CA
Reclamation! Pan-African Works from the Beth Rudin DeWoody Collection, Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, VA
Michael Jackson: On the Wall, National Portrait Gallery, London, England; Grand Palais, Paris, France
Chaos and Awe: Painting for the 21st Century, Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville, TN
Legacy of the Cool: A Tribute to Barkley L. Hendricks, MassArt, Boston, MA

2017 *Force and Form,* de la Cruz Collection Contemporary Art Space, Miami, FL
An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney's Collection, 1940–2017, organized by David Breslin, Jennie Goldstein, Rujeko Hockley, David Kiehl, and Margaret Kross, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York NY
Social Surfaces, organized by Jay Sanders, Artists Space Books & Talks, New York, NY
I hear it everywhere I go, curated by Terri C. Smith, Franklin Street Works, Stamford, CT
The Art Show: Art of the New Millennium in the Taguchi Art Collection, Museum of Modern Art, Gunma, Japan
**ISelf Collection: The End of Love,* Whitechapel Gallery, London, England
In Context: Africans in America, curated by artist Hank Willis Thomas and Liza Essers, Goodman Gallery Johannesburg, South Africa; Johannesburg Art Gallery, South Africa
*A Poet*hical Wager*, organized by Andria Hickey, Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, Cleveland, Ohio
Something living, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
The Legacy of Lynching: Confronting Racial Terror in America, organized by the Brooklyn Museum and the Equal Justice Initiative with support from Google, Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY
Simple Passion, Complex Vision: The Darryl Atwell Collection, Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture, Charlotte, NC
**Minimalism & Beyond*, Mnuchin Gallery, New York, NY
Hill People, curated by Benjamin Godsill, Performance Ski, Aspen, CO

botánica, organized by Todd von Ammon, John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Eternal Youth, curated by Omar Kholeif and Grace Deveney, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago, IL
**Prospect.4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp,* curated by Trevor Schoonmaker, Prospect New Orleans Triennial, New Orleans, LA
**Unpacking: The Marciano Collection,* curated by Philipp Kaiser, Marciano Art Foundation, Los Angeles, CA
Oliver Twist, Chapter 2: Dear Darren, Rental Gallery, East Hampton, NY
Art/Afrique, Le nouvel atelier, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, France
Please fasten your seat belt as we are experiencing some turbulence, Leo Xu Projects, Shanghai, China
One & Other, Zabludowicz Collection, London
**99 Cents or Less*, organized by Jens Hoffman, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Detroit, MI
The Age of Ambiguity: Abstract Figuration/Figurative Abstraction, Curated by Bob Colacello, Vito Schnabel Gallery, Moritz, Switzerland
We Are Here, organized by Naomi Beckwith, José Esparza Chong Cuy, and Omar Kholeif, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL
Il Cacciatore (The White Hunter), FM Centro per L'Arte Contemporanea, Milan, Italy
Tomorrow Will Still Be Ours A Festival of Visionary Ideas, Activism & Arts, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York, NY

2016 *L'esprit du Bauhaus, L'Objet en Question,* Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris
Visual Art and the American Experience, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C.
Inaugural Exhibition, Makasiini Contemporary, Turku, Finland
About Face, Fine Arts Center Gallery, curated by Marc Mitchell, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR
Moments of Impact, Mills College art Museum, Oakland, CA
Hard & Fast, collaborative object-based installation by Clifford Owens, INVISIBLE-EXPORTS, New York, NY
**Long View / Long Game,* curated by Brandon Alvendia, Cleve Carney Art Gallery, College of Dupage, Glen Ellyn, IL
Reality of my Surroundings: The Contemporary Collection, Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham, NC
Blackness in Abstraction, Pace Gallery, New York, NY
Public, Private, Secret, International Center of Photography, New York, NY
For Freedoms, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY
The Avant-Garde Won't Give Up: Cobra and Its Legacy, curated by Alison M. Gingeras, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, CA; Blum & Poe, New York, NY
Progressive Praxis, de la Cruz Collection Contemporary Art Space, Miami, FL

Show me your vital parts, curated by Pim Voorneman, Parts Project, The Hague, Netherlands
**30 Americans*, Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, WA
OVERRIDE | A Billboard Project, presented by EXPO Chicago and the City of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) on Chicago's City Digital Network (CDN), Chicago, IL
Che Il Vero Possa Confutare Il Falso, curated by Luigi Fassi and Alberto Salvadori, Palazzo Pubblico, Santa Maria Della Scala, Siena, Italy
Self-Portrait, Massimo de Carlo, London, England
**Good Dreams, Bad Dreams: American Mythologies,* curated by Massimiliano Gioni, Aïshti Foundation, Beirut, Lebanon
You Go To My Head: A Visual Poem On African Inheritance, curated by Rita Caltagirone, Galerie Daniel Templon, Brussels, Belgium
ROUTE TO (RE)SETTLEMENT, curated by Cecelia Stucker, Mann-Simons Site, Columbia, SC
Inside Out, curated by Alexandra Economou, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich, Switzerland
Paper in Practice, Moran Bondaroff, Los Angeles, CA
Nice Weather, curated by David Salle, Skarstedt Gallery, New York, NY
Woven, 60 Wall Gallery, New York NY

2015 *Civilization and Its Discontents*, curated by Scott and Tyson Reeder, School of the Art Institute Chicago, Chicago, IL
Hard Edged: Geometrical Abstraction and Beyond, California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA
I Got Rhythm. Art and Jazz Since 1920, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Germany
Maier Museum of Art, Randolph College, Lynchburg, VA
Storylines: Contemporary Art at the Guggenheim, Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY
America Is Hard To See, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music 1965 to Now, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL
Forms of Abstractions, N'Namdi Contemporary Gallery, Miami, FL
**30 Americans*, Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, AR; Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI
New American Art: Rashid Johnson – Matthew Day Jackson, Studio des Acacias, Paris, France

2014 **Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World,* curated by Laura Hoptman, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
One Man's Trash (Is Another Man's Treasure), Danjuma Collection, London, England

Secret Passions, Tripostal, Lille, France
Variations: Conversations in an and Around Abstract Painting, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA
Black Eye Art, curated by Nicola Vassel, New York, NY
Home/Sculpture, Massimo De Carlo, London, England
I May Be Wrong But I Think You Are Beautiful, David Achenbach Projects, Düsseldorf, Germany
**Point of View: Contemporary African American Art from the Elliot and Kimberly Perry Collection*, Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, Detroit, MI and Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, MI
Man in the Mirror, curated by Emma Dexter and Walter Vanhaerents, Vanhaerents Art Collection, Brussels, Belgium
Beneath the Surface, de la Cruz Collection, Miami, FL

2013 *personal, political, mysterious*, The FLAG Art Foundation, New York, NY
DSM-V, curated by David Rimanelli, presented by Vito Schnabel, The Future Moynihan Station, New York, NY
Painting in Place, Los Angeles Nomadic Division, Farmers and Merchants Bank, Los Angeles, CA
Out Of Memory, curated by Eleanor Cayre, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, NY
**White Collar Crimes*, presented by Vito Schnabel, Acquavella Galleries, New York, NY
**30 Americans*, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI; The Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville, TN
**Beg, Borrow and Steal*, Palm Springs Art Museum, Palm Springs, CA
**Etched in Collective History*, Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL
Portal, McClain Gallery, Houston, TX
Heinzmann Johnson Zipp, Galerie Guido W. Baudach, Berlin, Germany
Selections from the de la Cruz Collection, de la Cruz Collection, Miami, FL

2012 **From the Collection: 2012 Exhibition*, de la Cruz Collection Contemporary Art Space, Miami, FL
The Sound of Painting, curated by Margherita Artoni and Marco Marrone, Palazzo Saluzzo Paesana, Turin, Italy
In the Holocene, Hayden, Reference, Bakalar Galleries, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA
The Bearden Project, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
Beyond Beauty, Twig Gallery, Brussels, Belgium
An Architect's Dream, curated by Todd Levin, curator's office, Washington, D.C.
Things Beyond Our Control, Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami, FL

*_you, your sun and shadow_, curated by Michael Jones McKean, Anderson Gallery, School of Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
*_30 Americans_, Rubell Family Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA
*_American Exuberance_, Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL

2011 _OH!_, organized by Massimo De Carlo, Galerie Patrick Seguin, Paris, France
*_American Exuberance_, Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL
Home Alone, curated by Sarah Aibel, Sender Collection, Miami, FL
*_ESLOV WIDE SHUT_, curated by Stefan Lundgren, organized by Eslövs Kommun and Mallorca Landings, Blomsterberg's Warehouse, Eslöv, Sweden
There are two sides to every coin, and two sides to your face, curated by Carlos Cardenas, Galerie Xippas, Paris, France
INTERNAL / EXTERNAL AFFAIRS, Residence of the Ambassador of the United States of America to Germany, Berlin, Germany
Converging Voices, Transforming Dialogue, University Museum, Texas Southern University, Houston, TX
With one color…, Van de Weghe Fine Art, New York, NY
Becoming: Photographs from the Wedge Collection, The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, NC
*54th Venice Biennale, _ILLUMInations_, International Pavilion, curated by Bice Curiger, Venice, Italy
*_30 Americans_, Rubell Family Collection, The North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Seeing Is a Kind of Thinking: A Jim Nutt Companion, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago, IL
Livingroom Exotica, Kunsthaus Glarus, Glarus, Switzerland
*_Secret Societies. To Know, To Dare, To Will, To Keep Silence_, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, Germany; CAPC de Bordeaux, Bordeaux, France
Dwelling, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, NY

2010 _Lush Life_, Lehmann Maupin, New York, NY
Contemporary Magic: A Tarot Deck Art Project, National Arts Club, New York, NY
David Adamo, Heather Cook, Brendan Fowler, Rashid Johnson, Phil Wagner, UNTITLED, New York, NY
Re-dressing, Bortolami Gallery, New York, NY
About Us, Johann König, Berlin, Germany
Hope! A contemporary art exhibition, Palais des Arts et du Festival, Dinard, France
Item, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, NY
*_At Home/Not at Home: Works from the Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg_, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

(LEAN), Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, NY
Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines, Bortolami Gallery, New York, NY
From Then to Now: Masterworks of African American Art, curated by Margo Crutchfield, MOCA Cleveland, OH
Selected Works from the MCA Collection: Focus on UBS 12x12, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL

2009 **Beg, Borrow and Steal*, Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL
30 Seconds off an Inch, curated by Naomi Beckwith, Studio Museum Harlem, New York, NY
Under Control, curated by Ginger Gregg Duggan, Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, IL
Dress Codes: Clothing as Metaphor, curated by Barbara Bloemink, Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, NY
Across the Divide: Reconsidering the Other, Illinois State Museum, Chicago, IL

2008 **30 Americans*, Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL
Made in Chicago: Photographs from the Bank of American LaSale Collection, Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, IL
Across the Divide: Reconsidering the Other, Illinois State Museum, Springfield, IL
Ah, Decadence, curated by Lisa Wainright, School of the Art Institute, Chicago, IL
Summer Mixtape Volume 1: the Get Smart Edition, curated by Herb Tam and Lauren Rosati, Exit Art, New York, NY
Zero Zone, Tracey Williams, Ltd., New York, NY

2007 *Color Line* curated by Odili Donald Odita for the Luanda Triennial in Angola, Jack Shainman Gallery, NY
For the Love of the Game: Race and Sports, curated by Franklin Sirmans and Rehema Barber, The Amistad Center for Art & Culture at the Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT
MCA Exposed: Defining Moments in Photography, 1967-2007, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago, IL

2006 **A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: FARBEN,* Kunstmuseum Kloster Unser Lieben Fauen Magdeburg, Magdeburg, Germany
American Identities, curated by Terry Carbone, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY
Scarecrow, curated by David Hunt, Postmasters, New York, NY

2005 *NAPOLI PRESENTE Posizioni e Prospettive dell-Arte Contemporarea,* PAN Contemporary Art Museum, Naples, Italy
Wish, COCA Center of Contemporary Art, Seattle, WA

Only Skin Deep: Chancing Visions of the American Self, curated by Coco Fusco, San Diego Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, CA
Crossings: 10 artists from Kaohsiung & Chicago, curated by Greg Knight and Tseng Fangling, Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, IL; Museum of Fine Art, Kaohsiung, Taiwan
International Biennale of Contemporary Art 2005, Prague, Czech Republic
In Search of a Continuous Present, curated by Lynne Warren, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL
Pan/Sonic, Chicago Gallery, Northern Illinois University School of Art, Chicago, IL

2004 *Only Skin Deep: Chancing Visions of the American Self*, curated by Coco Fusco, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA
A Perfect Union…More or Less, curated by Hamza Walker, Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Chicago, IL
About Face: Photographic Portraits from the Collection, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
Common Ground: Discovering Community in 150 Years of Art, Corcoran Museum of Art, Washington, D.C.
Inside Out: Portrait Photographs from the Permanent Collection, Whitney Museum, New York, NY

2003 *Only Skin Deep: Chancing Visions of the American Self*, curated by Coco Fusco, ICP, New York, NY
1999 *The Squared Circle: Boxing in Contemporary Art*, curated by Olukemi Ilesanmi, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
A Century of Collecting: African American Art, curated by Daniel Schulman, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL

2002 *Manumission Papers,* Sunrise Museum, Charleston, WV
Cut, Pulled, Colored, and Burnt, curated by Michael Rooks, Hyde Park Art Center,
1998 Chicago, IL

2001 *Freestyle*, curated by Thelma Golden, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY

2000 *A Decade of Acquisitions,* Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI

GRANTS AND AWARDS

2020 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Directing in a Television Movie for *Native Son*

2018 ArtCrush 2018, Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO

2017 Tony Goldman Visionary Artist Award, Philadelphia, PA
Panerai Design Miami Vision Award, Mwabwindo School project

2012 David C. Driskell Prize, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA

CURATED EXHIBITIONS AND PROJECTS

2021 *There's There There*, organized by Rashid Johnson, Hauser & Wirth, Southampton, NY

2020 Mwabwindo School, site-specific mural, supported by 14+ Foundation, Zambia, Africa

2017 *Five and Forward,* curated by Rashid Johnson, Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY
Color People, curated by Rashid Johnson, Rental Gallery, East Hampton, NY

2014 *Ceremonies of Dark Men in Multimedia*, film screening, Lincoln Theatre, Washington, D.C.

2013 *Hard-Edge Paintings 1963-1966*, curated by Rashid Johnson, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Farewell Rodney, curated by Rashid Johnson, Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, Israel

2012 *Drip, Drape, Draft*, curated by Rashid Johnson, South London Gallery, London, England

FILMS

2019 *Native Son,* Feature film directed by the artist, produced by Matthew Perniciaro and Michael Sherman, adapted by Suzan-Lori Parks, and distributed by A24

DAVID
KORDANSKY
GALLERY

PERFORMANCES

2020 *Bedtime Stories*, a project initiated by Maurizio Cattelan, New Museum, New York, NY

2013 *Dutchman*, *Performa 13*, Performa, New York, NY

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY
available on request

press@davidkordanskygallery.com
www.davidkordanskygallery.com
T: 323.935.3030 F: 323.935.3031

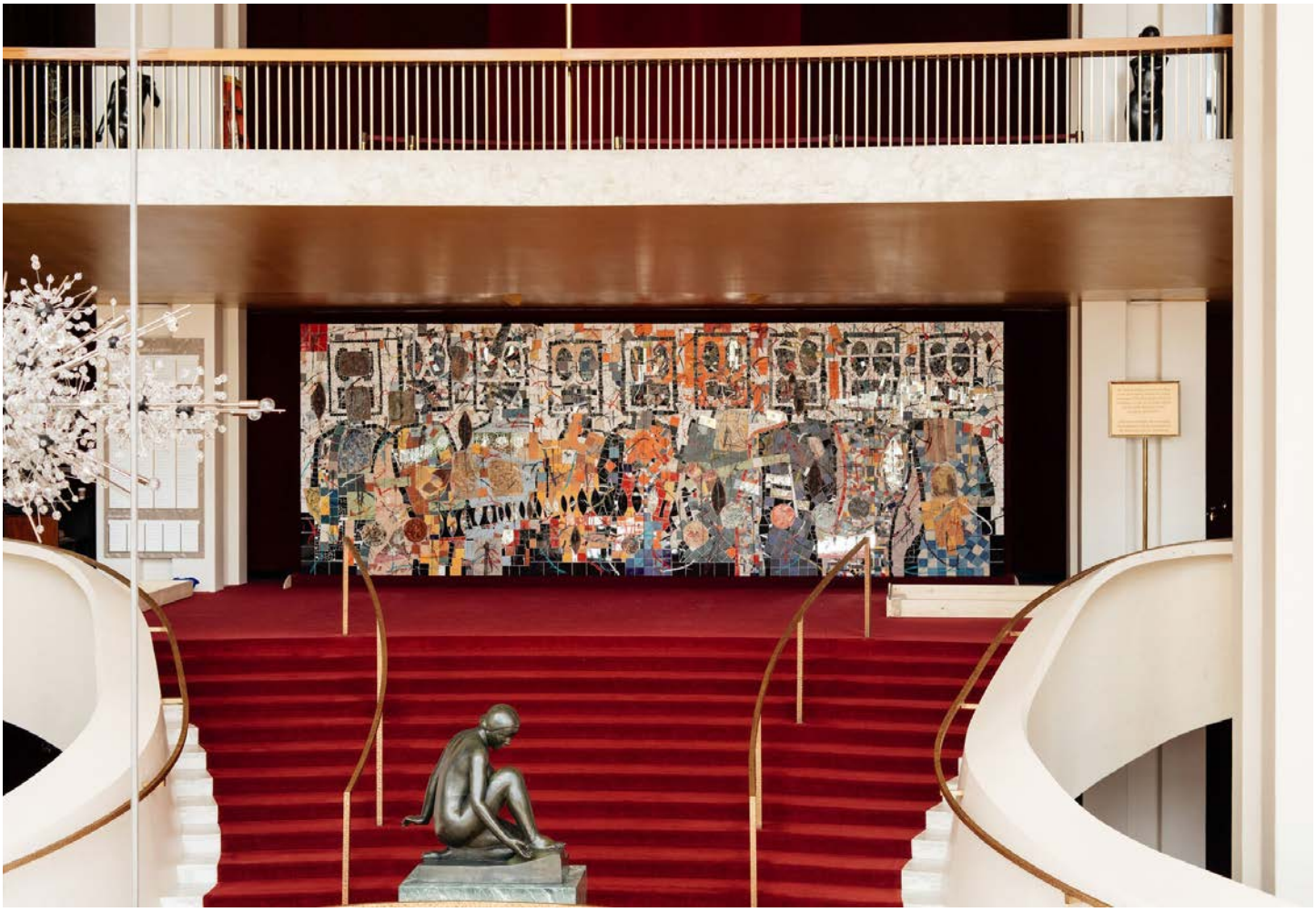
Sheets, Hilarie M., “In Rashid Johnson’s Mosaics, Broken Lives Pieced Together,” *NYTimes.com*, September 23, 2021

The New York Times

In Rashid Johnson’s Mosaics, Broken Lives Pieced Together

In new exhibitions at the Metropolitan Opera and David Kordansky Gallery, the artist offers a story of recovery — personal and collective — after a “blunt force trauma.”

By Hilarie M. Sheets | September 23, 2021



One of the two 9-by-25-foot mosaic panels Rashid Johnson created for the luxe interior of the Met Opera. Each is titled “The Broken Nine.” Ike Edeani for The New York Times

“The healing process starts with the negotiation of blunt force trauma,” the multidisciplinary artist Rashid Johnson said. “It’s the story of recovery.”

After the bruising of Covid, the end of the Trump administration and recent reckonings with race, gender, sexuality and identity, Johnson was ruminating about his own emotional state and our collective one, as he sees it.

Johnson, who turns 44 on Saturday, is mining a psychologically complicated moment in ways both highly personal and open-ended in new exhibitions at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, on view now, and the Metropolitan Opera in New York, opening Monday.

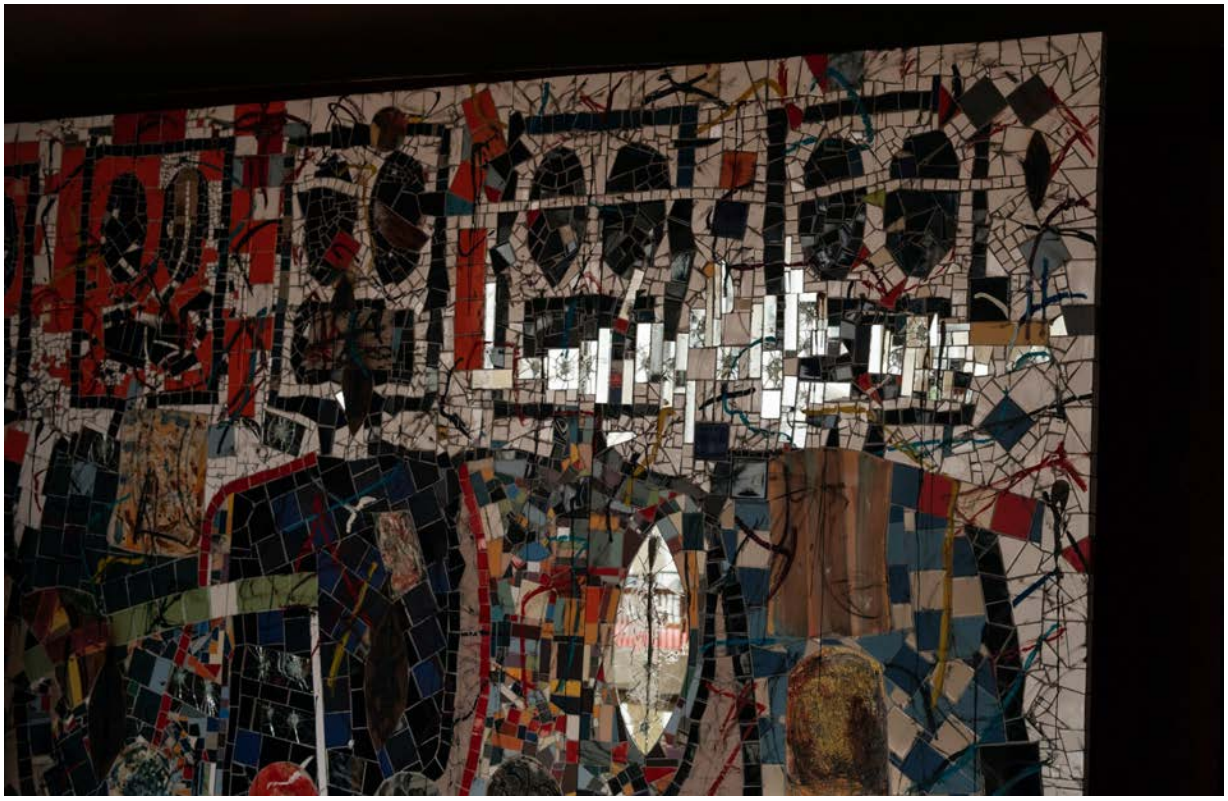
“My work has always had concerns around race, struggle, grief and grievance, but also joy and excitement around the tradition and opportunities of Blackness,” Rashid Johnson said. Ike Edeani for The New York Times

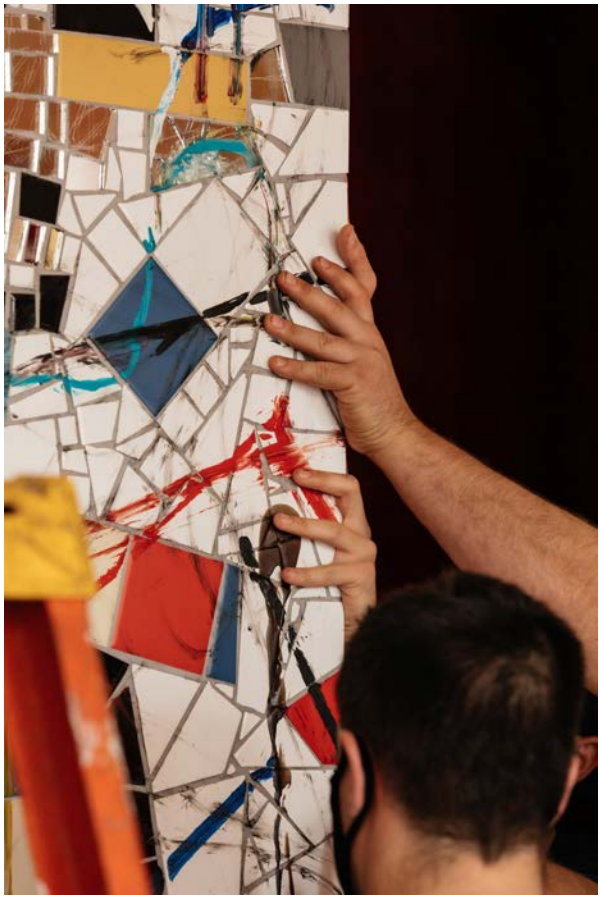
Johnson’s art practice has been kaleidoscopic, encompassing painting, sculpture, large-scale installation, film and, most recently, mosaic. His works are visual cosmologies, referencing aspects of Johnson’s home life growing up in Chicago and African diasporic culture.

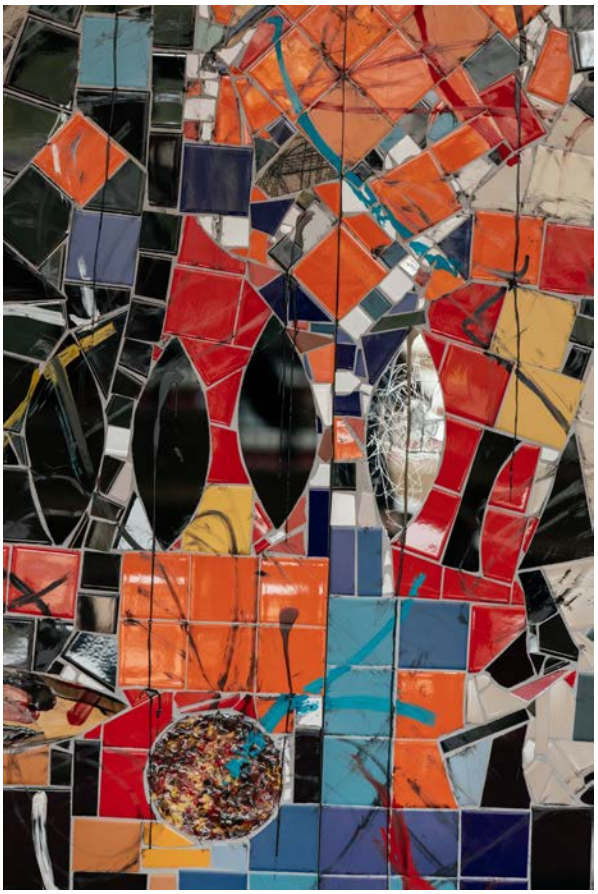
“My work has always had concerns around race, struggle, grief and grievance, but also joy and excitement around the tradition and opportunities of Blackness,” said Johnson, whose mother has been a university provost and whose father is an artist and ran a small electronics company.

For the luxe interior of the Met Opera, Johnson created two 9-by-25 foot mosaic panels at his studio in Brooklyn, each titled “The Broken Nine.” Installed on the grand tier landings, they comprise chorus lines of imposing standing figures pieced together from thousands of fragments of colorful ceramics, mirror and branded wood, across which the artist has painted improvisationally in oil stick, wax and spray enamel.

Sheets, Hilarie M., “In Rashid Johnson’s Mosaics, Broken Lives Pieced Together,” *NYTimes.com*, September 23, 2021







Ike Edeani for The New York Times

The mosaics reflect the artist’s challenges and professional rise over the last decade. “Rashid thinks and works on a scale that is operatic,” said Dodie Kazanjian, director of the Met Opera gallery. Ike Edeani for The New York Times

Their wide-eyed expressions could read as frustration, fear, joy, anxiety or disappointment. “I’m trying to illustrate tons of different people and at the same time they’re probably all me,” Johnson said.

The works at the Met are also a good metaphor for the opera house, Peter Gelb, its general manager, said, as it has had to piece itself back together again after being shuttered for 18 months and during protracted labor disputes. Although the Met commissioned Johnson’s works two years ago, independently of Terence Blanchard’s opera, “Fire Shut Up in My Bones,” which also debuts Monday, Gelb sees parallels. The first opera mounted at the Met by a Black composer and a Black librettist (Kasi Lemmons), it is based on the memoir of the New York Times columnist Charles Blow. “It’s a coming-of-age story about a life that’s damaged and then repaired,” Gelb said.

“Rashid thinks and works on a scale that is operatic,” said Dodie Kazanjian, director of the Met Opera gallery, who invited Johnson to make a site-specific work, as she had done before with Cecily Brown and George Condo.

Sheets, Hilarie M., “In Rashid Johnson’s Mosaics, Broken Lives Pieced Together,” *NYTimes.com*, September 23, 2021

Johnson signs the back of one of the panels during the installation. “I’m trying to illustrate tons of different people and at the same time they’re probably all me,” he said. Edeani for The New York Times

Johnson ascribes a “Humpty Dumpty” quality to his series of “Broken Men” mosaics, which he began in 2018. But unlike in the childhood nursery rhyme, the artist has put his shattered figures back together again. They reflect the artist’s challenges and professional rise over the last decade — during which time Johnson has become a parent, with his wife, Sheree Hovsepian, whom he met in graduate school at the Art Institute of Chicago. He also stopped drinking and using drugs on his journey to sobriety in 2014.

Seeing things with newly clear vision, he began his series, “Anxious Men,” in 2015, rectangular faces with spiraling eyes and chattering teeth scrawled in black soap and wax on white ceramic tile. They were repeated across large-scale grids like crowds at Hauser & Wirth during the 2016 election as a personal and collective response to the searing tumult of polarized politics and racial dynamics.

Johnson has become a leading voice of his generation, taking on board positions at the Guggenheim Museum, Performa and Ballroom Marfa, and helping raise the awareness of contributions by other Black artists, introducing the photographer Deana Lawson to Kordansky and curating a show of Sam Gilliam’s hard-edge 1960s paintings at that gallery in 2013. This year Johnson’s work was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, and his “Anxious Red Painting December 18th” set a new auction record at Christie’s for the artist, over $1.9 million.

Johnson’s new series, called “Bruise Paintings,” includes, from left, “Body and Soul,” “All of Me” and “Honeysuckle Rose” at the David Kordansky Gallery. David Kordansky Gallery; Jeff McLane

The characters in his mosaics may appear to have been roughed up but they are built into an armature that’s solid, something the artist likes about the medium. “They’ve definitely been through something, but those experiences they’ve had to negotiate are maybe the ones that have left good scars,” said Johnson. “The Broken Nine” for the Met were inspired in part by Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein,” which he read during quarantine with his family in Bridgehampton, N.Y., and also by the religious figures in Peruvian paintings. “There’s a real autonomy in each character. They don’t have to be tragic,” he said.

Ian Alteveer, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art who led its acquisition of “The Broken Five,” a 2019 work on view there, finds the figures wonderfully ambiguous. “They could be stand-ins for the artist himself or witnesses facing the world and the horror of it all,” Alteveer said. “They also could be more magical than that — strange new beings on the brink of a brand-new world.”

For Johnson’s show at Kordansky, titled “Black and Blue,” he used Louis Armstrong’s song of the same name as a departure point. In a new series called “Bruise Paintings,” his motif of the anxious face is now almost completely abstracted, rendered in a frenetic freehand with a palette of blues and repeated across linen in vast grids.

In another room of the gallery, Johnson’s weathered cubes cast in bronze are stacked like totems, with blue succulents sprouting from them absurdly like hair. David Kordansky Gallery; Jeff McLane

“It’s incredibly musical the way he works,” said Kordansky, “like bebop, growing off a template.”

In another room of the show, the face returns in three dimensions, now as weathered cubes cast in bronze and stacked like totems, with blue succulents sprouting from them absurdly like hair. Johnson jammed in vinyl copies of Armstrong’s “Black and Blue” — a record that the protagonist in Ralph Ellison’s novel “Invisible Man” listened to constantly. The artist mottled the surfaces with oyster shells, which he has also used in earlier works as a reference to Zora Neale Hurston’s “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” in which she wrote: “I do not weep at the world — I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.”

“I always found that to be so beautiful, this idea of being liberated to a place of nontragedy, but to expand even beyond that and imagine you have so much agency that you’re enjoying this leisure action,” Johnson said, referring to oysters’ connotations of luxury and sensuality.

These references resurface in a short film on gallery view shot at Johnson’s home in Bridgehampton that captures some of the monotonous, surreal, fearful, mundane qualities of quarantine life. The artist plays the main character — waking up, brushing his teeth, watching the talking heads drone on TV, going for a run. His 9-year-old son,

A short film on view at the gallery was shot at Johnson’s home in Bridgehampton. It captures some of the monotonous, surreal, fearful and mundane qualities of quarantine life. David Kordansky Gallery; Jeff McLane

Julius, practices “Black and Blue” on the piano and does homework as Johnson reads Toni Morrison’s “Song of Solomon.” At one point he shucks oysters at the table.

“It’s quite rare to see a Black character unencumbered and centralized,” said Johnson. “Yet you have to ask yourself, Why does it still feel anxious? This guy’s in a house in the Hamptons. Why does it still feel like something is about to happen?” (He directed a film adaptation of Richard Wright’s novel “Native Son” in 2019 that ends with the death of his young Black protagonist.)

Katherine Brinson, a curator at the Guggenheim Museum, remembers Johnson once telling her that he enjoyed wondering what Patrice Lumumba, the 20th-century Congolese independence leader, did when he got home and stopped living in the space of public activism.

“Rashid’s new work also deals with this foundational idea of how life is lived in the private quotidian sphere, away from the public gaze and the obligations to perform certain expected roles,” Brinson said. “It’s still a space that’s fraught and complex.”

Nyong'o, Tavia, "Ramble On," *Artforum.com*, September 10, 2021

ARTFORUM

PERFORMANCE

RAMBLE ON

September 10, 2021 • Tavia Nyong'o on Rashid Johnson's *The Hikers* at Storm King

Rashid Johnson, *The Hikers*, 2019. Storm King Art Center, New York, August 2021. Photo: Ruilian Son.

STORM KING ART CENTER is located in the Hudson Valley, about thirty miles south of the birthplace of nineteenth-century black abolitionist, feminist, and utopian seer Sojourner Truth. It sits on the ancestral territory of the Munsee Lenape nation. Bringing a black presence to outdoor sculpture in this verdant rural area should be less a matter of making space for diversity within white art worlds, and more a matter of challenging the terms upon which our histories have been violently erased from the landscape, and yet remain tangled up in its undergrowth.

A recent work by Rashid Johnson with Claudia Schreier performed at Storm King suggests that this history is still resurfacing. Indeed, we are dancing on it, in it, and through it. *The Hikers,* which was presented as a live dance piece over a weekend in August, grew out of a collaboration between artist Johnson and choreographer Schreier. It was inspired by a trail Johnson had walked in 2018 in Aspen, Colorado, and by thoughts that sprang from the idea of encountering another black person outdoors in that predominantly "white" airy redoubt for the ultraprivileged. Debuting as a film in Aspen in 2019, followed by an eponymous exhibition, publication, and performance at Hauser & Wirth in 2019–20, this latest iteration of *The Hikers* finds it relocated from the Rocky Mountains to the Hudson Valley. The change in terrain offers an opportunity to approach "the black outdoors" from more than one perspective, lending the project another layer of resonance.

That resonance includes a newly contested politics of access to open space during a pandemic that has made indoor spaces anxiogenic for most. In his new book *On Property*, Rinaldo Walcott reminds us how, for black people, many beaches, parks, and other outdoor recreational spaces remain "off limits, if only informally." It is hard not to watch *The Hikers* post-2020 and not think of Christian Cooper, the black bird watcher on whom a white woman called the cops when he asked her to leash her dog in Central Park, mere hours before George Floyd's murder. The ongoing search for a black outdoors beyond policing and possession is thus part of the frame for watching *The Hikers*.

As I was cautiously reentering public life in New York City this summer, two pieces by Johnson caught my eye. In the courtyard of PS1 MoMA in Queens, the bright yellow, literally titled *Stage* invited people to come up speak from five SM58 microphones of various heights. Evoking histories of amplified public speech from hip hop to Harlem's Speaker's Corner to Tania Bruguera's *Tatlin's Whisper #6*, *Stage*, when I caught it, was in use as the platform for a book launch for queer punk memoirist Brontez Purnell. As a series of writers and performers read from his ribald, diaristic *100 Boyfriends*, concluding with a reading by the queen herself, it felt like New York was getting its groove back. Purnell even signed my copy of his zine. Across the East River in Manhattan, another Johnson work, at Astor Place and titled *Red Stage*, became the spot for a host of invited and impromptu activations. On a given night in June, you might see Charlotte Brathwaite or Jason Moran or unamplified karaoke. The specificity and generosity of these public gestures—in which the artist sets up the conditions for planned and improvisatory response of others—made Johnson, for me, the man of the hour.

Rashid Johnson, *The Hikers*, 2019. Storm King Art Center, New York, August 2021. Photo: June Archer.

All the same, expecting artists to shoulder the weight of a public sphere collapsing under decades of neoliberal austerity is nothing short of deluded. And, to return to *The Hikers*, looking to dance in particular for inspiration or moral support, after eighteen months in which live performers have been struggling for their livelihoods, bears some careful thought. On the one hand, dancers want nothing more than the return of their audiences, and vice versa. As Johnson told me, watching performance is "like riding a bike"; we don't lose the skill once learned. On the other hand, as we have moved into a period that is neither

Rashid Johnson, *The Hikers*, 2019. Storm King Art Center, New York, August 2021. Photo: Ruilian Son.

"post-Covid" nor "the new normal," art has been repeatedly called upon to help imagine what is to come. In the wake of the George Floyd protests, BIPOC artists and arts professionals have been invited into greater institutional roles than ever in recent memory. Is there a danger in being so welcomed in at the very moment the walls are crashing down? The pandemic, as Arundhati Roy so wisely wrote last year, "is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it." Johnson's recent work channels this desire to get clear, let go, and find new commitment and focus at midlife and midcareer.

I recognize this is a long introduction to a review of a twenty-minute danced duet (perhaps I should heed Roy's advice about packing light). But I hope it's a useful approach for considering *The Hikers*, which was conceived well before the pandemic but has revealed new, strange paths amid the current flight of the privileged from urban enclaves (and in some cases, from terra firma). At the start of *The Hikers* project, Johnson had been meditating across various media upon anxiety, sobriety, parenthood, and the green shoots that might be springing out of the dead weight of the past.

One year and one "portal" later, *The Hikers* was again performed live, this time outdoors on a grassy incline at evening, cadging minutes between evening showers and clouds of gnats, in front of Johnson's *The Crisis*, a yellow steel pyramidal grid installed at Storm King (the title alludes to publications by black intellectuals W.E.B. Du Bois and Harold Cruse), floating above the late summer grass. Danced the evening I saw it by Leslie Andrea Williams of Martha Graham Dance Company and Brandon Gray of Complexions Contemporary Ballet, the figures appear in leather masks reminiscent, Schreier tells me, of the faces in Johnson's "Anxious Men" drawing series from 2015, masks they peel off before alternately mirroring each other's gestures, meeting in lifts and twirls, and ultimately stalking away again alone. Much of the movement vocabulary came from ballet—Schreier's technical background—but elements of postmodern and jazz were also key; the dancers wore sneakers and were accompanied by the saxophonist Marcus Miller. Early in their collaboration, Johnson asked Schreier to find movement that expressed encounter, recognition, and platonic love—to find that feeling that arises "only when you find yourself in another."

Whereas his urban stages offered a platform, here Johnson's sculpture offered a backdrop against which his dancers could soar, or crouch. If there was a narrative, it was lightly draped over the ballet, which felt perhaps more exuberant than it would have otherwise, given the long hibernation dance has experienced. We were exultant just to be moving and seeing people move. But the overall message of *The Hikers* came through: Claiming space for black art across genres is necessary but perilous, joyous but risky. While the work's ethics of connection stand in defiance of the scarcity and fear through which our pandemic futures are being managed, it also poses unanswered connections about what it will take for us to recognize true interdependence. As the dancers moved and occasionally stumbled on unsteady ground, Schreier's vision for the piece seemed apt: "The only thing they can grasp on to is each other."

— Tavia Nyong'o

Ghassemitari, Shawn, “David Kordansky Will Unveil an Online Exhibition on Prolific Conceptual Artist Rashid Johnson,” *HypeBeast.com,* July 29, 2021

HypeArt

David Kordansky Will Unveil an Online Exhibition on Prolific Conceptual Artist Rashid Johnson

Focusing specifically on the artist’s first decade of work.

Shawn Ghassemitari | July 29, 2021

Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery

David Kordansky Gallery will unveil a new online exhibition entitled, “Major Works: Rashid Johnson, Tell it on the Mountain.”

Inspired by James Baldwin‘s 1953 semi-autobiographical novel of the same name, Rashid Johnson‘s “Tell it on the Mountain” is rooted in similar intellectual and emotional themes that Baldwin expressed. However, they are taken further by mixing in references from Public Enemy, various Black secret societies and Johnson’s own coming of age as a Black man in Chicago. The exhibition is a summary of Johnson’s prolific first decade of work that demonstrates his ability to take on multiple legacies of abstract expressionism and in-turn, revitalize the genre for the 21st Century, by introducing techniques that were at-once shunned by it.

Rashid Johnson has worked across mediums and creates work that composes unapologetic meditations on race and class, all the while using a visual lexicon that blends his love for sculpture and painting. He has exhibited across the world at galleries — from LACMA and the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City, to MoMA New York and the Venice Biennale.

David Kordansky’s online exhibition, “Major Works: Rashid Johnson, Tell it on the Mountain,” views from August 6-13.

Okhio, Camille, "GRIEF AND GRIEVANCE: ART AND MOURNING IN AMERICA," *Art in America*, May/June 2021, pp. 109-110

"GRIEF AND GRIEVANCE: ART AND MOURNING IN AMERICA"

New Museum
On view through June 6

AS THE ELEVATOR OPENS ONTO THE fourth floor of the New Museum, you step into auditory chaos. Eighties hip-hop, classical music, the buzzing of flies, muffled and not-so-muffled voices: an enveloping swarm emanating from works that explore the infinitesimal individual experiences and larger shared realities of Blackness. "Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America," conceived by Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor roughly a year before his untimely death in March 2019, is a colossally ambitious show. Posthumously realized by Naomi Beckwith, Glenn Ligon, Massimiliano Gioni, and Mark Nash, the exhibition offers innumerable prompts for the collective acknowledgment of Black anguish. In Enwezor's essay for the show's catalogue (initially published in spring 2020), he writes, "The exhibition is devoted to examining modes of representation in different mediums where artists have addressed the concept of mourning, commemoration, and loss as a direct response to the national emergency of black grief." Viewers are asked to consider the breadth of experiences, expressions, and perceptions encapsulated in the troubles, triumphs, and traumas of Black people in the Western world – a mammoth effort considering the multitudes each Black individual and subculture contains.

The show opens with a palpable sense of heaviness. As I adjusted to the overwhelming presentation on the show's top floor, centered on Rashid Johnson's monumental installation *Antoine's Organ* (2016), pushy white visitors sidled in front of their Black counterparts supposedly unaware, squinting at the introductory wall text – racial ambivalence and anti-Black violence in action even here. Within the blackened steel grid of the massive scaffold is a sprinkling of retro television sets playing a selection of Johnson's past video works on loop: Black men performing martial arts, making music, just moving. Sitting among the monitors are stacks of books including Søren Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* and Randall Kennedy's *Sellout: The Politics of Racial Betrayal* – unsubtle nods to the complexity of a raced experience – and live plants, accompanied by busts of shea butter, and black soap. The scent is perhaps what attracted the flies, a tender nod to Black nostalgia made less tender by the tiny traveling companions of rot and decay.

Johnson's arresting installation is displayed alongside four paintings by Julie Mehretu and one by Mark Bradford. Collectively, the works tackle themes of destruction, creation, and loss reinterpreted. Built up from numerous small markings, Mehretu's paintings possess a world-ending force, as if channeling a relentless barrage of microaggressions: *Black Monolith, for Okwui Enwezor (Charlottesville)*, 2017–20, a large, abstract canvas with layered calligraphic marks and shadowy airbrushed slashes in black ink and acrylic nearly occluding a brightly colored ground, confronts grief directly, paying homage to the late curator.

Tucked quietly on the other side of the gallery is a small abstract assemblage by Jack Whitten, *Birmingham* (1964), its materials – aluminum foil, newsprint, stockings, and black paint on plywood – invoking the burnt Baptist tabernacles and ripped stockings of stalwart Black church aunties that were seared into the artist's mind from his early years in Birmingham, Alabama.

Installed in the stairwell leading down to the next floor is Hank Willis Thomas's *14,719* (2019), a monument – perhaps excessively literal – to victims of gun violence, taking the form of a circle of hanging banners embroidered with stars representing the number of people killed by guns in the US during a single year. It gives way to works that interlace mythology with science fiction and self-told history. Howardena Pindell's collage *Autobiography: Water (Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts)*, 1988, depicts dozens of eyes sprinkled around the vague silhouette of a human form. Extra limbs extend upward from the figure, calling to mind the protagonist of Octavia Butler's trilogy "Lilith's Brood," the vessel for a new form of human. Pindell uses her personal memories of segregation and the remembered tales of her enslaved ancestors (at least one of whom was maimed by their enslaver) to construct this vision of herself rising from watery depths, healing generational wounds. Other works call to mind celebration and pick up the earlier theme of destruction. In a video depicting

Photo Dario Lasagni

Rashid Johnson: *Antoine's Organ*, 2016, black steel, grow lights, plants, wood, shea butter, books, monitors, rugs, and piano, 189 by 338 by 127 inches; in "Grief and Grievance" at the New Museum.

Okhio, Camille, “GRIEF AND GRIEVANCE: ART AND MOURNING IN AMERICA,” *Art in America*, May/June 2021, pp. 109-110

the enchanting songstress Alice Smith in a recording session, Kahlil Joseph aims to capture Black beauty, seen through Black eyes, for Black enjoyment in *Alice™ (you don't have to think about it)*, 2016, while Okwui Okpokwasili offers a pleasantly unbalanced diptych in the installation *Poor People's TV Room (Solo)*, 2017, showing her physical and spirit selves intertwined in a dance of self-actualization and self-acknowledgment. Arthur Jafa's *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death* (2016) is a decidedly more forceful and cinematic video collage incorporating clips of police brutality, religious worship, and scenes from space, set to a Kanye West track (himself a troubled symbol of Black brilliance and self-hate intermingled in an individual).

The show includes a number of sculptural interventions that loom uncomfortably over their surroundings. Nari Ward's *Peace Keeper* (1995/2020), incorporating a tarred and peacock-feathered hearse, viscerally calls to mind early colonial exhibitionist punishments, designed to dehumanize and humiliate, which continued in the form of twentieth- and twenty-first-century lynchings. Simone Leigh's *Sentinel IV* (2020) peers over visitors, silently taking stock, recording, and repelling, while Tiona Nekkia McClodden's *THE FULL SEVERITY OF COMPASSION* (2019), a painted manual cattle squeeze, marries themes of pain and pleasure, comfort and death. A trio of works from Diamond Stingily's series "Entryways" (2016–19) – freestanding doors with baseball bats leaning against them – are affecting metaphors for self-protection and female agency. Stingily's sculptures also exemplify the limits of the show's theme: they are not so much about grief as its prevention. At once overambitious and oversimplifying, the show's attempts to fit a multitude of experiences into a single overarching framework can have a flattening effect: Blackness is not just grief, a point that often gets lost when work by Black artists is shown in predominantly white institutions.

But mourning is nevertheless a crucial part of healing, something too often denied Black Americans, who have had to contend with a hamster wheel of atrocities flung at them century after century. This is the dichotomy of Black grief and fictionalized white grievances to which the show's title speaks. Though at times disjointed, Enwezor's final curatorial effort makes an insistent attempt to re-center this vital process, bringing together artists with widely different practices to create a space within which viewers can safely mourn – or at the very least, remember why they didn't get the chance to in the first place.

– *Camille Okhio*

Herring, Sophia, “Rashid Johnson’s Latest Public Installation Invites Anyone on Stage,” *ArchitecturalDigest.com*, June 8, 2021

AD

Rashid Johnson’s Latest Public Installation Invites Anyone on Stage

Red Stage, which is being presented by Creative Time, calls upon New York’s artists, makers, and passersby to grab the proverbial mic

By Sophia Herring | June 8, 2021

QTPOC nightlife collective Papi Juice kicked off Red Stage’s celebratory opening weekendPhoto: Courtesy of Creative Time

Astor Place has long been a hub for the vibrant community of downtown New York City. Surrounded by historic theaters, schools, and meeting places, the square has seen plenty of momentous demonstrations, protests, and performances throughout the years.

On June 5, American artist Rashid Johnson became the latest creative to make the square his own platform by erecting a 30-foot-wide steel structure to stretch across the South Plaza. Garbed in a coat of “Alarm Red” paint, the stage is a call to chronic anxiety—a theme that became particularly central to Johnson’s work over the past year and one that has become newly relevant to many throughout the pandemic.

For Creative Time, the organization behind the installation (as well as many other public arts projects), it was crucial for Red Stage to respond to the current climate. “The pandemic led to a rethinking of the project as well as deep introspection around the intersecting roles of Creative Time, public art, and public space in this moment,” Justine Ludwig, Creative Time’s executive director, tells *AD*. “We wanted to speak to our creative collective histories while responding directly to the needs of a New York City reawakened from a year of pain and isolation.”

And with festivities and flair, that’s just what *Red Stage* does. Throughout the month, the installation will bring together community to celebrate the ability to reunite and collaborate again. The stage will carry on with a host of events including participatory workshops, games, block parties, poetry readings, walks, and protest music concerts. Community notables such as activist and performer Morgan Bassichis and award-winning theater director Charlotte Brathwaite will also have a day to take center stage.

Besides the exciting programming lineup, *Red Stage* will stay true to the roots of its location by serving as “the people’s platform” three days a week. During those hours, members of the public may use the stage in any way they please on a sign-up or drop-by basis. “This is a truly participatory project,” Diya Vij, associate curator of Creative Time, tells *AD*.

Swanson, Carl, “Rashid Johnson Welcomes Everyone To His ‘Red Stage’ on Astor Place,” *Curbed.com*, June 7, 2021

CURBED

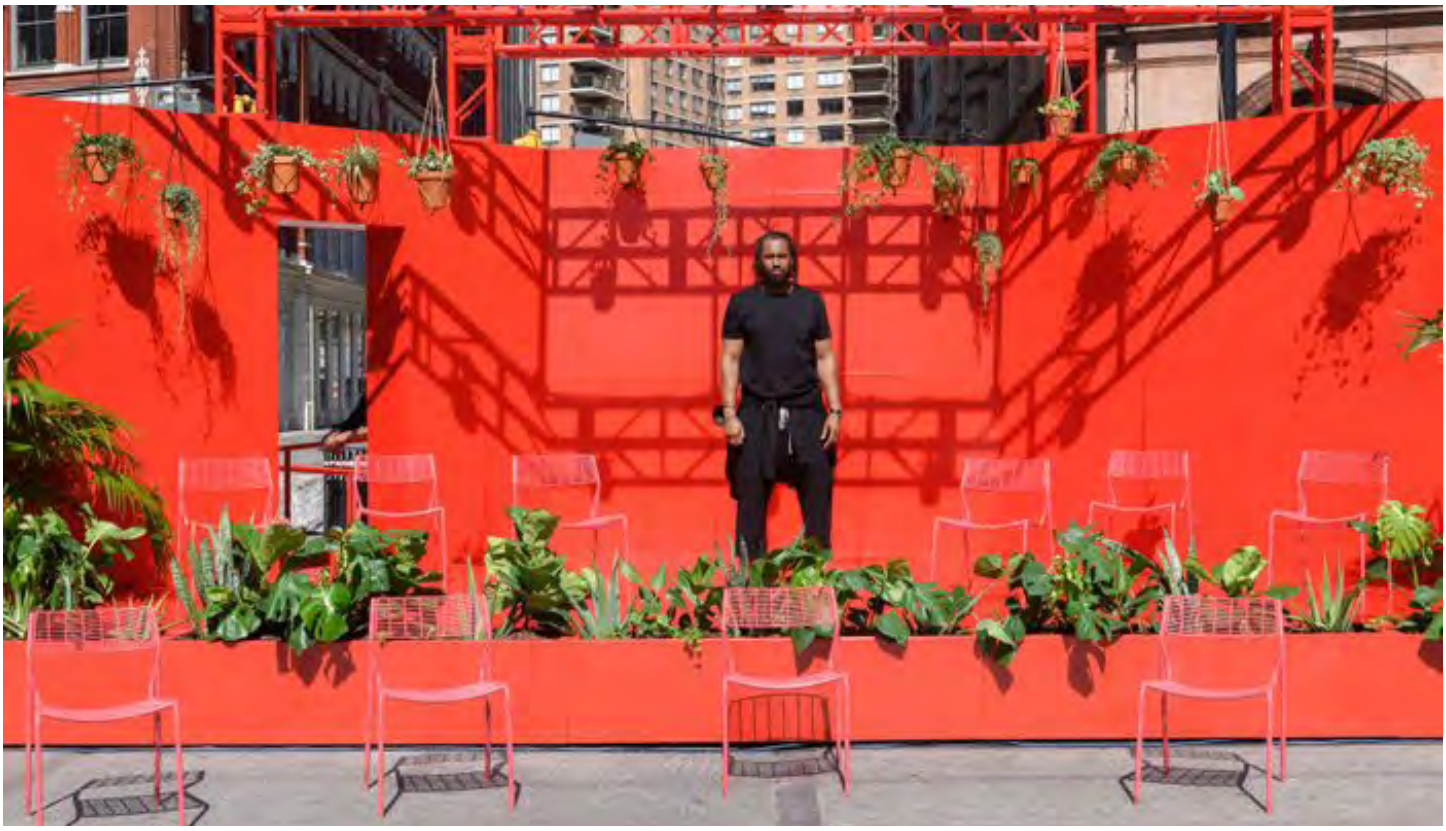
Rashid Johnson Welcomes Everyone To His ‘Red Stage’ on Astor Place

By Carl Swanson | June 7, 2021

This past weekend, Astor Place was full of a young crowd of day-dancers who are fans of the QTPOC collective Papi Juice, all gathered before artist Rashid Johnson’s bright-painted plant-bedecked Red Stage. For the next month, it will be spilling over with performances, music, games, history lessons, meet-ups and talk backs, all programmed by the public art nonprofit Creative Time. It will be locus for a kind of ongoing festival of festive intersectionality, a post-pandemic, post–George Floyd party with a purpose, much of it queer and trans-celebrating and so deliberately anti-heirarchical that three days a week will be open-sourced, when “the stage is open to artists and passersby to activate and occupy however they please.”

“It’s completely under-policed by me; this is ideally a gift to the folks who want to bring it to life,” Johnson tells me a few days before the Red Stage went live. In terms of the programming, “I don’t want to have anything to do with it” —not his skill set — ”but had it been my job I would have chosen these same people. They have turned it into something which is really inviting to LGBTQ folks, and have been really thoughtful about finding voices … I want it to be really representative of the city.”

The color of the stage itself is of course deliberate. “Red is this great sign of an alarm,” he explains “We’ve been living in this time of great alarm. And great awareness.” He made a series of *Untilted Anxious Red Paintings* over the pandemic, holed



Johnson on the *Red Stage* Photo: Filip Wolak, courtesy of Creative Time

Swanson, Carl, “Rashid Johnson Welcomes Everyone To His ‘Red Stage’ on Astor Place,” *Curbed.com*, June 7, 2021

Photo: Matteo Prandoni/BFA.com/Courtesy of Creative Time

up with his family in the East End of Long Island. But also: “I have these red sneakers I’ve been wearing. I’m looking down at them and thinking: Maybe I am really into red right now. And using color as a way to illustrate that color can be a tool to capture our mood.”

Color aside, the concept of the stage was “strangely born from Carl Andre,” Johnson says. “The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago had a great floor plate piece. When I learned I could walk on it, it blew my mind.” Realizing that, he and his friends–“these young black kids” — would get together and break dance on the piece. “It would alarm other people who didn’t realize you could interact with it,” he remembers. “The guards could not stop it. You can’t disallow something which is allowed.”

Tell that to the anarchic revelers who are being pushed out of Washington Square Park only a few blocks away by the new curfew; we live in an era of the re-disallowing. It’s not yet clear how controlled Red Stage will remain.

Johnson grew up in Chicago, and he tells me that he has little deep personal history with the Astor Place are area beyond going to the Public Theater (although he lives not too far uptown.) It’s the gateway to the East Village which during his 16 years in the city has steadily had its naturally-occurring radicality, dating from when rents were cheap and the area had an on-edge druggy abandonment, polished away. *The Alamo*, that upturned cube from 1967 that its sculptor, Tony Rosenthal, remembered as being sited in “an awful spot,” bereft of street life, today sits in the middle of an expanded plaza, surrounded by sleek glass tech bro bourgeiousity. The area itself as fancy as it has been since it was home to the city’s finest opera house in the mid-19th Century and a bit later was lorded over by Wannamaker’s department store (today home to Facebook.) Johnson doesn’t let this bother him too much. “During the time I’ve lived here I feel like it’s been three different cities,” he sys. “It’s going to change and it’s going to disappoint you.”

Swanson, Carl, “Rashid Johnson Welcomes Everyone To His ‘Red Stage’ on Astor Place,” *Curbed.com*, June 7, 2021

The genesis for the project dates back a few years, when Johnson was approached by Creative Time to collaborate. “It took me some time to think,” he says. “I had a couple ideas which I thought might be interesting. And we evolved out of those,” since they “did not deliver the experience this pandemic time needed. Touching and other things which didn’t make sense. I realized I wanted to be outside; some of those places had interior aspects.”

This is Johnson’s second stage in the city right now. The first, installed last fall in the courtyard at MoMA PS1, is just called *Stage*. It’s bright yellow and features five also-bright-yellow microphones, arranged at different heights. The idea is that anybody in any body–and admission to PS1 is free to city residents–could get up and speak their mind, or perhaps sing or, since it also celebrates the mic, the central fetish object of hip-hop, rhyme.

“Young black males become obsessed with this opportunity to make their voices louder,” he says of the mic, before acknowledging that “it’s archaic in that we have now found other substantive ways to make our voices louder on social media,” he says. But Stage gives “the opportunity to do that and say what you want to say whether it’s poetry or singing or speaking and have it archived by the institution as well.”

What the two stages share in common: “Give people something to use,” he says “Give them something to amplify their voice or give their bodies agency… I love that I can make these things and then step away and give it to the public. Do with it what you will.”

What’s next for it after this month? “There are some institutions in other cities which have expressed some interest in taking it to their homes,” he says. “So we’ll figure it out. I can see it possibly travelling.”

Then another comparison comes to Johnson’s mind: “There was a Picasso sculpture in downtown Chicago we’d call the slide,” he says. “This is just a part of how the work is constructed; You could use it as a slide. I don’t think that was Picasso’s intention. The public is so aggressive and will make anything what it wants to be. They aren’t beholden to critical and conceptual concerns. They don’t give a fuck and thats ok.”

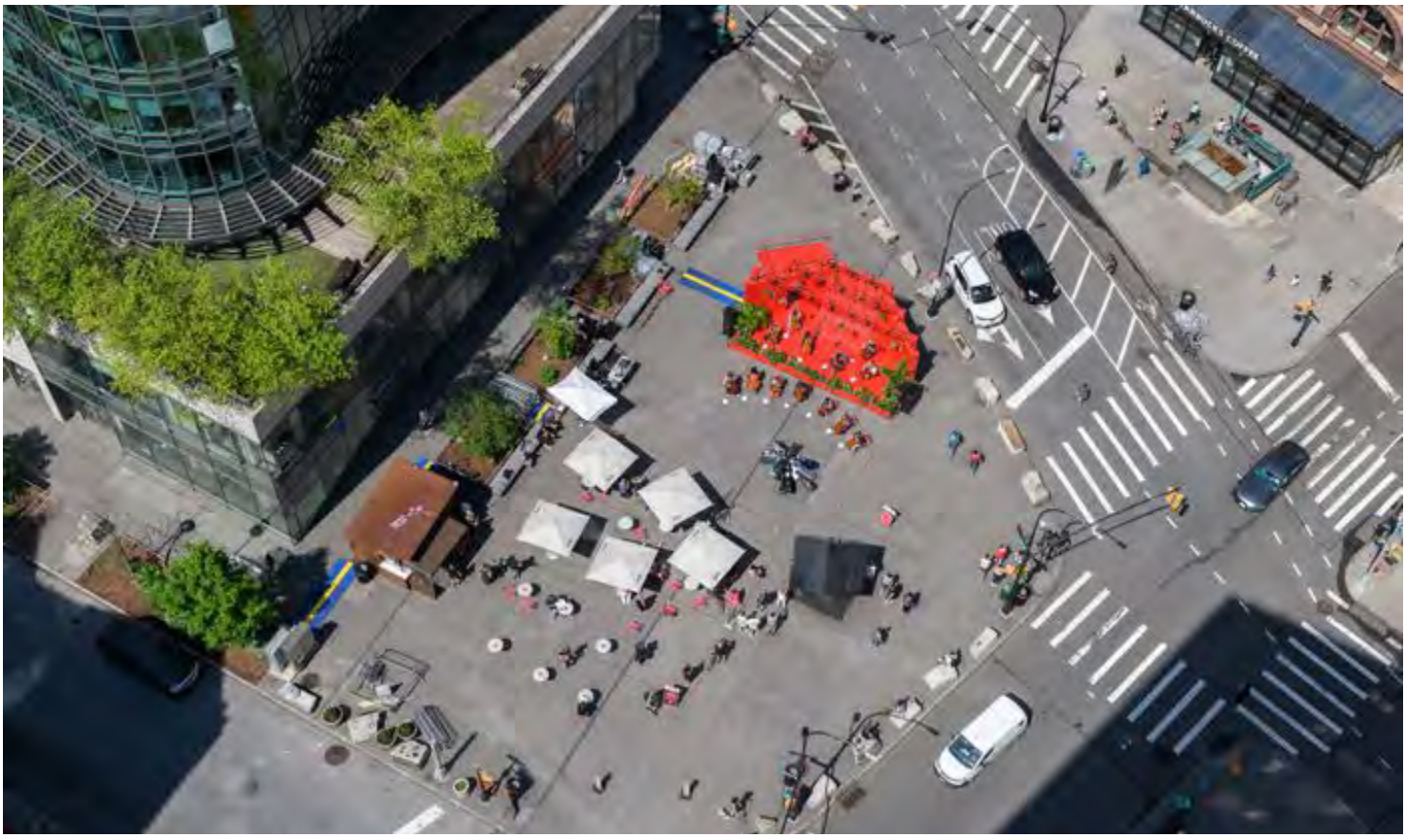


Photo: Filip Wolak, courtesy of Creative Time

Estiler, Keith, “Rashid Johnson Curates ‘There’s There There’ Group Exhibition at Hauser & Wirth Southampton,” *HypeBeast.com*, June 3, 2021

HYPEBEAST

Rashid Johnson Curates “There’s There There” Group Exhibition at Hauser & Wirth Southampton

A show about finding “simplicity in a complicated time.”

By Keith Estiler I June 3, 2021

Wolfgang Laib, *Untitled (Stairs)*, 2002

After unveiling his *Anxious Red Drawings* in an online viewing room, Rashid Johnson now travels to Hauser & Wirth’s Southampton outpost to curate a group exhibition entitled “There’s There There.” The presentation features a diverse group of contemporary artists whom specialize in varying mediums such as painting, sculpture, mixed-media and installation. The exhibition focuses on the shapes and objects found in the everyday while reflecting on the routines that dictate people’s lives.

“The idea for this show is rooted in trying to find simplicity in a complicated time. This doesn’t omit that the work has the ability to be rigorous and complicated in the way that it lives, but it does allow for a space of simple contemplation,” said Johnson in a statement. “In some respect, the things that you look at are what they are. But you also have op- portunity to unpack them. The simplicity of the forms and methods divorce the objects from their inherent complexity.”

Participating artists include Jennifer Bartlett, Vija Celmins, Willie Cole, Rob Davis, Alteronce Gumby, David Hammons, Mary Heilmann, Leslie Hewitt, Sheree Hovsepian, Wolfgang Laib, Robert Longo, Richard Mayhew, Joel Shapiro, Xaviera Simmons, and John Smith.

Ghosh, Ravi, “Behind the Mask: Face to Face with Rashid Johnson’s The Hikers,” *Elephant.art*, May 30, 2021

ELEPHANT

Behind the Mask: Face to Face with Rashid Johnson’s The Hikers

Images and essays explore the dark and disturbing world of the US artist’s multiform, multi-city, multimedia project

By Ravi Ghosh I May 30, 2021

The front and back covers of Rashid Johnson’s *The Hikers* both bear a black print of *Anxious Mask* (2019), the canvas jacket of the book taking on a textural similarity to the scrawled oil-stick face upon animal skin. Depicted flat and unworn, the loose strings used to secure the mask resemble single hairs or dangling earrings. Only when worn are these strings tied behind the head and hidden, the animal skin wrapped and contorted to fit the wearer’s skull.

The anxiety and deception evoked by Johnson’s masks are key forces in *The Hikers*, the artist’s 2019 film from which a series of exhibitions and performances were developed. This book is the latest to emerge, documenting the various iterations of the work as it evolved at galleries and museums in Colorado, Mexico City and New York City. Published by Hauser & Wirth, the book includes installation imagery and a visual inventory of works. Also featured is a conversation between Johnson and Claudia Schreier, who choreographed ballet performances of *The Hikers* in which Rashid’s Anxious Masks were worn alongside simple black costuming.

The full range of Johnson’s mixed-media practice is on show here. Variously defined within abstract, conceptual and historicist traditions, the Chicago-born African American artist showcases collage, sculpture, mosaic, painting and film in *The Hikers*. Using materials including shea butter, cotton rag, soap, bronze, mirror and tile in large-scale installations, he sets out to capture the anxieties of existing in a world of turmoil as a Black American citizen. Works such as *Untitled Escape Collage* (2019) feel monumental, its geometric flashes revealing the mask imagery on its red oak surface, while *Woodman* (2014) and other smaller sculptures focus instead on how materials overlay and wear away at each other.

An essay in the book by Heidi Zuckerman begins by noting that anxiety featured heavily in her conversations with Johnson in 2018, doubtless in part a nod to the re-emergence of white nationalism in the US at the halfway point of the Trump presidency. Despite the three intervening years, this context feels renewed rather than retired in her essay: Johnson’s admittance to Zuckerman that “I’m concerned about the world my son is going to be inheriting” rings just as true today.

Zuckerman goes on to read several of Johnson’s works closely, favouring an intimate idiom rather than a distanced, more conventionally curatorial authority. She unpicks *Untitled Anxious Audience* (2016), a large ceramic tile work bearing 34 pseudo-robotic faces, and *Untitled Microphone Sculpture* (2018), whose single face, Zuckerman writes, parallels “the way we pace around the kitchen on a conference call… simultaneously hyperproductive and present, and distracted and self-doubting.”

Curator Manuela Moscoso’s essay focuses on touch and materiality. Johnson’s works, she argues, “do invoke a non-ocular-centric mode of interpretation… his materials, such as shea butter or black soap, stimulate tactile memories; both their composition and their finish encourage haptic viewing.” She casts the skin as a mediating force through which we distinguish forms of touch, arguing that *The Hikers* film, “triggers this sense of touch as a figure of relation” via its depiction of two Black walkers and their interactions with the land, while also tapping into long-standing literary depictions of the wanderer and the revelatory potential of natural exploration.

The photographic spreads of the ballet (supplemented by Johnson’s conversation with Schreier) distinguish the book from straightforward inventory. The performance explores the ways in which people minimise, contort and express themselves in an embodied fashion, whether to communicate a feeling or element of their personalities, or to disguise or shield themselves from an external agent. “This idea of being Black and feeling outside of oneself” was the choreography’s central idea, Schreier says. Johnson’s appetite for formal experimentation is obvious, eager to bend and break dance orthodoxy in favour of more intuitive storytelling.

Schreier says that it was upon seeing the masks—how “deeply disturbing” they were—that she realised the pair in *The Hikers* ballet could not reasonably come to a romantic conclusion. Out of this judgement came a different direction, a new route prompted by a visceral reaction to Johnson’s work. Across three American cities and some 450 pages, this power to move freely beyond convention is thankfully retained.

Dafoe, Taylor, “Rashid Johnson Will Give Artists a Literal Stage to Reemerge From the Pandemic as Part of a New Project With Creative Time,” *news.Artnet.com*, May 12, 2021

artnet

Rashid Johnson Will Give Artists a Literal Stage to Reemerge From the Pandemic as Part of a New Project With Creative Time

“Red Stage” will offer both scheduled programs and open days for anyone to use in downtown Manhattan.

By Taylor Dafoe | May 12, 2021

The south plaza of Astor Place. Courtesy of Creative Time.

One year ago, Rashid Johnson was holed up in a makeshift workspace in the basement of his Long Island home, churning out a series of apocalyptic oil stick drawings the color of a fire alarm. They belonged to his ongoing “Anxious Men” project, the artist told Artnet News at the time. He *sounded* anxious—as we all did then, a month deep into the pandemic, uncertainty still the dominant mood.

Now, as we prepare to return to a semblance of normalcy, Johnson has once again turned to that same anxious red color—but this time, he’s doing so to a more optimistic end.

Next month, the artist will unveil *Red Stage*, a new Creative Time-sponsored public art piece that will act as both a monumental sculpture and a participatory installation.

The work’s title doubles as a physical description: Installed at New York’s Astor Place, Johnson’s piece will take the form of a 30-foot-wide red platform backed by a 13-foot-tall proscenium.

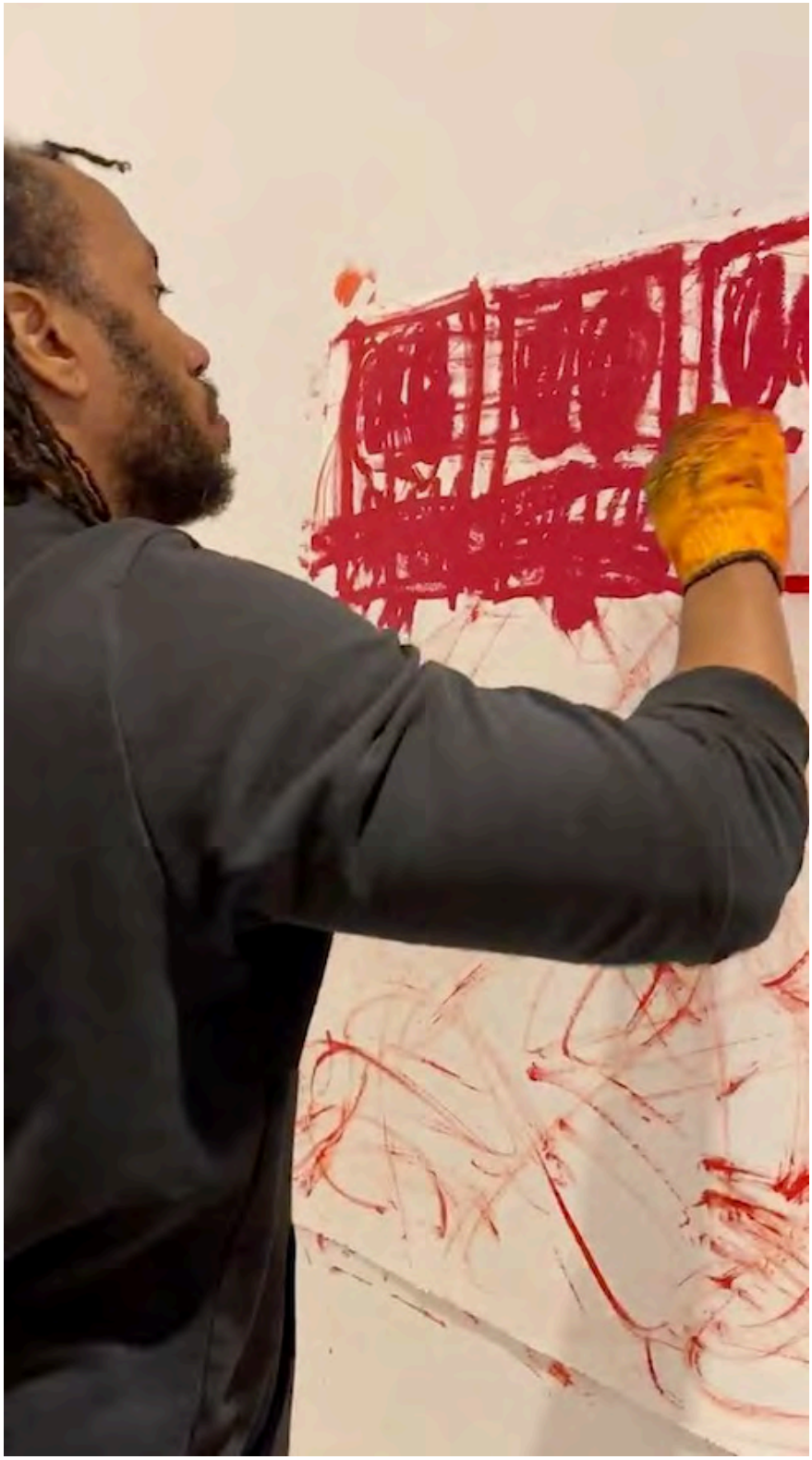
Playing out on the stage for the project’s month-long run will be any number of activations, both planned and unplanned: Creative Time-organized programs, artist-curated takeovers, and what Johnson calls the People Days, in which the site will be turned over to artists and passersby to use it as they see fit—for rehearsals and performances, or maybe meditation. (A full programming schedule—including presentations by theater director Charlotte Brathwaite and the nightlife collective Papi Juice—will be announced in the coming weeks.)

“We are still contending with so much trauma and pain from what has been experienced during the course of the pandemic,” Justine Ludwig, Creative Time’s executive director, told Artnet News. “We’re back in the world and we’re thinking about the place that we want to be a part of. There’s a lot of tension that exists there.”

For three years, Ludwig and Johnson have been in discussions about a Creative Time presentation. Initially, the director explained, they were working on a “radically different project.” The pandemic changed that and their conversations pivoted. “Community, exchange, and collaboration, and thinking about how the city itself becomes a site of activation” became the new priority, said Ludwig.

The sculpture’s design recalls the artist’s modular architectural grid structures, where cubes of bare scaffolding overflow with objects symbolic of the African diaspora: plants, pottery, shea butter sculptures. Plants will live on Red Stage, too—a symbol of the artwork’s purported status as a locus of growth and regeneration.

“It’s very much intended to be a living structure in more than one way,” Ludwig said. “That’s something we need to think about at this moment and something that’s very poetically reflected in the fact that there are plants growing off of it: What do we want to seed at this moment, what do we want to nurture? What should be growing out of this period of trauma and isolation that we all collectively experienced?”



Rashid Johnson working on an “Untitled Anxious Red Drawing” (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Red Stage will be on view June 5 – July 4, 2021 on the south plaza of Astor Place.

FRIEZE

The Best Public Art Shows to See this Year

From Yayoi Kusama's flora-inspired sculptures at the New York Botanical Garden to this year's Shanghai Urban Space Art Season, these are must-see public art shows across the globe

By Frieze | April 21, 2021

Rashid Johnson, *Stacked Heads*, 2020, installation view at Canning Dock Quayside; Courtesy: the artist and the Liverpool Biennial; photograph: Mark McNulty.

Liverpool Biennial

Various venues, Liverpool, UK

The 2021 Liverpool Biennial – rescheduled from 2020 due to COVID-19 – brings together 50 international artists and two collectives to present works in various locations around the city. Larry Achiampong has installed eight Pan-African flags on buildings and streets across the city centre, referencing Liverpool's connection to the transatlantic slave trade while evoking a sense of solidarity and collective empathy. Yael Davids presents a new public performance, *Wingspan of the Captive* (2021), at Liverpool Central Library, responding to the naturalist illustrations of John James Audubon's *The Birds of America* (1827). Rashid Johnson's public sculpture *Stacked Heads* (2020) – a totem that uses resilient flora to speak to present-day racial discrimination – is presented at Canning Dock Quayside. And Luisa Ungar's interactive tours, taking place throughout the city, point to elements of medicine, stigmatization and otherness.

The 11th edition of Liverpool Biennial, 'The Stomach and the Port', is on view through 6 June 2021.

Ohio, Camille, “MOURNING IN AMERICA: ‘GRIEF AND GRIEVANCE’ AT THE NEW MUSEUM,” *ARTnews*.com, April 19, 2021

ARTnews

MOURNING IN AMERICA: “GRIEF AND GRIEVANCE” AT THE NEW MUSEUM

By Camille Ohio | April 19, 2021

As the elevator opens onto the fourth floor of the New Museum, you step into auditory chaos. Eighties hip-hop, classical music, the buzzing of flies, muffled and not-so-muffled voices: an enveloping swarm emanating from works that explore the infinitesimal individual experiences and larger shared realities of Blackness. “Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America,” conceived by Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor roughly a year before his untimely death in March 2019, is a colossally ambitious show. Posthumously realized by Naomi Beckwith, Glenn Ligon, Massimiliano Gioni, and Mark Nash, the exhibition offers innumerable prompts for the collective acknowledgment of Black anguish. In Enwezor’s essay for the show’s catalogue (initially published in spring 2020), he writes, “The exhibition is devoted to examining modes of representation in different mediums where artists have addressed the concept of mourning, commemoration, and loss as a direct response to the national emergency of black grief.” Viewers are asked to consider the breadth of experiences, expressions, and perceptions encapsulated in the troubles, triumphs, and traumas of Black people in the Western world—a mammoth effort considering the multitudes each Black individual and subculture contains.

The show opens with a palpable sense of heaviness. As I adjusted to the overwhelming presentation on the show’s top floor, centered on Rashid Johnson’s monumental installation *Antoine’s Organ* (2016), pushy white visitors sidled in front of their Black counterparts supposedly unaware, squinting at the introductory wall text—racial ambivalence and anti-Black violence in action even here. Within the blackened steel grid of the massive scaffold is a sprinkling of retro television sets playing a selection of Johnson’s past video works on loop: Black men performing martial arts, making music, just moving. Sitting among the monitors are stacks of books including Søren Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Anxiety* and Randall Kennedy’s Sellout: *The Politics of Racial Betrayal*—unsubtle nods to the complexity of a raced experience—and live plants, accompanied by busts of shea butter, and black soap. The scent is perhaps what attracted the flies, a tender nod to Black nostalgia made less tender by the tiny traveling companions of rot and decay.

Rashid Johnson, *Antoine’s Organ*, 2016, black steel, grow lights, plants, wood, shea butter, books, monitors, rugs, piano, 189 by 338 by 126 3/4 inches.

Johnson’s arresting installation is displayed alongside four paintings by Julie Mehretu and one by Mark Bradford. Collectively, the works tackle themes of destruction, creation, and loss reinterpreted. Built up from numerous small markings, Mehretu’s paintings possess a world-ending force, as if channeling a relentless barrage of microaggressions: *Black Monolith, for Okwui Enwezor (Charlottesville)*, 2017–20, a large, abstract canvas with layered calligraphic marks and shadowy airbrushed slashes in black ink and acrylic nearly occluding a brightly colored ground, confronts grief directly, paying homage to the late curator. Tucked quietly on the other side of the gallery is a small abstract assemblage by Jack Whitten, *Birmingham* (1964), its materials—aluminum foil, newsprint, stockings, and black paint on plywood—invoking the burnt Baptist tabernacles and ripped stockings of stalwart Black church aunties that were seared into the artist’s mind from his early years in Birmingham, Alabama.

Installed in the stairwell leading down to the next floor is Hank Willis Thomas’s *14,719* (2019), a monument—perhaps excessively literal—to victims of gun violence, taking the form of a circle of hanging banners embroidered with stars representing the number of people killed by guns in the US during a single year. It gives way to works that interlace mythology with science fiction and self-told history. Howardena Pindell’s collage *Autobiography: Water (Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts)*, 1988, depicts dozens of eyes sprinkled around the vague silhouette of a human form. Extra limbs extend upward from the figure, calling to mind the protagonist of Octavia Butler’s trilogy “Lilith’s Brood,” the vessel for a new form of human. Pindell uses her personal memories of segregation and the remembered tales of her enslaved ancestors (at least one of whom was maimed by their enslaver) to construct this vision of herself rising from watery depths, healing generational wounds. Other works call to mind celebration and pick up the earlier theme of destruction. In a video depicting the enchanting songstress Alice Smith in a recording session, Kahlil Joseph aims to capture Black beauty, seen through Black eyes, for Black enjoyment in *AliceTM (you don’t have to think about it)*, 2016, while Okwui Okpokwasili offers a pleasantly unbalanced diptych in the installation *Poor People’s TV Room (Solo),* 2017, showing her physical and spirit selves intertwined in a dance of self-actualization and self-acknowledgment. Arthur Jafa’s *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death* (2016) is a decidedly more forceful and cinematic video collage incorporating clips of police brutality, religious worship, and scenes from space, set to a Kanye West track (himself a troubled symbol of Black brilliance and self-hate intermingled in an individual).

The show includes a number of sculptural interventions that loom uncomfortably over their surroundings. Nari Ward’s *Peace Keeper* (1995/2020), incorporating a tarred and peacock-feathered hearse, viscerally calls to mind early colonial exhibitionist punishments, designed to dehumanize and humiliate, which continued in the form of twentieth- and twenty-first-century lynchings. Simone Leigh’s *Sentinel IV* (2020) peers over visitors, silently taking stock, recording, and repelling, while Tiona Nekkia McClodden’s *THE FULL SEVERITY OF COMPASSION* (2019), a painted manual cattle squeeze, marries themes of pain and pleasure, comfort and death. A trio of works from Diamond Stingily’s series “Entryways” (2016–19)— freestanding doors with baseball bats leaning against them—are affecting metaphors for self-protection and female agency. Stingily’s sculptures also exemplify the limits of the show’s theme: they are not so much about grief as its prevention. At once overambitious and oversimplifying, the show’s attempts to fit a multitude of experiences into a single overarching framework can have a flattening effect: Blackness is not just grief, a point that often gets lost when work by Black artists is shown in predominantly white institutions.

But mourning is nevertheless a crucial part of healing, something too often denied Black Americans, who have had to contend with a hamster wheel of atrocities flung at them century after century. This is the dichotomy of Black grief and fictionalized white grievances to which the show’s title speaks. Though at times disjointed, Enwezor’s final curatorial effort makes an insistent attempt to recenter this vital process, bringing together artists with widely different practices to create a space within which viewers can safely mourn—or at the very least, remember why they didn’t get the chance to in the first place.

Jack Whitten, *Birmingham*, 1964, aluminum foil, newsprint, stocking, and oil on plywood, 16 5/8 by 16 inches.

"Storm King Art Center Presents Site-Specific Installation of Rashid Johnson's 'The Crisis', Opening April 7,"
ARTFixdaily.com, April 5, 2021

ARTFIX*daily*

Storm King Art Center Presents Site-Specific Installation of Rashid Johnson's 'The Crisis', Opening April 7

April 5th, 2021

Rashid Johnson, *The Crisis* (2019). Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Stephanie Powell, courtesy of Storm King Art Center.

Storm King Art Center will present a site-specific installation of Rashid Johnson's 2019 sculptural work The Crisis, on view from April 7 to November 8, 2021.

The installation will mark the first US presentation of the artwork, which the artist has adapted to respond directly to Storm King's native landscape.

Rashid Johnson (b. 1977) draws inspiration from combining architectural and organic elements, intending for *The Crisis* to capture the tension of the moment in which nature has just begun to reclaim a human-made structure. Originally planned to be shown at Storm King in 2020, a year marked by an unprecedented global pandemic and sociopolitical unrest, *The Crisis* has taken on a striking new relevance in this time of reflection.

Nora Lawrence, Storm King Senior Curator, commented, "What I love most about working at Storm King is being able to present art in a way no other place can. I am looking forward to watching The Crisis change as the grasses grow up and into it and the seasons shift. In collaboration with Rashid, we were able to place The Crisis in a central location on-site where visitors can view it both from above and from a closer vantage point. These various physical approaches invite the multiplicity of interpretations that Rashid intends for this work and allow space for visitors to contemplate the striking new relevance that The Crisis has taken on in today's moment."

The title *The Crisis* is ambiguous, taking on different meaning based on the context in which the work is viewed, and the perspective of the viewer who witnesses it. *The Crisis* can speak to something deeply personal as well as a collective event and can invoke both historical and ongoing crises.

The work—a sixteen-foot-tall, yellow pyramidal steel structure—is set within a field of native grasses, which Storm King has worked to reintroduce to its landscape and cultivate over the last 25 years. Over the course of the presentation, these grasses will grow up within and around the geometric frame, integrating it into the very fabric of Storm King. The structure's shelves are populated with a range of smaller objects including blocks of shea butter, sculpted fiberglass busts, and hand-crafted, painted ceramic vessels planted with natural vegetation from the surrounding landscape. Johnson chose the color yellow for *The Crisis* to evoke multiple meanings. While the bright yellow frame and sculpted busts within it send out a warning, they are also the color of shea butter, a West African product known for its healing properties, which frequently occurs within Johnson's practice. *The Crisis* at once calls upon us to beware and also points to the regeneration that often follows trauma.

Johnson said: "The title *The Crisis* talks about the time we're living in. When I was making this work in 2019, there was so much talk about a 'crisis at the border'—but now, in 2021, there is even more at stake. The world has endured a year of struggle defined by the global pandemic, compounded by ongoing social unrest. My presentation at Storm King prompts us to reflect on how we move through our own daily lives as the world around us continues in crisis."

In the fall of 2021, *The Crisis* will be activated and accompanied by the performance of Johnson's 2019 ballet, *The Hikers*, conceived in partnership with choreographer Claudia Schreier. Johnson and Schreier will adapt The Hikers specifically for Storm King's vast setting. Further details and performance dates will be announced in the coming months.

The Crisis (2019) is on loan to Storm King for the 2021 season from the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Gaskin, Sam, “Rashid Johnson Brings ‘The Crisis’ to Storm King,” *Ocula.com*, April 6, 2021

OCULA

Rashid Johnson Brings ‘The Crisis’ to Storm King

Johnson conceived the warning-sign-yellow work before Covid-19 ravaged the globe.

By Sam Gaskin | April 6, 2021

Rashid Johnson, *The Crisis* (2019). Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Stephanie Powell, courtesy of Storm King Art Center.

Rashid Johnson’s ‘The Crisis’ will be installed outdoors at New York’s Storm King Art Center from 7 April to 8 November.

The 16-foot-tall yellow steel pyramid screams caution but its shelves—which contain blocks of shea butter, fibreglass busts, and pots containing local flora—suggest recovery, reconnection, and regrowth.

In his work, the Chicago-born artist regularly uses West African materials such as shea butter, known for its healing properties, and black soap.

‘When I was making this work in 2019, there was so much talk about a “crisis at the border”—but now, in 2021, there is even more at stake,’ Johnson said. ‘The world has endured a year of struggle defined by the global pandemic, compounded by ongoing social unrest. My presentation at Storm King prompts us to reflect on how we move through our own daily lives as the world around us continues in crisis.’

In choosing a site for *The Crisis,* Storm King sought to give audiences different ways of seeing the work.

‘We were able to place *The Crisis* in a central location on-site where visitors can view it both from above and from a closer vantage point,’ said Nora Lawrence, Storm King Senior Curator. ‘These various physical approaches invite the multiplicity of interpretations that Rashid intends for this work and allow space for visitors to contemplate the striking new relevance that The Crisis has taken on in today’s moment.’

The work’s theme of recovery echoes the outdoor museum’s effort in recent years to reintroduce native wild grasses to its 500 acre plot.

‘I am looking forward to watching *The Crisis* change as the grasses grow up and into it and the seasons shift,’ Lawrence said.

Rashid Johnson is represented by Hauser & Wirth. His work *The Broken Five* (2019) was acquired by The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York last month. Along with Amy Sherald, Nick Cave, Lorna Simpson, Kerry James Marshall, Hank Willis Thomas, and others, he is participating in the exhibition *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*, which reflects on the life and death of Breonna Taylor. The exhibition opens at the Speed Art Museum, Louisville, on 7 April and will remain on view until 6 June. —[O]

Selvin, Claire, “Metropolitan Museum of Art Acquires Mixed-Media Work by Rashid Johnson,” *ARTnews.com*, March 11, 2021

ARTnews

Metropolitan Museum of Art Acquires Mixed-Media Work by Rashid Johnson

By Claire Selvin | March 11, 2021

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.
KYODO VIA AP IMAGES

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has acquired Rashid Johnson’s 2019 mixed-media work *The Broken Five*, which debuted at the artist’s solo exhibition at Hauser & Wirth in New York that same year. The piece has not been on view since that showing, and it is the first unique work by Johnson to enter the institution’s collection, following its acquisition of an untitled etching by the artist from 2015.

Johnson announced the Met’s latest acquisition of his work in an Instagram post this week, writing, “It was a real joy to see my work, *The Broken Five*, recently acquired by and exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum.” *The Broken Five*, which incorporates ceramic, mirrored glass, spray paint, black soap, and other materials, has recently gone on view in a suite of galleries on the museum’s second floor where works by Jackson Pollock, Sam Gilliam, Joan Mitchell, Willem de Kooning, and other marquee names of the postwar era hang alongside abstract works by artists of more recent generations.

The Met has been working on buying *The Broken Five* since it went on view at Hauser & Wirth. The pandemic has slowed the acquisition process somewhat, and the museum is still finalizing the purchase. Ian Alteveer, a curator of modern and contemporary art at the Met who played an integral role in the acquisition, told ARTnews that the work represents the artist in the collection “in a really impactful and robust way.”

Alteveer continued, “It is a kind of kaleidoscopic vision that incorporates so much of [Johnson’s] practice today—something that is a painting and a sculpture all at once. *The Broken Five* is a wall relief that carries with it all this weight of history in his work but also speaks to the emergence over the past six years of these ‘anxious’ and ‘broken’ figures in the practice.”

The curator said the five figures that make up the piece’s composition have a “semi-autobiographical” quality to them. The work as a whole also addresses how the world bears witness to issues of racial justice, police violence, environmental crises, and other socio-political concerns.

According to Alteveer, the acquisition also aligns with the collection’s “deep interest in augmenting and centering Black artists,” which “is a tradition we’ve been building on, I think really successfully, in recent years,” he said.

The Broken Five will remain on view in the coming months, and Alteveer pointed out that one of the images of the work that Johnson posted to Instagram features Gilliam’s 1968 Carousel State, an unstretched acrylic on canvas painting affixed to the wall.

“Those two works, fifty years apart from each other, hang so beautifully together and share some of the same traditions about questioning and running with modes of abstraction to speak to all kinds of different contexts and stories,” Alteveer said.

Holland, Oscar, “The art of processing our collective grief,” *CNN.com*, February 23, 2021

The art of processing our collective grief

An urgent show at the New Museum — both a monument to a resilient culture and a memorial to what’s lost through racism — will surely rank as one of the most important of 2021.

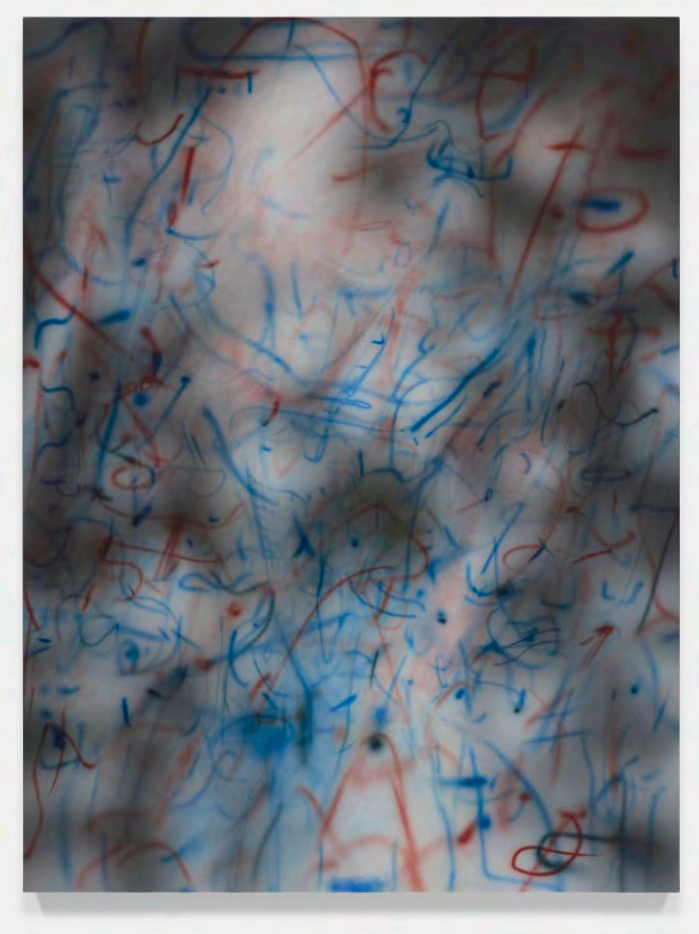
By Oscar Holland | February 23, 2021

Rashid Johnson’s “Antoine’s Organ,” brings together lights, plants and various objects within a black steel frame. Credit: Rashid Johnson/ Hauser & Wirth

We have heard the phrase “grim milestone” so often in the past year that it now falls into the realm of journalistic cliché. Monday’s news that the US has surpassed half a million Covid-19 deaths should not, however, be any less poignant for its morbid familiarity.

These are the moments in which individual and shared grief intersect. But as we struggle to take stock of societies’ losses, what does coming to terms with grief, as a culture, really look like?

Whether portraying others’ grief or revealing their own, artists are often able tap into something universal. One need not be Christian to feel Mary’s anguish in Renaissance depictions of Christ’s crucifixion; one need not have lived through the Spanish Civil War to feel the harrowing abyss at the heart of Picasso’s “Guernica” (pictured above). The torment of Edvard Munch’s “The Scream” is clear to all.



Julie Mehretu’s painting “Rubber Gloves (O.C.).” Credit: Julie Mehretu/White Cube/ Marian Goodman Gallery/Tom Powel Imaging

The New Museum in New York City explores this idea of processing grief through art with painfully appropriate timing. Just days before Monday’s Covid-19 milestone, it opened the new exhibition, “Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America.” In another cruel twist, the show’s mastermind, Nigerian curator and critic Okwui Enwezor, died before its opening following a long battle with cancer.

The show was, however, conceived before the emergence of Covid-19. (Enwezor passed away in 2019, though he might well have predicted how a pandemic would disproportionately affect people of color.) It instead addresses racial injustice and, in the late curator’s words, “black grief in the face of a politically orchestrated white grievance.”

In the exhibition, memorial and commemoration take many forms. In “Peace Keeper,” Jamaican artist Nari Ward covered a full-size hearse in tar and feathers. Rashid Johnson’s living installation, “Antoine’s Organ,” meanwhile presents plants and various household items (including shea butter and books chronicling the experiences of the African diaspora) in a commentary on the nature of life and decay. Elsewhere, LaToya Ruby Frazier’s photographs of working-class hardship and Julie Mehretu’s abstract landscape paintings all struggle with loss in their own unique ways.

These varied responses to the show’s central premise -- that grief is irrevocably woven through the Black experience in America -- are both personal and, by virtue of their exhibition, inherently public. Artistic creation is often an act of both private catharsis and solidarity.

Audiences interpret the creators’ grief through the lens of their own, and thus individual suffering is communicated to society as a whole. Culture may not cure, but it can soothe.

Smee, Sebastian, "A searing, all-star art show explores Black grief from the civil rights era to now," *WashingtonPost.com*, February 17, 2021

The Washington Post

A searing, all-star art show explores Black grief from the civil rights era to now

By Sebastian Smee | February 17, 2021

Kerry James Marshall's "Souvenir II," 1997. (Addison Gallery of American Art/Courtesy New Museum)

NEW YORK — The most ambitious exhibitions help to usher in new ways of seeing. The Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor, who died in March 2019 at just 55, specialized in these kinds of paradigm-shifting shows. His exhibitions had a prescient feeling. If you saw them or even read about them, you knew you were seeing the shape of future conversations about art — and about who gets kudos for making it.

"Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America" — the last show organized by Enwezor and his only one devoted exclusively to art by African Americans — feels retrospective rather than prescient. That makes sense, because the show, at the New Museum in New York, is about mourning, commemoration and loss.

Remarkable in its quality, emotional force and concision, it features work by many of this country's most acclaimed Black artists — among them Carrie Mae Weems, Mark Bradford, Lorna Simpson, Kerry James Marshall, Theaster Gates and Kara Walker.

Enwezor originally conceived "Grief and Grievance" in 2018, in the aftermath of a period that saw America's first Black president, the death of Trayvon Martin, the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and the murder of nine members of an African American congregation by a young white supremacist. After Donald Trump became president, Enwezor wanted to think through what he called the "crystallization of Black grief in the face of a politically orchestrated White grievance."

Smee, Sebastian, “A searing, all-star art show explores Black grief from the civil rights era to now,” *WashingtonPost.com*, February 17, 2021

Curator Okwui Enwezor. (Giorgio Zucchiatti/Courtesy Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia)

He has done that and, at the same time, produced a show that is filled with musical invention, austere forms of abstract beauty and visceral expressions of joy.

Enwezor planned for the show to open during Trump’s first term. In case his cancer progressed, he had entrusted aspects of the project to the artist Glenn Ligon, who worked with curators Mark Nash, Naomi Beckwith and Massimiliano Gioni to bring the show to fruition. The catalogue was completed on May 1, 2020, less than a month before the killing of George Floyd. The opening was then set back by the pandemic.

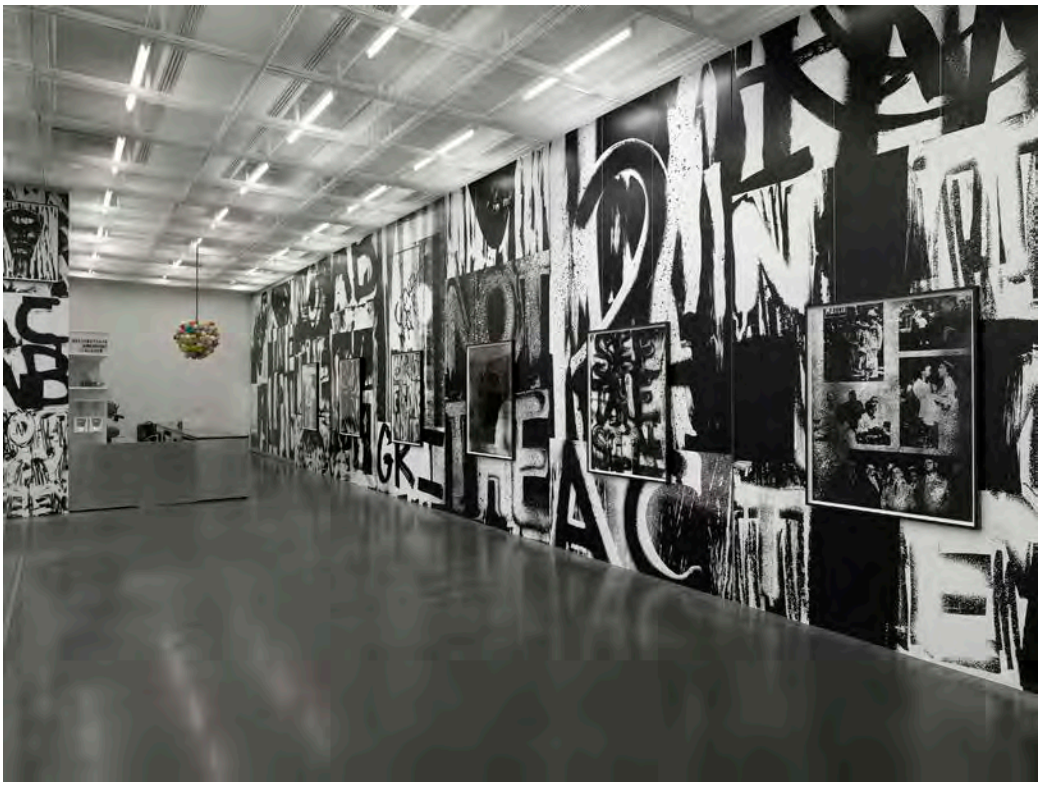
Trump is no longer president, and in 2021, many people — buffeted by so many crises on so many fronts — might not want to be reminded of the concatenation of traumas to which the art in the show responds. I don’t blame them. But the exhibition is polyphonic, layered and, in many ways, I think, cathartic. Beckwith told me last fall that she envisaged the show as “a form of collective therapy.”

The show’s cathartic potential is linked to its visceral immediacy: much of the art is either robustly made (Bradford, Nari Ward, Kevin Beasley) or plugged into the emotional directness of music (Arthur Jafa, Tyshawn Sorey, Kahlil Joseph). Its aura of hard-won wisdom emerges from the work of artists who take a long view, engaging with the civil rights era (Weems, Marshall, Dawoud Bey) or pulling us into more personal histories (LaToya Ruby Frazier, Howardena Pindell).

Several works on the ground floor generate their own little storm cells of energy. Adam Pendleton has covered the walls of the foyer with a dynamic, black-and-white collage dominated by large-scale lettering that evokes placards used during the summer’s Black Lives Matter protests. Hardly anything is legible, however. Pendleton is interested in the limits of language, the pressure it comes under from politics — sometimes buckling, sometimes achieving compact new kinds of poetry. The words in his collage are all cropped, appearing more like code or camouflage than clear-voiced protest.

You can walk from the foyer straight into a darkened gallery displaying Jafa’s “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death,” a high-voltage, seven-minute film set to Kanye West’s “Ultralight Beam” (and a snippet of Cali Swag District’s “Teach Me How to Dougie”). Jafa’s montage interweaves often shocking instances of violence, abuse and abasement with moments of everyday beauty, footage of athletic prowess, spiritual transport and dance.

Smee, Sebastian, “A searing, all-star art show explores Black grief from the civil rights era to now,” *WashingtonPost.com*, February 17, 2021



A “Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America” installation by Adam Pendleton at New Museum in New York. (Dario Lasagni)

The impact is hectic and hypnotic, and very different from the quiet, poignant effect of Garrett Bradley’s “Alone,” a short, beautifully shot film about a single mother who, over the objections of her family, has decided to marry her boyfriend, who is in prison. The film has no resolution, and it speaks to what Bradley calls “the chronic possibility of separation” experienced by so many Black families in our era of mass incarceration.

When Enwezor spoke of the “crystallization of Black grief,” he was hinting at grief’s capacity to be converted into political action. But even when that happens — as it did after the death of Floyd — grief remains fundamentally a psychological phenomenon, private and profoundly destabilizing. The dynamic of mourning, what’s more, hinges on failure: our failure to bring the dead back to life, and our failure to communicate the effect of such loss.

The incommunicable thing at the heart of grief helps explain why abstraction is one of its most powerful expressions, and why so many artists in this show turn either to visual abstraction or to the abstractions of music and language.

A key artist is the late, great abstract painter and sculptor Jack Whitten (1939-2018), who is represented here by “Birmingham,” from 1964, the earliest work in the exhibition. It’s a tiny, unprepossessing thing made from black paint slathered over wrinkled fabric and aluminum foil. Near the center, the foil has been ripped open to reveal a photograph. Veiled by a transparent nylon stocking, it shows a young Black man being attacked by a dog during civil rights protests in Birmingham.

What was Whitten getting at? The work has a frustrated, thwarted quality. It might suggest a loss of faith in the power of abstract art in periods of political crisis — something like the moral conflict that led Whitten’s contemporary, Philip Guston, to abandon abstraction and return to figurative art.

But I think something more subtle is going on. Abstract art, like music, can communicate what cannot be put into words. Ligon sees a parallel between the music of John Coltrane — with its cascading sense of fury, outrage and grief — and what some Black abstract artists are trying to do. They are trying, Ligon told me in a phone interview last fall,

Smee, Sebastian, “A searing, all-star art show explores Black grief from the civil rights era to now,” *WashingtonPost.com*, February 17, 2021

“Antoine’s Organ,” a 2016 installation by Rashid Johnson. (Rashid Johnson/Hauser & Wirth)

“to get past the topical and into the spiritual.” Abstraction, he continued, “is about getting a little deeper into the soul of the country and expressing the inexpressible.”

Many works in the show play up the opacity of Black identity — all the ways in which stereotypes and assumptions fall short of representing actual experience and inner life. Rashid Johnson’s “Antoine’s Organ” is a massive structure of black scaffolding on which dozens of potted plants have been placed, along with lumps of Shea butter and copies of books by Richard Wright, W.E.B. Du Bois, Randall Kennedy and Paul Beatty. Sensuous, poetic, overwhelming, it simultaneously invites and mocks the idea of interpretation, safeguarding certain freedoms in the process.

Terry Adkins’s large-scale X-ray photographs of miscellaneous objects similarly suggest the ways in which our true selves elude markers of identity. His images riff on the southern Black tradition of “memory jugs” which commemorate the dead by attaching small, meaningful objects to the vessels’ exterior surfaces. The ghostly insubstantiality of Adkins’s images (which were made in response to the killing of Trayvon Martin) contrasts with Melvin Edwards’s powerfully congested wall sculptures — from a series called “Lynch Fragments” — made from welded steel chains, pegs and rods. But both artists sublimate grief into mute, fragmented forms.

The inability to share grief eventually becomes its own shared state — which is why we go to funerals. But even after it has “crystallized,” achieving some kind of critical mass, grief lingers. The part of it that cannot be processed is always tugging at us, pulling us away from community, from hope.

The issue then becomes one of translation. How do you translate mourning into community, music into politics, or vice versa?

Some of the show’s music-related works explicitly address the problem of translation. Jennie C. Jones, for instance, makes small-scale, minimalist drawings that resemble musical staves. But these exquisite, free-floating “scores” —

Smee, Sebastian, “A searing, all-star art show explores Black grief from the civil rights era to now,” *WashingtonPost.com*, February 17, 2021

A scene from “Gone Are the Days of Shelter and Martyr,” a 2014 video by Theaster Gates. (Theaster Gates/Courtesy of White Cube and Regen Projects)

they’re from a series called “Scores for Sustained Blackness” — are unplayable. Charles Gaines’s more imposing installation uses different systems of transcription to turn speeches by Martin Luther King Jr. and James Baldwin into giant musical scores.

Beasley’s hanging sculpture, “Strange Fruit (Pair 1)” is named for the well-known 1930s song, written by Abel Meeropol and made famous by Billie Holiday. Protesting the lynching of African Americans, the song helped kick off the civil rights movement. Beasley’s sculpture is a mangled-looking thing, composed of speakers, a microphone and a pair of Nike Air Jordans, all drenched in resin.

The show’s musical theme is pervasive. Tyshawn Sorey’s experimental 2018 album “Pillars” can be heard in a dedicated listening room. And besides Jafa’s “Love Is the Message,” there are two other videos with powerful musical elements.

One is Kahlil Joseph’s 18-minute film, “Alice (You Don’t Have to Think About It).” A prelude to his mesmerizing 2017 film, “Black Mary,” it shows, in intimate, sometimes blurry close-up, the singer Alice Smith improvising in a recording studio. The film was made in 2016, not long after Smith had lost her grandmother and Joseph his brother, the painter Noah Davis.

The other video, called “Gone Are the Days of Shelter and Martyr,” is by Theaster Gates. It shows two Black men repeatedly slamming doors to the ground in a dusty old abandoned church in Chicago. Their rhythmic, Sisyphean actions are accompanied by blues singing and cello. The performance feels like a strange and electrifying new form of call-and-response.

Layered like a complex chord with overtones and undertones, Gates’s film gets more powerful every time I see it. Evoking both mourning and resilience, it combines deep cultural tradition with a sense of immediate cultural crisis. It is an emblematic work, nested inside an emblematic show, itself conceived by a much-mourned curator.

O'Grady, Megan, "Once Overlooked, Black Abstract Painters Are Finally Given Their Due," *NYTimes.com*, February 12, 2021

The New York Times

Once Overlooked, Black Abstract Painters Are Finally Given Their Due

In the 1960s, abstract painting was a controversial style for Black artists, overshadowed by social realist works. Now, it's claimed its place as a vital form of expression.

By Megan O'Grady | February 12, 2021

Howardena Pindell, a multidisciplinary artist whose works include video art and abstract pieces that incorporate figurative elements, photographed in her New York studio on Dec. 22, 2020. Photo by Jon Henry. Left: Pindell's "Untitled (Work in Progress)" (2020-21). Right: Pindell's "Untitled (Work in Progress)" (2020-21).

In 1998, THE ARTIST Jack Whitten, then 58, jotted down 32 objectives, a manifesto of sorts, which included the following:

Learn to understand existence as being political.
Avoid art-world strategies.
Erase all known isms.
Don't succumb to populist aesthetics.
Remove the notion of me.
Eliminate that which qualifies as a narrative.
Learn to live by the philosophy of jazz.
Only fools want to be famous (avoid at all cost).
Remain true to myself.

O'Grady, Megan, "Once Overlooked, Black Abstract Painters Are Finally Given Their Due," *NYTimes.com*, February 12, 2021

Norman Lewis's "Alabama" (1960). © Estate of Norman Lewis, courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York

Published posthumously in his 2018 book, "Jack Whitten: Notes From the Woodshed" — a collection of studio logs, essays and poetry spanning 50 years — the list points to some of the tensions, formal and psychic, that shaped his art (for jazz musicians, to "go to the woodshed" means to work in solitude, trying out ideas and testing instincts before taking them public). Growing up in Jim Crow Alabama, Whitten was barred from the public library but, by 1960, he was in New York, studying art at Cooper Union. The Abstract Expressionist Norman Lewis (a Black American) befriended and mentored him; so did Willem de Kooning (a white European). Art allowed Whitten to bridge the country's racial divides with a practice that embodied the possibility of individual freedom and improvisation within larger social identities. His insistence that painting was *about* something ran counter to — or expanded upon — the Minimalist ideals of the time, which privileged form over meaning ("Erase all known isms"). "Abstract painting that addresses subject is what I want," he wrote. "I want something that goes beyond the notion of the 'formal' as subject."

In America throughout the 1960s — as the civil rights movement crested, calls for Black Power sounded and the Black Panther Party was birthed — the aesthetics of Black artists became itself a kind of revolutionary proposition. In 1965, after the assassination of Malcolm X but several months before the passage of the Voting Rights Act, landmark legislation that prohibited racial discrimination in the American electoral process, the poet LeRoi Jones (who would later change his name to Amiri Baraka) founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater School in Harlem, effectively inaugurating the Black Arts Movement. The writer Larry Neal, his collaborator, described the movement's goal to create art that "speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America," one objective of which was nothing less than "a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic." Figurative painting and sculpture were key components in how this reordering took place, and some of the most enduring visuals from the movement were explicitly realist depictions of Black people, heroes, history and activism. There was the "Wall of Respect" mural, painted by the artist William Walker and others in 1967 on the side of a building in an African-American neighborhood in Chicago, which included stately portraits of figures who fought for equality, like Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, Nat Turner, Aretha Franklin and Muhammad Ali. There was Archibald Motley's scene of a lynching, "The First One Hundred Years," which he worked on for much of the '60s and completed in 1972. There was Faith Ringgold, who developed a style she described as "super realism," and whose work confronted viewers with unflinchingly rendered scenes of racial tension, as in the 1967 painting inspired by uprisings in Newark, N.J., and other cities at the time, "American People Series #20: Die." There was Elizabeth Catlett — who once said that art "must answer a question, or wake somebody up, or give a shove in the right direction" — whose remarkable sculpture "Black Unity" (1968), a raised fist sculpted out of cedar, evokes the Black Power movement's enduring symbol.

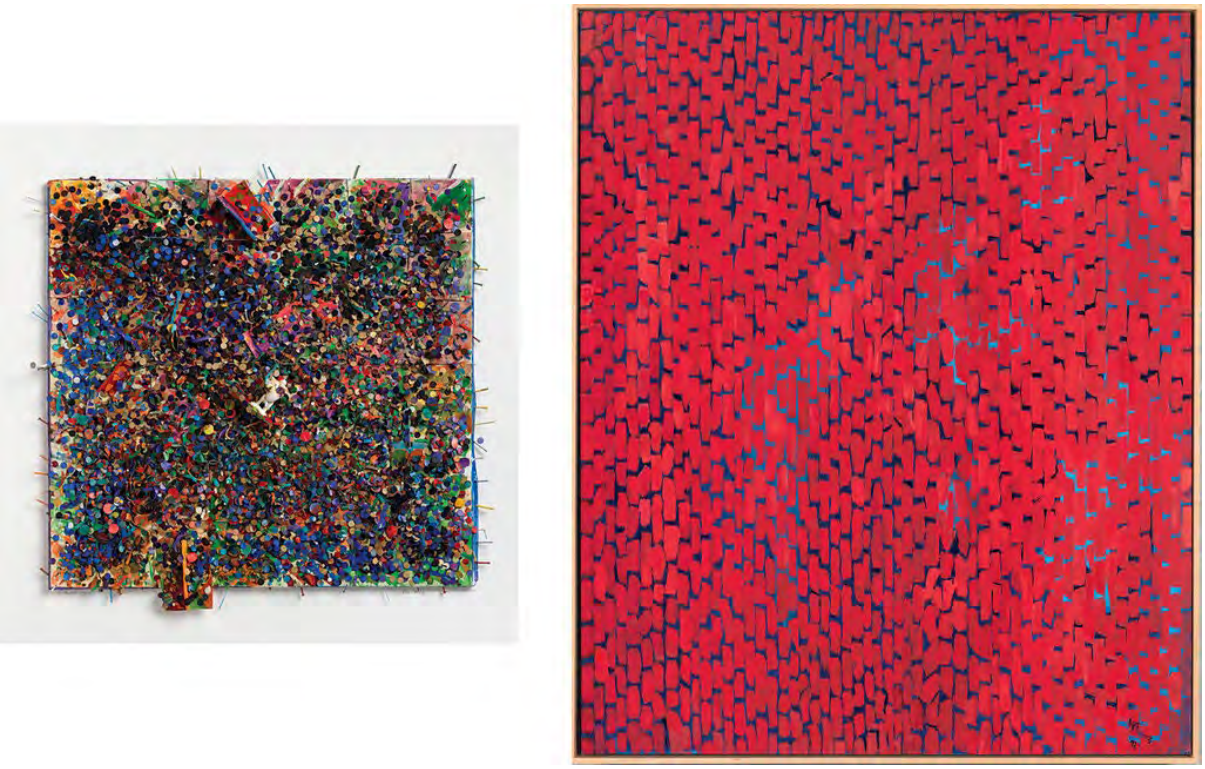
O'Grady, Megan, "Once Overlooked, Black Abstract Painters Are Finally Given Their Due," *NYTimes.com*, February 12, 2021

Rashid Johnson, a painter, sculptor, installation artist and filmmaker, in his Long Island, N.Y., studio on Dec. 16, 2020. Jon Henry

Abstract painting, with its focus on formal subtleties, color and more subliminal messaging, may not have tidily fit into this narrative of freedom and revolution, yet it was a vital component of the era. The origins of Black abstract painting can be traced back to Norman Lewis, who started out as a social realist painter before World War II — 1940's "The Dispossessed (Family)," in which a recently evicted family, trying to comfort one another while surrounded by the detritus of their middle-class possessions, is among the saddest artworks of the 20th century — before entering increasingly abstract realms in subsequent decades. Disillusioned by the hypocrisy of America fighting against the racist ideologies in Europe while still segregating its own military, and struggling far more than his white peers to find galleries that would display his work, Lewis's painting became more expressive and free-form, while remaining rooted in an African-American identity. "Jazz Band," from 1948, is a masterpiece that simultaneously suggests the wild improvisations of bebop and the seemingly random scribblelike shapes that would make Cy Twombly famous a decade or so later. As the civil rights movement gained power, Lewis created a kind of topical abstraction, as in the 1960 painting "Alabama," a menagerie of white shapes against a black background, which from a distance resembles the glow of a raging fire, but up close looks like a cluster of white hoods and crosses, alluding to a nighttime gathering of the Ku Klux Klan.

It was also Lewis who, in anticipation of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which would help elevate the civil rights movement in the national consciousness, co-founded the Spiral group, a loose collective of Black artists in New York that considered the question, "Is there a Negro image?" It turns out there was no simple response, which was also the point: Black art, like Black America itself, was not a monolith, and was therefore irreducible. The Spiral artists' works were neither uniquely figurative nor abstract, and this conclusion — that there was no one way to be a Black artist, nor to express Black art — encouraged other multidisciplinary movements to grapple with the question of how art should express Black identity. A later collective, Smokehouse Associates — founded in 1968 by the artists William T. Williams, Melvin Edwards, Guy Ciarcia and Billy Rose — expanded on Neal's guidelines for the aspirations of Black America by installing abstract works in public spaces in Harlem. The idea was that this was the best way to transform a community, to make it "visually and aesthetically better and therefore more human."

THE EXPECTATION THAT Black artists would create representational art that reflects the Black experience continued to resonate throughout the '60s, and is vividly addressed in Whitten's writing. The 1963 killing of four girls in a church bombing in Birmingham, his hometown, touched off a long period of rage, anxiety and existential questioning. For Whitten and other Black artists of his generation, abstraction was something of a lonely course, one that set them apart from the Black Arts Movement. Early in her career, the painter and video artist Howardena Pindell was famously told by the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem to "go downtown and show with the



Left: Howardena Pindell's "Memory Test: Free, White & Plastic (#114)" (1979-80). Right: Alma Thomas's "Mars Dust" (1972). Left: Courtesy of the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York. Right: © Whitney Museum of American Art/Scala/Art Resource NY.

white boys" when she shared with him her abstract work, which also failed to adhere to the feminist narrative of the time. Pindell was certainly not alone in her frustration with having her work perceived solely through her race or gender.

The license to free expression that white artists have been granted by birthright — especially white male artists, so often perceived as the vanguard in visual arts — hasn't been available to Black artists. (Maybe only fools want to be famous, but it's dehumanizing to have your work sidelined and undervalued, as Whitten's was, and is.) Still, generations of Black abstract painters have claimed it: Pindell, with her kaleidoscopic mixed media; Whitten's mosaics of paint and found objects; Sam Gilliam's euphoric spatters of color; Charles Gaines's data-driven renderings of trees. Meanwhile, new works by a new generation have arisen: Shinique Smith's swirly collages; Jennie C. Jones's synesthesia-driven Minimalism; Mark Bradford's abraded urban archaeology; Rashid Johnson's etchings on wood with black wax — all of their art explores what painting can be, and can do, with radical color, texture, scarcity, rhythm, gesture and a refusal to bow to imposed standards. (All these artists are under the age of 60.) Today, Johnson tells me, "There is no battle between abstraction and representation. These are not adversarial positions. It's like suggesting that John Coltrane has less of a voice than Stevie Wonder."

And so, in yet another era in which artists of color are continually called upon to solve, in essence, the problem of their own marginalization, there's a defiance in opting not to represent. For the last decade or so, more figurative forms of expression (by artists of color and white artists alike) have dominated the commercial sphere, driven, perhaps, by a desire for art that grants a certain access to its critical intentions, to a shared conversation about Issues of Our Time. The return of portraiture in particular seemed to give recognizable shape to gulfs within the art world itself. The selection of Kehinde Wiley by Barack Obama and Amy Sherald by Michelle Obama to paint their presidential portraits in 2018 was a watershed moment in the history of portraiture, calling attention to the stark lack of faces of color in institutions and galleries alike. What better way to address absence, after all, than with presence?

That the art market might be eager to satisfy a craving for forms of creative expression that empower or engage with our sense of injustice is understandable; so, too, is the falling down in the critical realm. Writers and scholars may feel more potential solace in speaking about art that's clearly invested in racial uplift than they do in unpacking a kind of existential conundrum that demands a great deal more of its viewer and denies the relief of a comforting directive. Now that the spotlight is moving back to nonrepresentational art forms, with it has come a fuller picture not just of Black art but of art itself, and of the artificiality of art-world taxonomies, of oppositional labels and styles that are, in fact, a great deal more porous than they're made out to be.

O'Grady, Megan, "Once Overlooked, Black Abstract Painters Are Finally Given Their Due," *NYTimes.com*, February 12, 2021

McArthur Binion, an artist whose Minimalist and often abstract paintings have garnered fresh attention, in his Chicago studio on Dec. 18, 2020. Photo by Jon Henry. Binion's "Stuttering:Standing:Still (LDM Two) VI" (2013).

THIS INCREASINGLY REFLECTIVE mood has brought a welcome spotlight to past innovators, bringing the 87-year-old Gilliam, the 77-year-old Pindell, Whitten (who was 78 when he died in 2018) and others of their generation fresh acclaim. Beginning in 2017, museums in Baltimore, New Orleans and Chicago showcased an entire lineage with the Joyner/Giuffrida collection of African-American abstraction, which includes works by Whitten, Gilliam, Edwards and a number of younger artists. Gaines has a new installation opening at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art this spring, inspired by his research into the Dred Scott decision of 1857, in which the Supreme Court ruled that Black people were not U.S. citizens and therefore could not sue in federal court. In October, Pindell showed (in addition to her first video work in 25 years), five new paintings — some collagelike pieces with text, others expanding on her body of work involving textured abstractions encrusted with paint and paper chads — at the Shed in New York City. The 74-year-old McArthur Binion signed with his first gallery and had his debut solo museum show only eight years ago, after a nearly half-century career; his hand-drawn grids have become increasingly intimate through the years, more recently appearing layered over personal documents or photographs in a kind of autobiographical abstraction.

Gilliam recently showed three different bodies of new work at New York's Pace Gallery, including an enthralling set of beveled-edge canvases that appear from a distance as largely black or white, but up close contain entire galaxies of colored flecks, their layers of sawdust and paint creating an impression of great depth, as though one could fall into a painting and float away, suspended within its force field. (The paintings pay homage, in their titles, to some of his personal heroes, including Serena Williams and the late civil rights leader Representative John Lewis.) But for anyone who hasn't been in the same room as a Gilliam painting, perhaps the best place to discover his work is at Dia Beacon in upstate New York, known for its collection of Minimalist and Pop Art, and where, in 2019, the artist installed "Double Merge," two grandly scaled canvases he painted in 1968, retwisted and draped from the ceiling to span the entire room, creating a double rainbow, essentially, of melting colors with a double history, a now and then, attached: the tension between the past in which it was made and our own uneasy present. When Gilliam was liberating paintings from the wall, Jimi Hendrix was at his most psychedelic and social revolutions were taking hold around the globe. (Gilliam has spoken of music as a metaphor in his way of approaching "the acrobatics of art.") While viewing these works, one might consider what has and hasn't changed since the two canvases

O'Grady, Megan, "Once Overlooked, Black Abstract Painters Are Finally Given Their Due," *NYTimes.com*, February 12, 2021

Mark Bradford's "Q3" (2020). Mark Bradford, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth, photo by Joshua White/JWPictures

were painted, or the almost unbearably tender display of beauty and mystery in the face of a callously technological age — or (as I did) one might feel time disappear entirely, such is the exhilarating receptivity of the work in a contained space: a phenomenon that surpasses mere comprehension.

Gilliam's art is also a reminder of why the rediscovery narratives that have burdened so many artists — and Black abstract artists in particular — are so problematic: rediscovered by whom, exactly? Framing art history this way only seems to reinforce the same kind of hierarchy that allows certain names to fall into oblivion while continually recycling others. In fact, the first African-American woman to have a solo show at the Whitney was the abstract painter Alma Thomas in 1972. Gilliam, who was affiliated with the Washington Color School, became the first African-American artist to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale the same year. Both are legends — Gilliam's radical innovation, in the late 1960s, of making paintings from draped, unsupported canvases was a breakthrough — and yet they both fell into relative obscurity for decades.

Gilliam's meaning as a painter emerges through color and form. And yet, as Rashid Johnson, who organized a 2013 show of Gilliam's hard-edge paintings, his series of canvases bisected by precise diagonal bands of color, points out, "It's impossible not to look at those paintings and think of the sort of rigid binaries he confronted." Here we are again, in a new era of national self-reflection, prompted in part by a flood of brutalities captured on cellphone cameras — an era parallel in certain unignorable ways to the mid-1960s, when images from Selma, Ala., were being beamed into living rooms, and white Americans saw what Black communities were up against. The promise of progress — and the failure, by many measures, of that promise — surely isn't unrelated to the renewed interest in artists who defined this time and were defined by it, as well.

AS A CRITICAL and existential investigation, then, abstraction is decidedly relevant to questions of identity or consciousness, even when they aren't immediately legible to viewers. Though sometimes, of course, they are: In 1970, Gilliam painted "Red April," staining a monumental canvas with hot pinks and reds in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. two years prior. Whitten's "Black Monolith" paintings, begun in the late '80s and continued up until the year before his death, were made as tributes to Black luminaries, including Chuck Berry, Ralph Ellison and the former Congresswoman Barbara Jordan. But sources of inspiration, in work that's both intuitive and formally attuned, often aren't conscious choices. Pindell has traced her preoccupation with circles as a geometric form to a long-buried childhood memory of being served, during a car trip with her father through Kentucky in the 1950s, a root beer with a red circle on the bottom of the mug, marking which glasses were used for nonwhites — as though by focusing on the formal properties of the shape, she could neutralize its insult.

O'Grady, Megan, "Once Overlooked, Black Abstract Painters Are Finally Given Their Due," *NYTimes.com*, February 12, 2021

Rashid Johnson's "Cosmic Slop 'Black Orpheus'" (2011). Rashid Johnson, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth, photo: Martin Parsekian

Abstraction's resurgence has also brought welcome attention to questions of lineage, and to earlier transitional figures like the great Beauford Delaney, who was the focus, along with his longtime friend the writer James Baldwin, of a superb show at the Knoxville Museum of Art in 2020. Baldwin famously credited the painter with teaching him how to "see" by pointing out street puddles on their many walks together around New York, pools of water slicked with rainbows of oil, the merging of surfaces and depths and distorted reflections. The artist's extraordinary works from the late 1950s and early 1960s, completed in Clamart, the Paris suburb where his painting turned more definitively to abstraction, captures sunlight at different times of day, reflected through windows, or across turbulent ripples of water — radiant, ominous paintings that, like the street puddles, contain both inward depths and reflections outward. You feel you're looking through Delaney's eyes, but also into his brain. His biographer David Leeming has written of Delaney's auditory hallucinations, voices calling him derogatory terms for his race and gayness. In 1961, he attempted suicide. The fights against being pigeonholed, against being surface-leveled, aren't separate from the battles on the canvas.

So many things are abstractions until they become terribly concrete in a person's lived reality, in an awareness of being seen and read a certain way. As Zora Neale Hurston famously wrote in a 1928 essay, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." Now, it's fallen to younger artists to defy, or ignore, such expectations. This new generation includes Bradford, with his recent "Quarantine Paintings" — agitated-looking layers of sanded paint and paper, a topographical map of isolation — as well as the Minimalist painter Jennie C. Jones and her acoustic panels covered in vibrant chromatic harmonies. She showed them last year at the Arts Club of Chicago, alongside a display case of piano keys: in other words, a witty collection of surfaces that resist being taken at face value, that demand to be taken on their own terms. "Beneath every surface lies an identity," Whitten wrote in 1964, in a passage that could have just as easily been written today. "The amount of depth beneath this surface determines the value of its being. What is the depth of America in the year 1964? What is the depth of its people? … I look at my hand and see my face. I will not rest until every American can do the same."

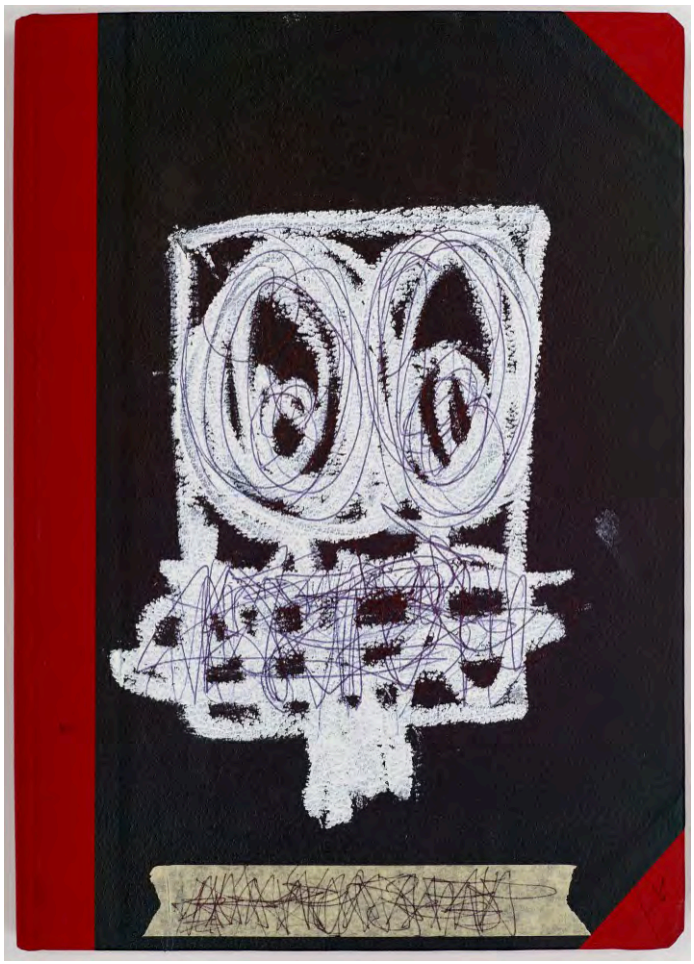
MoMA

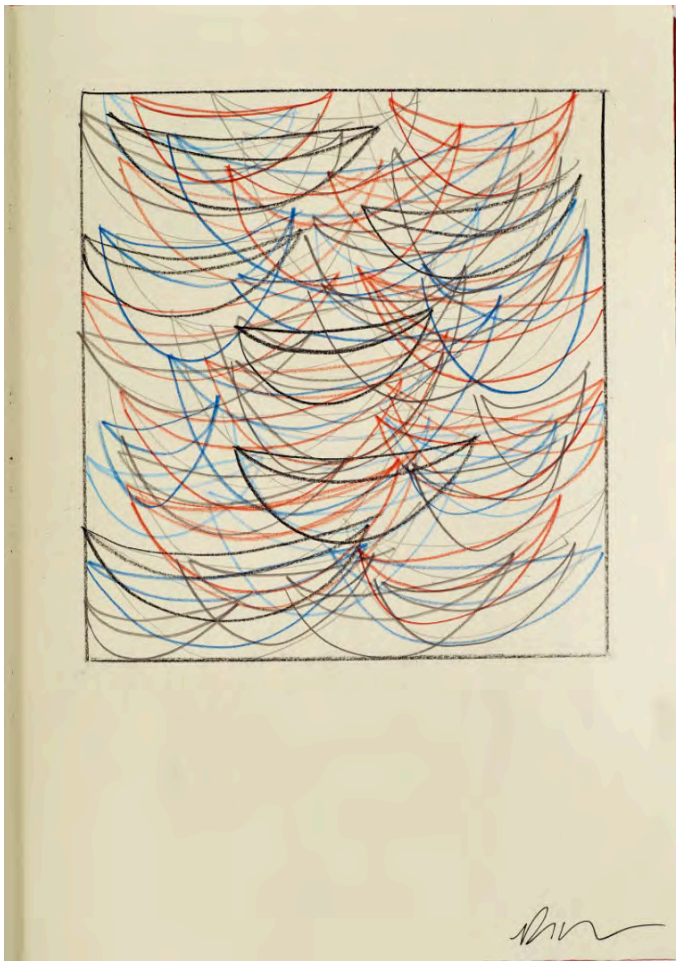
Artist Project

A Rashid Johnson Sketchbook

The artist shares a never-before-seen drawing project and talks about his “existential line-making.”

By Samantha Friedman | February 8, 2021



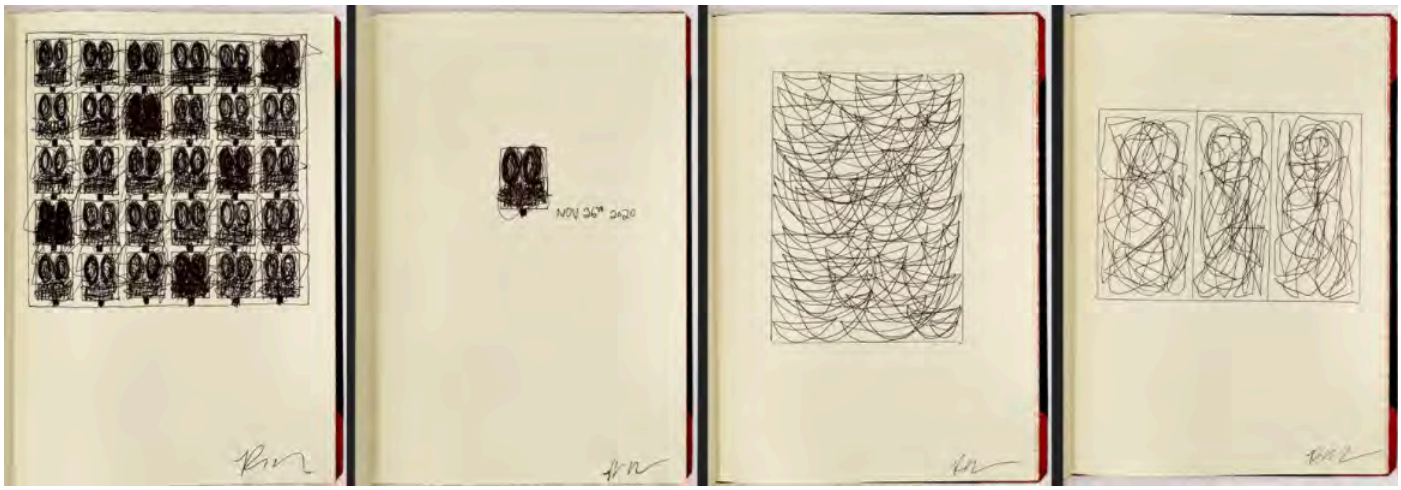


Rashid Johnson. Cover and page from Untitled Sketchbook. 2020. Courtesy the artist

Rashid Johnson was on my mind as I installed the works on paper in *Degree Zero: Drawing at Midcentury*. His particular approach to anxious mark-making seemed to share commonalities with drawings made seven decades earlier by Jean Dubuffet, Willem de Kooning, Louise Bourgeois, and Beauford Delaney. When I asked him about the relationship, he shared a just-completed sketchbook whose pages he filled in the weeks between the election and the inauguration. Our conversation—about sequence and rhythm, mobility and humility, personality and perspective—not only confirmed but expanded my sense of his drawings as spiritual successors to the works in this show.

Samantha Friedman: Let’s start by talking about the rhythm of your sketchbook practice. How do you use sketchbooks generally and when, in particular, did you work in this sketchbook?

Rashid Johnson: It’s something that I’ve used sporadically in my project for several years. I didn’t have a sketchbook as nice as the one that I used for these more recent drawings; that was actually a gift of Alex, who is my studio director.



Rashid Johnson. Pages from Untitled Sketchbook. 2020

She knew that I was messing around and drawing during these 4:00 meetings that I had, and so she bought me a couple sketchbooks. My drawing and sketching practice previous to that was on found pieces of paper—bubblegum wrappers, the backs of receipts, envelopes, cardboard. I’d draw on anything.

But this sketchbook created this scenario for me where I needed to refine how the images were gonna graduate into one another because it lives in the form of a book. You turn the page, you see the next drawing, and you see that there’s a sequencing of images, sketches, and ideas as they expand day to day. I hadn’t had a project like this since I was quite young, when I had sketchbooks that I used in high school and even in college. A sketchbook was a big part of how that practice functioned when I was just coming out of my interest in graffiti and street art. After that, I abandoned the sketchbook, but I never abandoned sketching or playing or drawing.

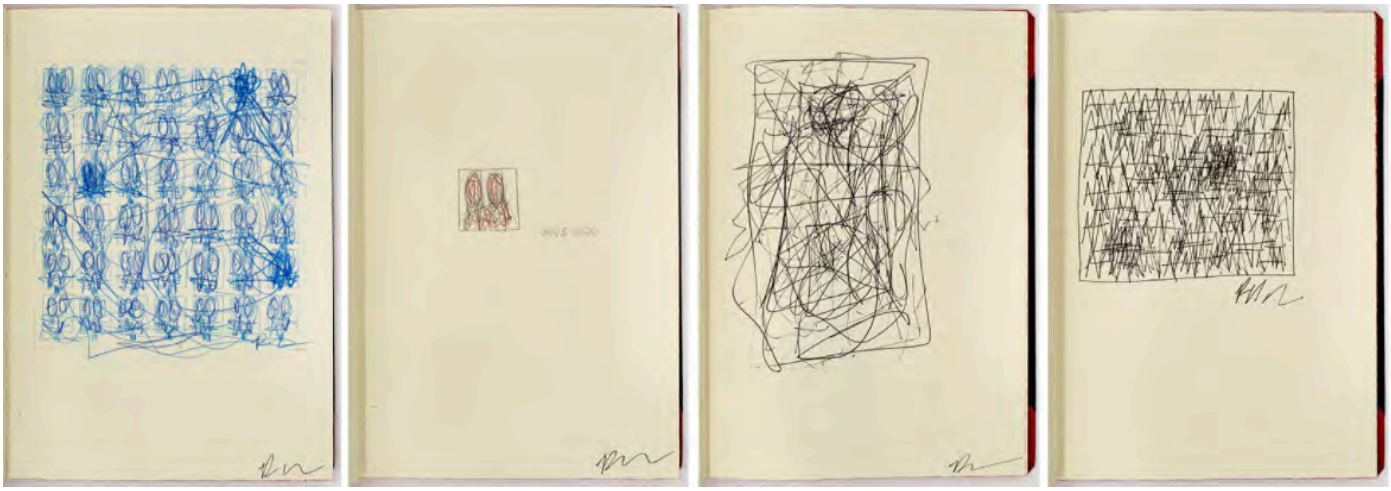
You alternate between a few kinds of motifs in the sketchbook. There’s the grid of faces, different colors; a single face, small and tight at the center of the page; a crescent motif that appears and returns. Then toward the end of the book, you see this line that’s a little bit freer and wandering but sometimes still enclosed within a grid. I wonder if you could talk about the way you approach each page on a different day. Is it your conscious choice to explore a particular motif or return to one particular motif or another, or is it something that’s more automatic for you?

Rashid Johnson. Page from Untitled Sketchbook. 2020

I kept finding these themes and there were things that I was interested in and imagining on a larger scale. The crescent shape that you mentioned reminded me of a boat. I was thinking a lot about vehicles and mobility and movement, and thought, What kind of vehicle would I explore? What does it look like? I was thinking about a Cuban artist named Kcho who always used boats. I kept thinking about why he used boats and what boats might’ve meant for him.

The Anxious Men you see in there are dated. The dates allow you to imagine, “This is what was happening at 4:00 p.m. or 4:15 or 4:30 p.m. on Friday, December 23rd.” I like the idea that those anxious characters could be located and placed into the framework of time and space quite specifically. The gridded characters are not dated.

There’s this sequence of line drawings which were different lengths of lines. I was interested in how and why a certain line would start and end at different spaces on the page and how the quality of the ink changed as I dragged the

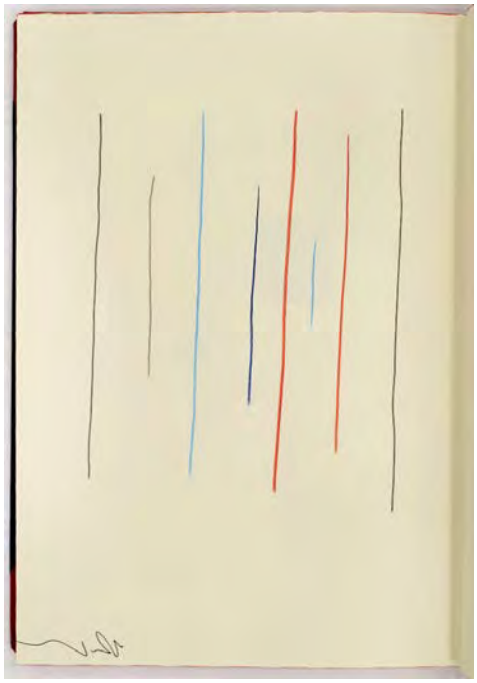


Rashid Johnson. Pages from Untitled Sketchbook. 2020

pen across the paper. Some of that was just experimentation and thinking about the methods, strategies, and philosophies for how a line comes together. Like you suggested, at the tail end of the sketchbook, it gets more and more loose, and you start to see these other kinds of characters develop as the pen goes from a lucid and fluid gestural line to hard changes in direction. I think quite often about my philosophy for how a line is structured and how it can represent both personality and perspective.

The lines that Picasso made were always quite consistent from the point they begin to where they resolve. You feel like the intention was fully there—that the line had no expectation to go any other direction other than the one that he had projected for it—and he captured all of that intention from the start to the finish. I think something similar happens in the work of someone like Willem de Kooning, who understood and had tremendous confidence in the directionality and intentionality of his lines.

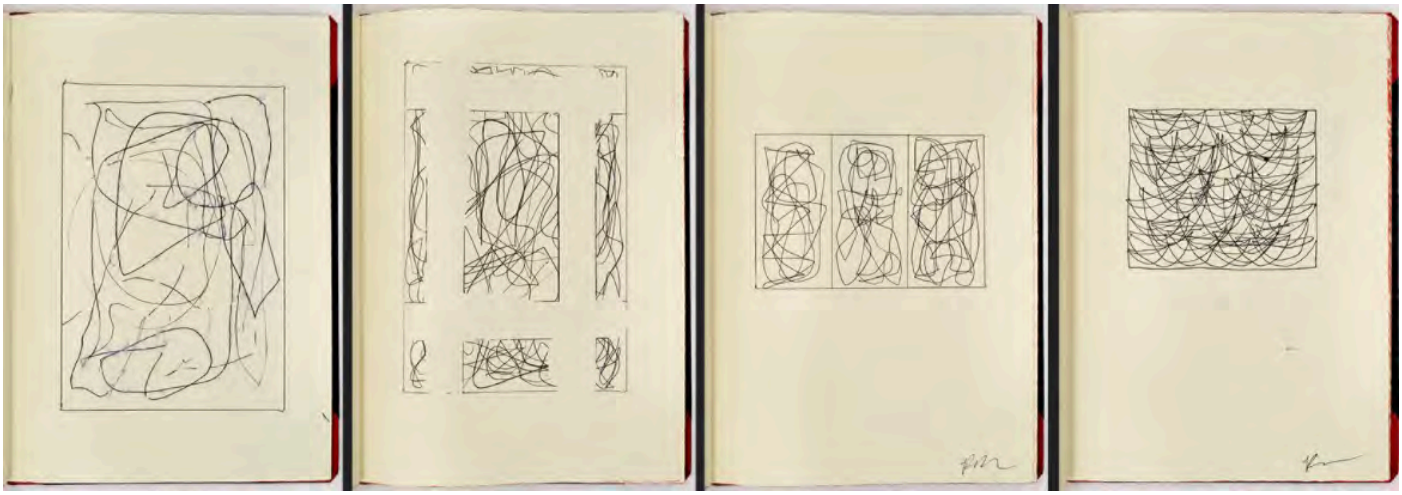
I like to contrast that with someone like Christopher Wool, whose lines you feel have a clumsiness to them, and in an almost insecure way, take other directions as if they’re quite confused. I like that existential line-making: something that can change direction or get confused in the middle of being made. I think that’s a better representation of contemporary life and of how I see the world. I like to start in a certain direction and imagine I’m going that way, but really I’m open to a very hard turn in the other direction. I think it requires honesty and malleability to be humbled in the making of something to say, “Oh, wow. Is this the right way? Maybe I should change direction and make a hard turn and an uncomfortable turn.”



Rashid Johnson. Page from Untitled Sketchbook. 2020

I love that phrase that you used, “existential line-making.” The artists in *Degree Zero* worked in the ’50s, when Existentialism was on deck. Jean Dubuffet is in this exhibition and was interested in graffiti. I wonder if you could speak a bit about whether graffiti played a role in a sketchbook like this.

My previous relationship to sketchbooks really came from my time as a graffiti artist. When I picked up a sketchbook again over the course of the pandemic, some of that 16-year-old me popped in and said, Well, what did I do with this previously? In the case of someone like Dubuffet, there’s always the suggestion of naiveté that comes into play and the way that we think about both his skilling, or deskilling if you will, and to whom and how he conjures these images. Dubuffet deals a lot with the city and has this incredible investment in how you conjure images that represent the city or urbanity.

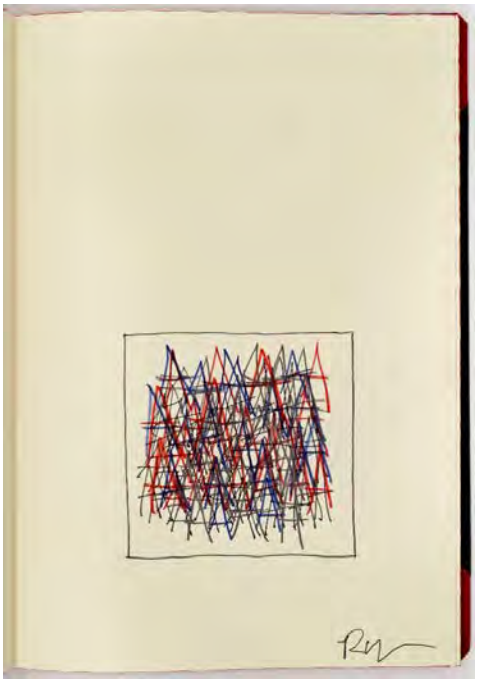


Rashid Johnson. Pages from Untitled Sketchbook. 2020

For me, where I grew up in Chicago, there were two parallel worlds in urban street mark-making: the folks who consider themselves to be artists and were using the city as a backdrop or canvas for their work, and then there were folks who were associated with gangs and whose mark-making intentionally located where and how you were to understand the space that you were in. This neighborhood has been marked by that gang which means that that gang controls this street, etc.

As I got older and started thinking about what marks mean, how they function, how they become signifiers, I oftentimes went back to the gang work; although it wasn’t often recognized as skilled work or didn’t have the intention to please, it did have the intention to deliver a message very specifically. As I started thinking, What does my project mean? What are my intentions? What are the signifiers? What are the concepts and philosophies and concerns of my work? It almost had as much to do with that deskilled work and the gang graffito than other aspects that were more aesthetically inclined.

It seems fitting that we’re talking about this particular sketchbook, which you started just before the election in early November and finished in early January, when we’re embarking on a New Year just after the inauguration. I’m curious whether your art might be any less anxious at a moment like this.



Rashid Johnson. Page from Untitled Sketchbook. 2020

The idea of anxiety and its relationship to my project very much predates the political turmoil of the last four years. At the same time, I think a lot of us are feeling a sense of relief. There’s also a real reticence to accept that. You always hear that caveat of, “We still have a lot of work to do.” This is only the beginning of some of the successes that we’d like to see over the next few years from an activist perspective.

But at the same time, I do feel a little bit of a weight lifted. And so I would like to see where that turns the project. And I’ve had a lot more levity and joy. I hope that I continue to explore all of the pieces that make up my thinking and ideally also capture how other people are seeing the world. Although this is often made with the intention of creating an autobiography of sorts, other people have experienced the work and said, “Oh, I see and understand these symbols and signifiers. These are concerns that I share.” In that respect, I feel like art has led me to feel less alone, which was never really my intention. I came to art from more of an academic positioning. I thought: tell honest stories, be focused, think about history. Yet it’s become far more poetic, which is a really beautiful part of why I chose this direction for myself.

Gural, Natasha, “Artists Rashid Johnson And Viktor Timofeev Share Insights Into The Power Of Drawing, Highlighted In Comprehensive New Book,” *Forbes.com,* February 4, 2021

Forbes

Artists Rashid Johnson And Viktor Timofeev Share Insights Into The Power Of Drawing, Highlighted In Comprehensive New Book

By Natasha Gural | February 4, 2021

Rashid Johnson ‘Untitled Anxious Drawing’ (2017) oil on cotton rag, 82.8 × 63.5 cm (32 ½ × 25 in). PICTURE CREDIT: ARTWORK (C) THE ARTIST / PHOTO: MARTIN PARSEKIAN (PAGE 124, BOTTOM)

“As an interdisciplinary artist thinking about drawing, one of the aspects of my kind of post-medium relationship to art is that I really do appreciate each and every approach to art making within the context of its autonomy,” Rashid Johnson, a New York-based, Chicago-born African-American conceptual artist, told me during a Zoom interview. “Drawing for me is drawing, and I love it and appreciate it in that space. I feel similarly about filmmaking, painting, sculpture, performance, picture making, and photography. All of these spaces have an autonomy, they don’t meld together for me, necessarily. I really see them as individual pursuits that I tackle, instead of considering them kind of an amalgamated strategy.”

Johnson, a key figure in post-Black art, is among more than 100 artists including Miriam Cahn, Robert Crumb, Tom Friedman, Tania Kovats, Claudette Johnson, Otobong Nkanga, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Deanna Petherbridge, Christina Quarles, Qiu Zhijie, Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Wael Shawky, Emma Talbot, and Johanna Unzueta, featured in *Vitamin D3: Today’s Best in Contemporary Drawing*, a new release by Phaidon Press. The book examines how we have turned our gaze to drawing as a primary medium and central art form over the last half century.

The artists for this volume were nominated by more than 70 artists, critics, art historians, and soholars, including: Iwona Blazwick, Louisa Buck, Mark Coetzee, Thelma Golden, Laura Hoptman, Geeta Kapur, Pablo León de la Barra, Christine Macel, Kate Macfarlane, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Zoe Whitley.

Like many artists who have been displaced from their studios during quarantine, Johnson has turned to drawing more frequently.

“There’s something really immediate about drawing. It also allows me to work more flexibly, because I’ve been moving around a lot, and not necessarily always having at my disposal all of the materials I’m accustomed to having in my New York City studio, and all of the kind of creature comforts of that space, going back and forth,” he said. “With lack of mobility, I’ve been leaning on drawing considerably more than I have in the past.”

Johnson’s diverse work explores themes of art history, individual and shared cultural identities, personal narratives, literature, philosophy, materiality, and critical history.

“Escapism has really been central, thematically, to a lot of work that I’ve made in the past. I think that it’s been misinterpreted at times as an ambition to not engage, or to imagine that the realities that we’re facing and the obstacles that are present and those realities are things that I’m attempting to avoid. I think that there’s kind of a duality and a complexity to escapism. It can activate the idea of the potential of change, and the potential of distance and movement and mobility and access, and how those things represent the agency of both the practitioner and the people viewing,” said Johnson.

Gural, Natasha, “Artists Rashid Johnson And Viktor Timofeev Share Insights Into The Power Of Drawing, Highlighted In Comprehensive New Book,” *Forbes.com,* February 4, 2021

‘Vitamin D3: Today’s Best in Contemporary Drawing’ Phaidon Editors COURTESY OF PHAIDON PRESS

He added: “Viewers want to participate in and imagine the kind of trials and tribulations and joy that escapism can produce. It’s never been fully with the ambition of closing my ears and shutting my eyes and wishing away the times that we live in. It’s been more of an idea of a graduation, after the hard work of actually facing, negotiating, and challenging some of the more complex obstacles and concerns that we have. It’s got a lot of tentacles for me, the idea of escape in different forms, whether you imagine it through how I’ve explored anxiety, or whether you imagine it through how I’ve explored landscape in the form of escape collages. It’s really more nimble, I hope, than simple.”

The term “escapism” first appeared in the 1933 *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* and is often a pejorative term for behavior perceived as a withdrawal from the problems, routines, and tensions of everyday life. But Johnson’s interpretation is far more complex than a distraction often found in entertainment or fantasy.

“It’s never been about running away. It’s about tactfully imagining how space can function and what your relationship is to it, and changing certain sensibilities and mentalities and being able to explore what’s possible as much as be aware of what’s happening in our current realities,” Johnson explained. “It’s optimistic, there’s no question about that, but not without being aware of the past and our banalities.”

Created before the pandemic, Johnson’s Untitled *Anxious Drawing* (2017), an oil on cotton rag, speaks to our collective distress.

“Drawing is an interesting thing, in its immediacy, and I think drawing is an interesting thing, depending on how you define it,” Johnson said. “Drawing gives me pause when I look at drawing as far as how I interpret what artistic tension is, or what I’m learning about that artist. When I’m participating with the drawing, line and gesture become really honest and definable. Drawing functions a lot like a signature for me.”

Conflict and chaos abound in Viktor Timofeev’s *(AB/AB)/B* (2018), part of coloured pencil on paper series using two colors (red and blue) to depict two opposing populations, disrupted by outside forces in shades of grey.

“I think of drawing as an activity that sits outside of time - it is primitive and futuristic at once. It can open this window into oneself that makes space for unmediated world building with very simple means - a record of one’s own personal corridor of archives,” said New York-based Timofeev. “The definition of what constitutes drawing is expansive and open-ended, which also helps prop it up as a genre that isn’t just a means to a different end. That said, I also love exploring drawings by people who are known for their work in another field, such as choreography or sculpture, and therefore really appreciate when documents such as these are made public in exhibitions or publications.”

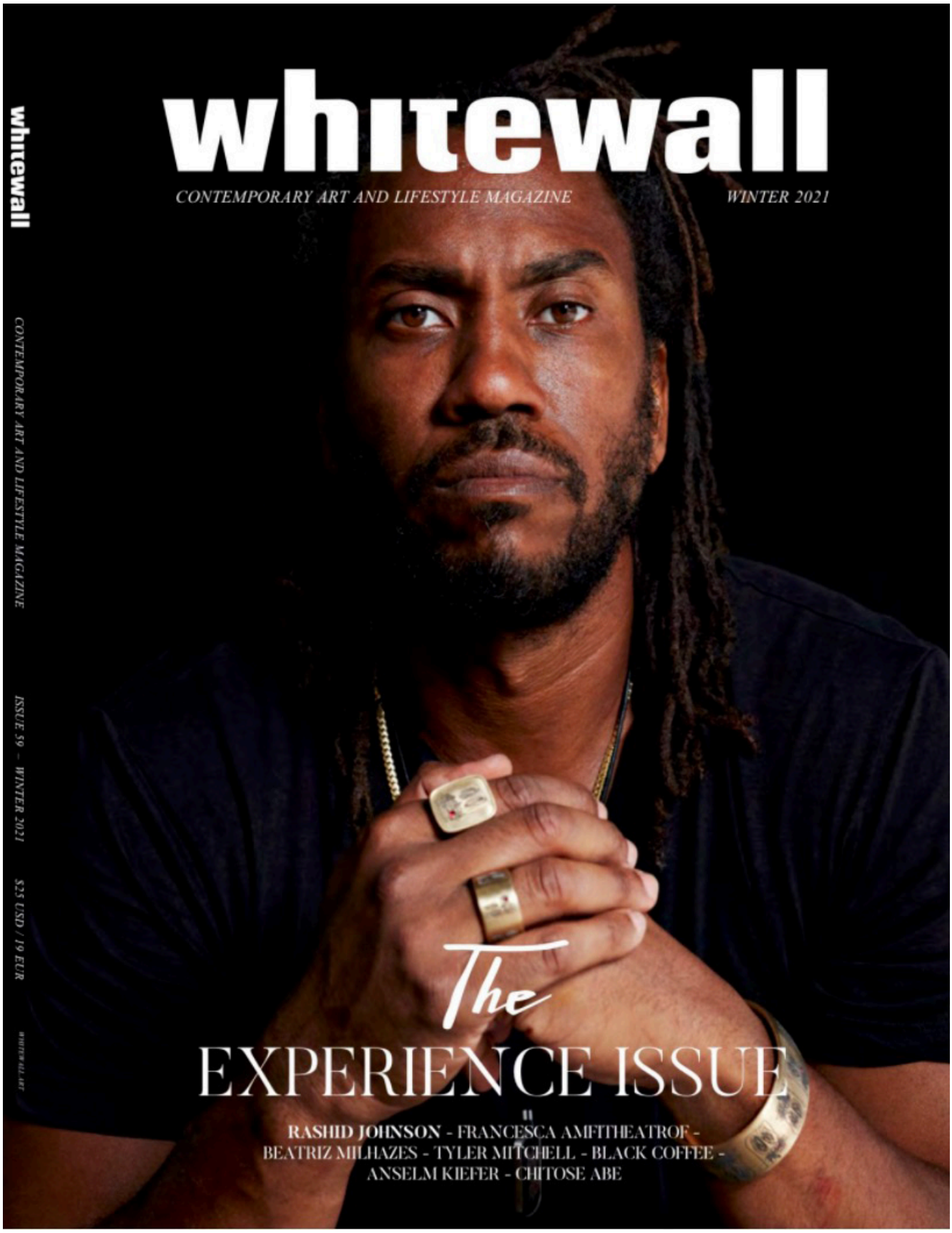
Timofeev said he doesn’t distinguish between his drawings and his paintings, “but I can’t say the same for many other mediums I work with.”

“I used to think that it all comes down to this fundamental act of drawing, but I’m not so sure anymore. There is this difference in process between functional drawing (serving another purpose) and drawing for its own sake (serving nothing else) that I do think about lately,” Timofeev said. “But I also frequently contradict this when I discover that a drawing made as a crutch for something else is more successful than something that was made to stand on its own, so it’s a back and forth that I haven’t really resolved and maybe never will.”

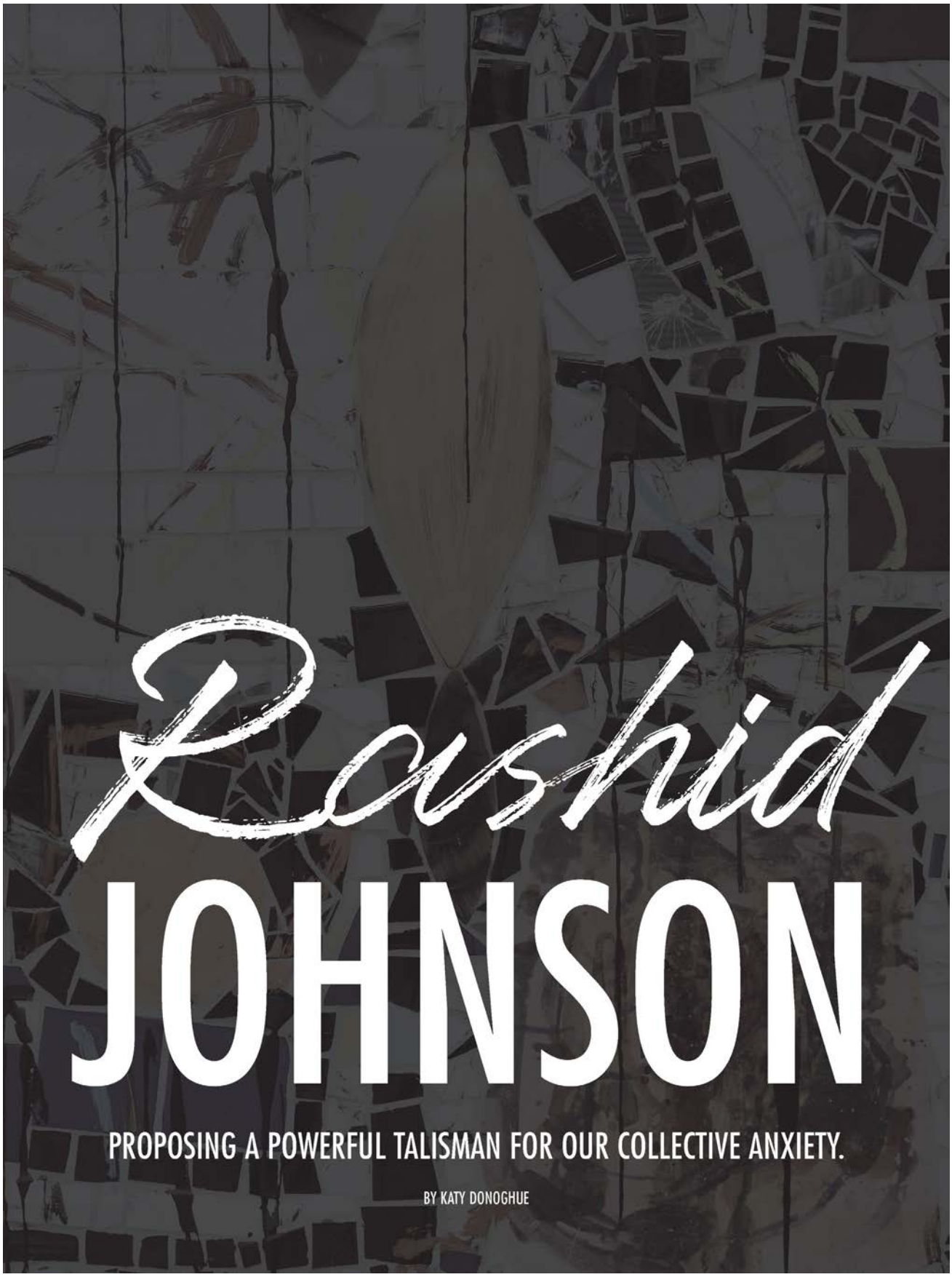
While working during the pandemic hasn’t altered Timofeev’s creative process, quarantine has transformed how he perceives art.

“If anything it helped to reinforce it as an activity that I feel lucky to get lost in. The rollercoaster of this year has also made me think about how impotent ‘Art’ is, and how important ‘art’ can be, the capitalizations crucial there. It has felt like there is this push and pull between the urgency of art-making as a process versus its potential futility as a tool for social change, and the masks that these oppositions can wear,” Timofeev said. “ I’m currently drawing with anything available, most frequently colored pencils and a digital trackpad.”

Donoghue, Katy, “Rashid Johnson: Proposing a Powerful Talisman for Our Collective Anxiety,” *Whitewall*, Winter 2021, pp. cover, 98-105



Donoghue, Katy, “Rashid Johnson: Proposing a Powerful Talisman for Our Collective Anxiety,” *Whitewall*, Winter 2021, pp. cover, 98-105



Rashid JOHNSON

PROPOSING A POWERFUL TALISMAN FOR OUR COLLECTIVE ANXIETY.

BY KATY DONOGHUE

Donoghue, Katy, “Rashid Johnson: Proposing a Powerful Talisman for Our Collective Anxiety,” *Whitewall*, Winter 2021, pp. cover, 98-105

Donoghue, Katy, “Rashid Johnson: Proposing a Powerful Talisman for Our Collective Anxiety,” *Whitewall*, Winter 2021, pp. cover, 98-105

Last spring, Rashid Johnson captured the global mood with his “Anxious Red Drawings” series in deep red oil stick on cotton rag paper. He made the works, depicting crude faces with swirling eyes and gnashing mouths, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and evoked our collective feeling of anxiety and tension.

The new drawings came from Johnson’s ongoing “Anxious Men” series, first imagined as a self-portrait. Looking to address his own experiences with stress and unease, he found a universal response to and understanding of the works ever since they were first exhibited. At a time when worry abounds, Johnson managed to create an immediately recognizable symbol for anxiety—like the smiley face for happiness.

“Anxious Men” was an obvious choice to explore with Liz Swig of LIZWORKS when she approached the artist in late 2019 to collaborate on a new collection of jewelry. The resulting line of ring bands, signet rings, military tags, and cuffs in gold and titanium feature agitated engravings punctuated by a single red stone. The collaboration debuted last fall, again managing to capture the spirit of 2020. Sales benefit the Black Mental Health Alliance and Prep for Prep.

Johnson—whose current show “Waves” at Hauser & Wirth in London is on view through December 23, 2020—spoke with *Whitewall* from his studio in Long Island, New York, about carrying with you a universal symbol for the human condition.

WHITEWALL: *How did Liz Swig first approach you for this collaboration?*

RASHID JOHNSON: Liz and I have known each other for many years, and she came to me and said, “I’ve been thinking about working with a male artist, exploring a different energy.” I don’t have a lot of history with wearable art and jewelry, but it’s something that is interesting to me. I wear jewelry myself. We started to have a dialogue and we were really on the same page from the beginning, thinking about a body of work that I had produced called “Anxious Men.” From there we started saying, “What does it look like? How do we translate it?” And we experimented, explored, and found ourselves in a good place with the ideas, and next thing you know we were rolling along.

WW: *What made the “Anxious Men” series fitting for this?*

RJ: For me the “Anxious Men” and some of the things they discuss were really attractive to imagine in a wearable—discussing these ideas of anxiety and frustration and fear. That’s something that you as an individual, if it’s something you’ve struggled with, it’s something you carry with you. It’s mobile. You don’t leave your anxiety at home. It travels with you. I really like the idea that it could translate into something that is nimble, something that moves—that kind of reminder was really intriguing.

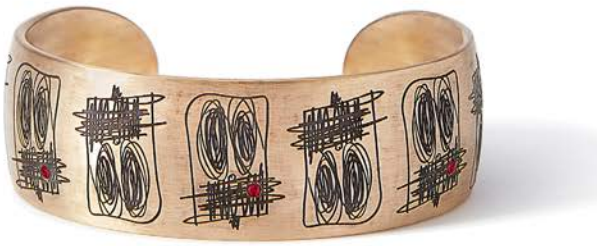
WW: *It’s interesting to see this almost freehand aggressive engraving on a piece of precious metal. It’s surprising in a jewelry piece.*

RJ: Yeah, very much so. There is a crudeness to it. The pieces are quite sculptural, but they really translate, and the questions that they ask and the ideas that belong to them, they just translate. Both Liz and I were really excited to see that the idea worked. This doesn’t betray the ideas and the concerns that the work had in its initial life as paintings. It still carries the same critical concern, and it doesn’t cheapen or devalue the things that were really present and really prescient to what my original intentions were.

WW: *I wonder if you see having a representation of anxiety outside of the body, but still on it, as some sort of grounding talisman?*

RJ: Absolutely. Oftentimes we think about jewelry in this relationship to memento and memory. And I like that this work can carry those same sentiments potentially, while also carrying a different kind of cathartic weight. This is an opportunity to confront those concerns or be reminded of them and not feel handicapped by them.

One of the organizations that I’m donating the proceeds of the sales to is the Black Mental Health Alliance, which works to destigmatize mental health concerns in communities of color. So the idea that one would prominently wear something that speaks to their anxiety, and wear it in almost a celebratory fashion, is in line with what I’m trying to do on the charitable side of things. Which is to say, look, this is not something you have to be, that you have to see as a blight. That it’s something that you would not necessarily celebrate, but not bury.



Gold Cuff from Lizworks Anxious Men collection by Rashid Johnson.

I think in communities of color it’s important that we don’t perpetuate this idea that anxiety is emasculating or weak; it’s really a symptom of awareness. It would be odd for people in certain communities to not be anxious, in particular Black and Brown people, in our engagement with the world and our relationships to systems and authority spaces. It would be strange for us to not be anxious. I hope that this speaks to that deconstructing of what I see as the obvious.

WW: *What was it like for you when you first made and presented the “Anxious Men” series?*

RJ: There was some vulnerability there, for sure. But the job of the artist, if you were to ask the filmmaker Akira Kurosawa, is to not avert their eyes. So in that respect, I felt like it was obligatory for me to discuss something that was really present in my life. Which was anxiety, fear, and frustration. Some of it stemmed from things I was dealing with personally; some of it stemmed from things we were dealing with collectively. The most honest way for me to engage was me being sincere. And when an artist isn’t doing that, then we generally have bigger problems.

WW: *We read that at first you saw it as a self-portrait, but then saw it as more of a collective representation. Was there a moment for you when that realization happened?*

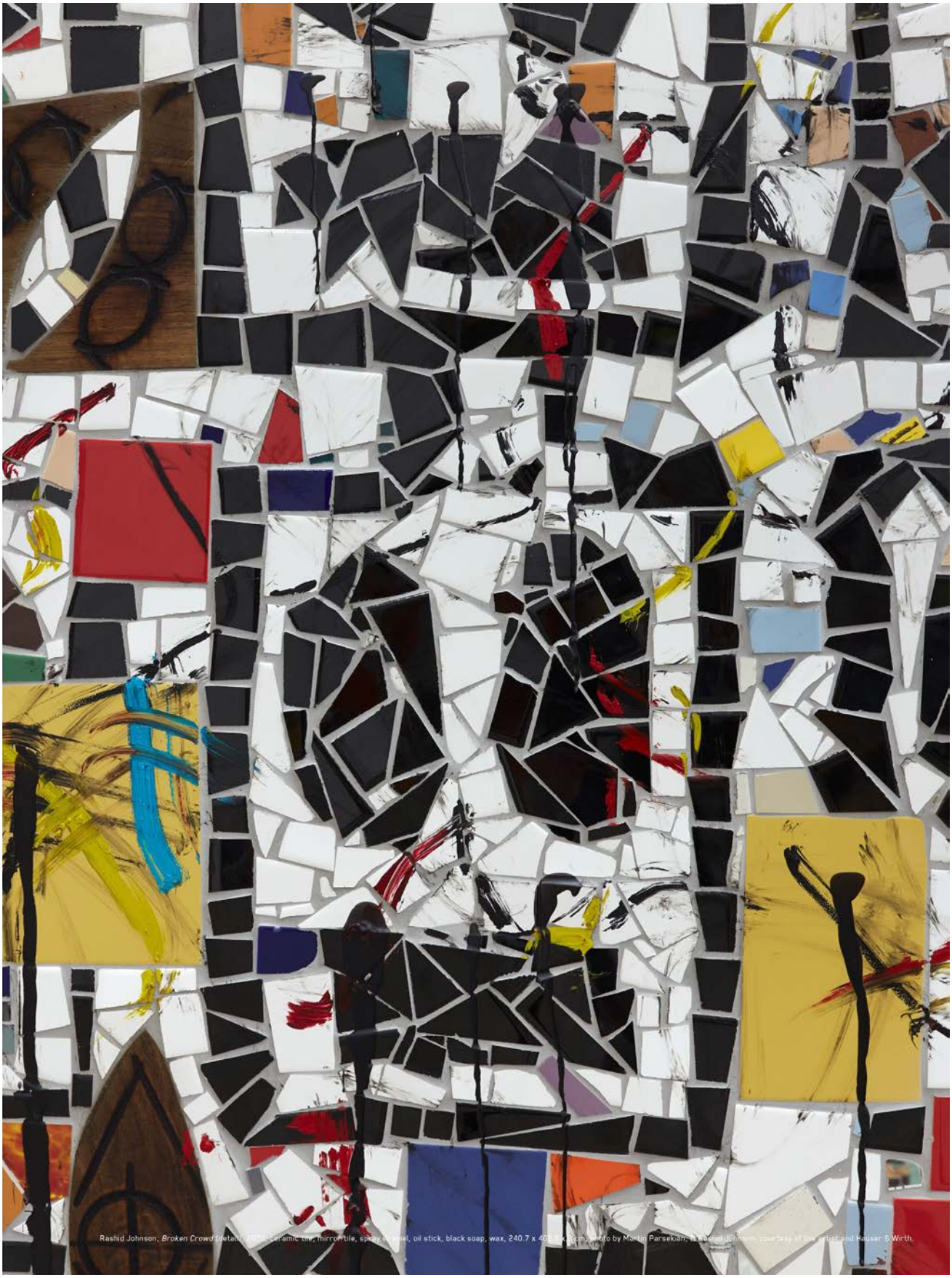
RJ: Honestly, it came about on exhibition, as soon as I started showing the works and people responded the way they responded. And the realization that I had from that point was, “Oh, wow, more or less I’m not alone.” Other people are seeing themselves.

It’s so interesting with that body of work. There’s no real reason other than psychological that one would see these scrawled, scribbled characters and say, “That’s anxiety,” but no one ever questions it either. Which is really fascinating. I have called them “Anxious Men” and everyone is like, “Yeah, absolutely.”

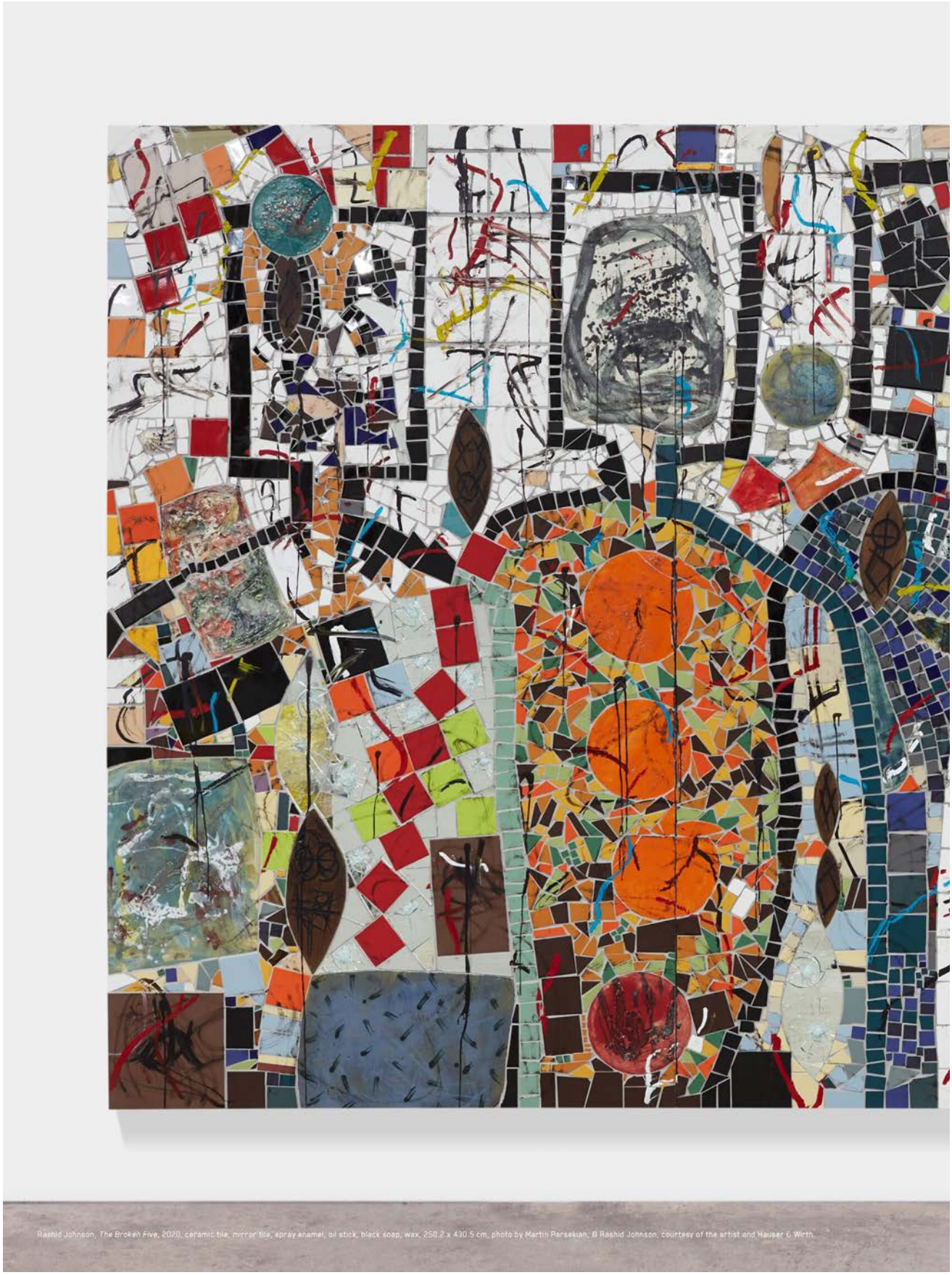
WW: *You’ve created the universal symbol for that.*

RJ: It’s like the smiley face, or the peace sign. This is anxiety. It’s really interesting that way. And it’s interesting that maybe we didn’t have a symbol for it previously. It was something that universally understood, anxiety, it’s not a new condition, yet there was still space to frame really specifically.

Donoghue, Katy, “Rashid Johnson: Proposing a Powerful Talisman for Our Collective Anxiety,” *Whitewall*, Winter 2021, pp. cover, 98-105

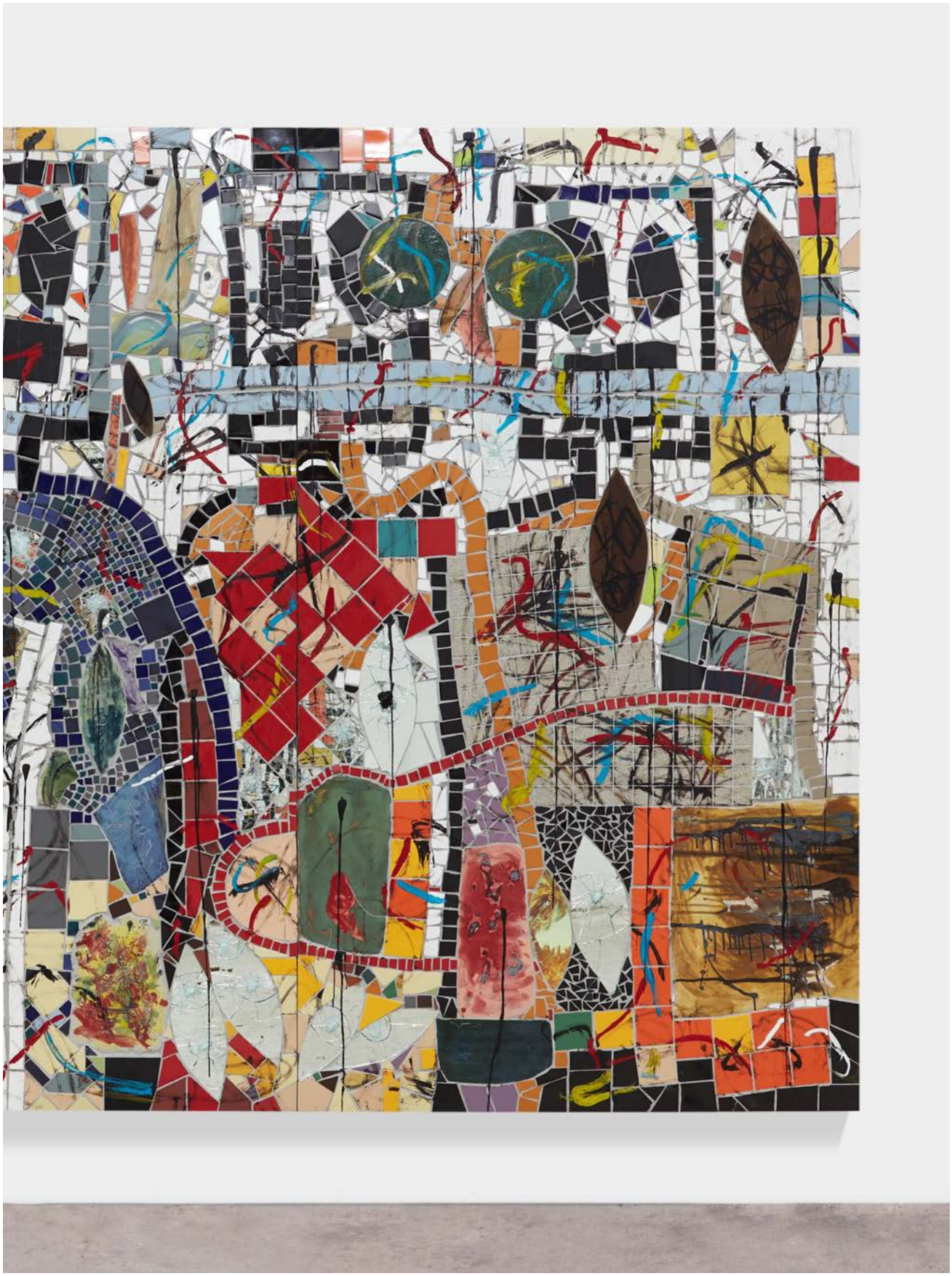


Donoghue, Katy, “Rashid Johnson: Proposing a Powerful Talisman for Our Collective Anxiety,” *Whitewall*, Winter 2021, pp. cover, 98-105



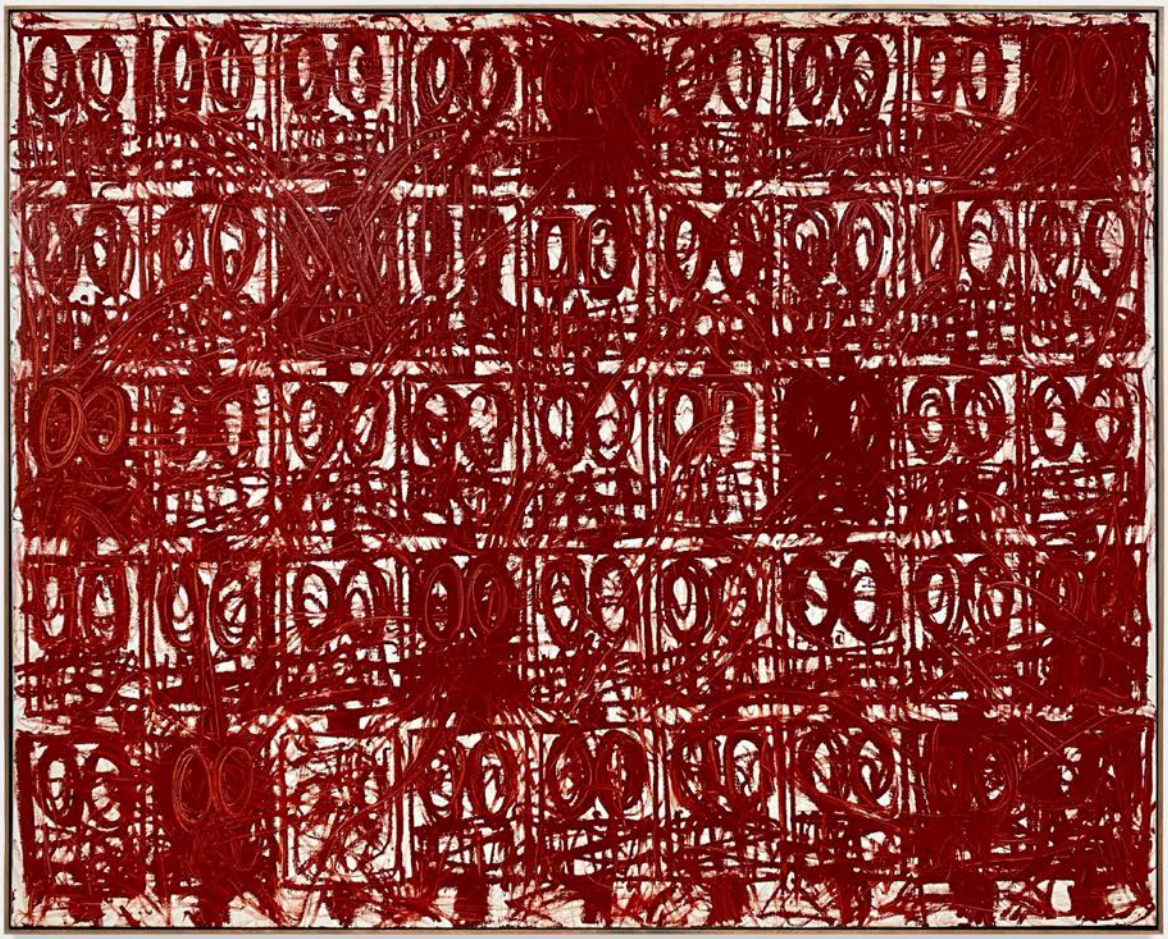
Rashid Johnson, *The Broken Five*, 2020, ceramic tile, mirror tile, spray enamel, oil stick, black soap, wax, 250.2 x 430.5 cm, photo by Martin Parsekian, © Rashid Johnson, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Donoghue, Katy, “Rashid Johnson: Proposing a Powerful Talisman for Our Collective Anxiety,” *Whitewall*, Winter 2021, pp. cover, 98-105



Donoghue, Katy, “Rashid Johnson: Proposing a Powerful Talisman for Our Collective Anxiety,” *Whitewall*, Winter 2021, pp. cover, 98-105

Rashid Johnson, *Anxious Red Painting*, August 6th, 2020, oil on linen, 239.1 x 305.1 x 5.1 cm, photo by Martin Parsekian, © Rashid Johnson, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.



Donoghue, Katy, “Rashid Johnson: Proposing a Powerful Talisman for Our Collective Anxiety,” *Whitewall*, Winter 2021, pp. cover, 98-105

> “The job of the artist . . . is to not avert their eyes.”

Titanium Military Tag from Lizworks Anxious Men collection by Rashid Johnson.

WW: *And the “Red Anxious Drawings” made this spring in response to the global pandemic also felt universally understood. I saw those and was like, “Yup, I’m feeling that.”*

RJ: Boy, you and me both! Yeah, again, small moves, small changes, can produce significant shifts in how we understand symbols and signs. To change something simple as the path and the viscosity, and for that to be able to pivot to consume the time that we’re currently living, is again a really interesting journey for this idea. In that respect, it feels like it has a relationship to history painting. Not dissimilar from—and not to make a comparison in any respect—but to how we would imagine *Guernica* and its representation of war. If you were to look at *Guernica* today, it would pivot to consume this time. Or Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*. I’d never imagined myself to be an artist who had an investment in any sort of populist concern but, I don’t know, maybe it can carry itself into these other more broad conversations about the human condition.

WW: *The themes you’ve always returned to in your work—anxiety and escapism—could not be more relevant at this moment.*

RJ: I’ve never wanted to be less relevant!

WW: *[Laughs]*

RJ: I would prefer we be less invested in the things that have driven my practice because of the circumstances, but I’m glad if some of what it is I explore and how I explore it can be effective in translating how we’re all feeling and making us feel less alone as a result.

WW: *What has your studio practice looked like for the past few months?*

RJ: I’ve been working. I’m on the board of the Guggenheim Museum, and I’ve been working for them to create change, which I think is ideally quite positive. It’s been a very complicated time for institutions. But cultural institutions feel quite motivated to change outside of being affected by their bottom line. The corporations jump to change when they see that it’s going to affect their ability to continue to grow. I think cultural institutions jump to change when they see themselves as potentially being on the wrong side of history. Cultural institutions are under fire, and rightfully so, and ideally going to be stepping up to the plate and responding with real ambitious solutions.

I’m working on a show that opens at Hauser & Wirth that I’ve been working on for over a year. It includes mosaics, some of the “Anxious Red Paintings,” a bunch of bodies of work. It’s been really an incredibly welcoming transition of my project—working very much alone, on these big paintings, and my studio, listening to Percival Everett books and music and learning about some things that were underexplored in my process.

And hanging out with my son and my wife and hoping that some of this enthusiasm and ambition can translate into real tangible change.

WW: *This fall, you opened “Stage” at MoMA PS1 in New York. What kind of interactive experience did you want to create?*

RJ: It includes five microphones on a stage, and each of those microphones works and amplifies the voice of whoever comes in contact with it. Each mic sits at a different height, so you have to move your body in different directions in order to participate. For me, that’s really an interesting scenario. Some of the mics are to a height to which you would go on your knees and pray to them; others are so low, you’d have to perform on all fours. Others are so high you’d have to perform on your tippy-toes. I guess it speaks to this idea of, “What are you willing to do to amplify your voice? What position are you willing to put your body in to be heard?”

It’s something I’ve explored in my work since I was in undergrad. People haven’t gotten to see this aspect of my project, but it’s one that’s really been present for a long time for me. It’s kind of like an authored and unauthored project. I want people to take advantage of it and do whatever they hell they want with it. It’s not for me to dictate or suggest what and how people should engage with it.

This work is one that says, “Hey, your voice can be present at the museum. Maybe we can’t put up all your paintings right now, but this is an opportunity to be heard in these spaces and that’s a great place to start.”

Luke, Ben, "A brush with... Rashid Johnson," *TheArtNewspaper.com,* August 26, 2020

INTERNATIONAL EDITION
THE ART NEWSPAPER

A brush with... Rashid Johnson

An in-depth podcast conversation on the artist's big influences, from Richard Tuttle to Sun Ra

Hosted by Ben Luke. Produced by Julia Michalska, David Clack and Aimee Dawson. Sponsored by Cork Street Galleries | August 26, 2020

Rashid Johnson in the studio 2020 © Rashid Johnson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Photo: Axel Dupeux

In the final episode of *A brush with...*, we sat down with the US artist Rashid Johnson to speak about his cultural experiences and their effect on his life and work. Johnson shares his admiration of Richard Tuttle and Parliament-Funkadelic and discusses how sobriety helped him to complete a recent series of work on anxiety and toxic masculinity.

Born in Illinois, Johnson makes paintings amid a much broader range of media, having studied photography at Columbia College in Chicago before later moving to the Art Institute of Chicago. Johnson first rose to prominence aged just 24 when he showed a series of photographs of African American homeless people using techniques that evoked the grandeur of 19th-century photographic portraiture.

Since then, he has moved from installation to sculpture, and indeed to painting, all the time reflecting his deeply subjective response to the world alongside the cultural and social experiences of the wider Black community. Both sets of experiences are also writ large in the materials that he uses, such as paint made from black soap and wax and sculpture formed from shea butter—all of which are intimately connected with the Black body.

Among the most powerful bodies of work that Johnson has created in recent years is a series called *Anxious Men*, which he began in 2015. The series, which he initially termed a "self-portrait", evolved into paintings of groups of tormented and anguished figures that examine the fractured—and often

toxic—state of contemporary masculinity. Frequently using spray paint and oil sticks on varied surfaces which include ceramic and mirrored tiles, Johnson constantly pushes the territory of painting into new and unexpected directions. A solo show, R*ashid Johnson: Waves,* opens across both of Hauser & Wirth’s London galleries on 6 October and runs until 23 December 2020.

Richard Tuttle’s *Tenth Cloth Octagona*l (1967) Art Institute of Chicago

Detail of Rashid Johnson’s *Monument*, 2018. Rashid Johnson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Rashid Johnson on... Richard Tuttle

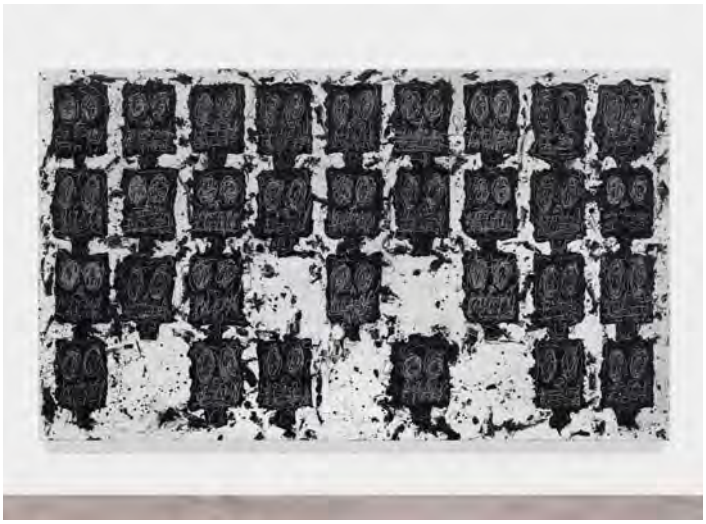
“I often tell a story about being at the Art Institute of Chicago and coming across a work of the artist Richard Tuttle, which was a piece of cloth that was just pinned to the wall in a few different spots. I was maybe 19 at the time, and I thought to myself: ‘My God, I did not know this was an option.’ [...] I think some people would come to a work like that at a young age and say, ‘this is not good. I am a skilled practitioner, I have higher expectations’. I came to it and was like ‘this is genius’. I love it. I love the questions that it asks.”

... using books in his work

“I grew up with my mother having a pretty extensive library in the basement. I remember just looking at the library [...] I love that the books are our delivery systems, but I also just love the objectness of them. I often use them in multiplicity. I will include 100 copies of the same book in one work. And in that sense, it’s an opportunity to say, ‘no, I didn’t find this’. I’m not interested in the found object. I’m interested in the searched-for object. It performs the role of creating intentionality. Here’s this book 100 times I meant for this book to be here.”

... “bearing witness”

“’Bearing witness’ to something is somehow more active than just standing in front of it and looking [...] our expectation for witnessing is higher than it is for looking because witnesses are expected to recall. We’re supposed to be able to go to a witness and say, ‘what is it that you saw?’ and have them describe it to us. So I like to think of myself as a witness when I go see an exhibition in any space. It’s how I often talk to my son when we go see exhibitions. Now he’s eight years old and still struggles to have the patience, but I make him consciously bear witness, I say: ‘What did you see? What was it? And what did it make you feel?’”



Rashid Johnson, ‘*Untitled Anxious Audience*’, 2016. © Rashid Johnson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Rashid Johnson *I Who Have Nothing*, (2008), made from wax, soap and shea butter © Rashid Johnson

... how we’re taught to approach art

“Something that we have planted in young folks is this expectation that everything that you see has some sort of meaning that you’re not seeing; that there’s always some sort of iconography or metaphor, that the artist has some sort of hidden agenda which you have to somehow discover or imagine that you’re not privy to. I think that’s dangerous, because it makes people feel like they don’t understand what it is they’re looking at. And a lot of times they do. You have the sophistication. You don’t need a tremendous amount of antecedent knowledge to come to an art object, bear witness, explore it, and then say what that object is and how it performs in the world and feel confidence in that description. And I think that people need to feel that kind of agency.”

...Sun Ra and Afrofuturism

“I listened to Sun Ra quite often and I love the message, some aspects of it I like more than when I was a little bit younger. The escapist aspects of his work are some of the things that continue to be really present in my work. Sun Ra believed himself to actually be from Mars. He had become, for whatever reason, so disillusioned by the world that we inhabit here and its limitations that he created a parallel universe for himself. That Afrofuturist narrative is conceptually fascinating to me.”

... his use of “anxious red”

“The antecedent that I use is the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, which was born of a conversation around the Aids crisis. But it is also the kind of work that is able to embrace any kind of critical moment [...] I happened to have a body of work that I thought [had the potential to be] as nimble as that [...] but I needed to make a small change. And that change in this particular body of work, *Anxious Men*, was to give it a colour that spoke to the urgency that I thought we are all facing. And that was red.”

... Broken Men and getting sober

“I had gotten sober in 2014 and I started making [the *Broken Men* series] in 2015 as a response to living in a world that I didn’t know how to live in without drugs and alcohol. That was paralleled by the killing of Mike Brown, Donald Trump running for president and the global refugee crisis [...] I felt

Rashid Johnson’s *The Ritual* (2015) Rashid Johnson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Rashid Johnson’s *Untitled Anxious Red Drawing* (2020) © Rashid Johnson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

like my eyes had just opened [...] A lot of my work is dealing with historical narratives and the autobiographic: What’s my story? How does it fit into these historical narratives? I was making a project that was quite timeless in a sense. But the work, upon me becoming sober, started to look at the world that we were living in at the time. It was really kind of a shock. There was no more buffer. I had no escape tool, I didn’t have the fluid that I had used to perform my escape. And so the work started showing a different urgency by speaking to time in a way that it hadn’t so much prior. “

Rashid Johnson’s *The Broken Five* (2018) Rashid Johnson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Florsheim, Lane, “Rashid Johnson: Art ‘Can Be a Problematic Tool’ for Responding to Current Events,”
WSJ.com, July 10 2020

WSJ.

Rashid Johnson: Art “Can Be a Problematic Tool” for Responding to Current Events

The conceptual artist on donating work to fight the coronavirus, his recent, sold-out online show and the food he’s missing right now

By Lane Florsheim | July 10, 2020

ART OF THE MATTER ”Sometimes artists don’t really produce their best work when they’re responding immediately to events,” says Rashid Johnson. PHOTO: ERIK VOGEL, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH

During the pandemic, conceptual artist and film director Rashid Johnson began a series called *Untitled Anxious Red Drawings*, in which characters are rendered in bright crimson oil stick on cotton rag. A show of eight of them opened on Hauser & Wirth’s website in April and has since sold out. Johnson recently donated another of the drawings to a Christie’s auction benefiting amfAR’s Fund to Fight Covid-19. That piece is part of a group, up for auction on July 10, called *From the Studio* that brings together 17 works by contemporary artists, including Richard Serra, Dana Schutz and George Condo, who also donated in support of the cause.

Johnson, 42, who lives in New York City and relocated to Long Island to isolate, was born in Chicago. He first gained acclaim for his series of photographs of Chicago’s homeless Black population that was exhibited in the group show *Freestyle* at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2001. His practice now includes painting, sculpture and assemblage. He’s known for his shelf-like wall pieces that hold items from his life, including shea butter, lush plants and books, including copies of Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son*, which Johnson directed a movie version of in 2019. An earlier series called *Anxious Men*, in which characters are etched out of black soap and wax on white canvas, was a precursor of the *Anxious Red Drawings*.

Here, Johnson speaks to *WSJ.* about using red to represent anxiety, what he learned from doing an online show and art’s role in responding to current events.

A drawing with “anxious” in the title seems fitting to donate to an auction raising funds to fight Covid-19.

I can imagine that people would see it that way. I don’t disagree. Those works were made [during] those early moments in New York, when it was the epicenter for American coronavirus. I was feeling all of that anxiety and all that fear that most of us were feeling and continue to feel.

What led you to both the materials [oil stick and cotton rag] and the color for the series?

Some of it was just access. I had moved to our house on Long Island. I had paper and I had some oils. I took the materials that were in front of me. I felt an urgency to make something. I felt like that was going to be a cathartic opportunity. I haven’t historically used red in that way and I happened to have a few red oil sticks. I said, You know, it feels like the color that represents this time for me, this moment.

Florsheim, Lane, "Rashid Johnson: Art 'Can Be a Problematic Tool' for Responding to Current Events," *WSJ.com*, July 10 2020

Rashid Johnson, *Untitled Anxious Red Drawing*, 2020. PHOTO: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. 2020

Do you find that it's easier or harder to make art right now?

I don't think it's either for me. I just make art. There's a quote... that inspiration is for amateurs. This is what I do; I make art. When things are complicated I make art; when things are easy, I make art. I do it under every circumstance. I respond to it differently as I do it under those different circumstances, but every circumstance is a reason for me to make art.

What do you think art's role is in responding to current events?

Art can be an incredible tool to respond to events. Sometimes it can be a problematic tool. Sometimes artists don't really produce their best work when they're responding immediately to events, especially when we feel an urgency to describe those events.

For my work in particular, I had a body of work that was able to pivot and consume this moment while staying within the nature of what it wanted to say previously. If the work becomes didactic in its explanation of a time without opportunity to digest it, I think sometimes it's problematic. I think art never has responsibility; I think art has opportunity. When [artists] do take on complicated topics and complicated times, it can be really really good. But I don't think artists need to imagine that as their only responsibility. I do think that artists shouldn't be averting their eyes, that we should be present and that we need to be capturing history in real time and after the fact.

Your show of the *Untitled Anxious Red Drawings* series at Hauser & Wirth sold out. What was the experience of having an online show like?

Very strange. The thing that's really interesting about it is that there's this new architecture in doing online shows. There's a different amount of information that you can share. You can use imagery, you can use biography, you can use video as barriers between the works, which allow you a different perspective for how you navigate this web space. It's fresh to me and new and not natural because I still far more prefer to see an artwork in person and to allow my body to traffic and navigate it.

Do you think any of those elements of online shows can be brought into in-person shows?

I think we're going to see a lot of hybrid exhibitions, meaning that there will be exhibitions that are, of course, in the flesh but have components online. I think the idea of how something lives online will even continue on post–this moment, even just for the purpose of access.

You wrote an essay on anxiety for CNN in May. How are you dealing with your anxiety during the pandemic?

You know, it's been complicated. I've had good days and bad days. The thing that I am doing is I'm being conscious of it and I'm admitting it and I'm exploring it and I'm staying present for it. I'm not letting it overwhelm me. I'm going to try to be conscious of my relationship to it.

What are you finding comfort in right now?

Family. It's been great to be able to spend so much time with family. And just being there for that and seeing my son and watching him grow. And all the opportunity I've had to talk with friends. I've been really connected to people.

What do you miss the most from pre-pandemic life?

Sushi.

I watched your film *Native Son* [based on Richard Wright's novel about a young Black man growing up in Chicago who accidentally commits a crime]. It seems maybe even more relevant now than when it came out last year. How have you felt watching the protests and responses to police violence?

I'm glad to see so many people so activated. I think we'll see a lot of return for this. I'm not going to be pessimistic. It's complicated to see. When someone looks at me and says, "Black Lives Matter," I kind of want to say, "Yeah, I know." I understand that... it's important some people hear this—for some people it's apparently new information. So I'm glad people are out there doing what it is they're doing to make sure that our voices are amplified. I've been lucky to attend a few [of the marches] myself [in New York City], and it's been a good experience.

Has the experience of the pandemic shifted your perspective on anything?

I haven't totally unpacked all that. I feel like we're still in the middle of it. I'm reserving opinion on some of that. [Otherwise] I'll have to answer this, like, 20 times over, and in a year I'll be like, *Holy crap; I can't believe I said that*. I don't know where we are. I know that I'm seeing what I believe to be a real failure in leadership.

Brara, Noor, “Nine Black Artists and Cultural Leaders on Seeing and Being Seen,” *NYTimes.com*, The New York Times Style Magazine, June 23, 2020

Nine Black Artists and Cultural Leaders on Seeing and Being Seen

Amy Sherald, Michael R. Jackson and others discuss the challenges and opportunities of cultivating black audiences and dismantling historically white institutions.

Amy Sherald’s “Precious Jewels by the Sea” (2019). © Amy Sherald. Courtesy of Hauser & Wirth

“If you’re silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it,” wrote Zora Neale Hurston in her 1937 novel “Their Eyes Were Watching God.” Throughout this country’s history, black Americans have been reminded near daily that this remains true — both literally and more obliquely. In creative fields, for instance, from the visual arts to theater, the white gaze has long determined whose stories are told — what gets to be seen, what’s given value and what’s deemed worthy enough to be recorded and remembered — enforcing a seemingly immovable standard by which black artists and other artists of color are nearly always cast in supporting roles to the mostly white stars of the Western canon.

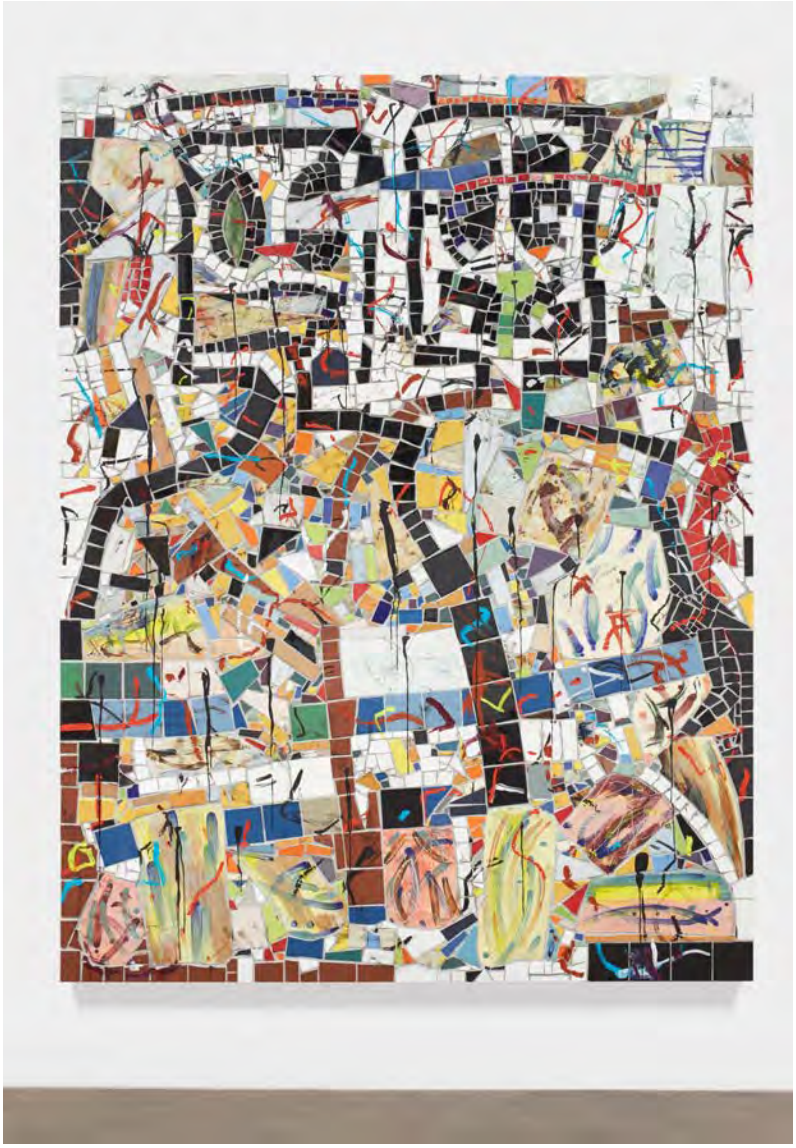
Today, though, many black artists are actively resisting that idea, creating work that speaks directly to a black audience, a black gaze, in order to reform the often whitewashed realms in which they practice. We talked with nine of them — each a voice of this moment, as the nation reckons with the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others, and beyond — about making work that captures the richness and variety of black life. Whether it’s the artist Tschabalala Self discussing the fraught experience of seeing her paintings be sold, like her ancestors, at auction or the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Michael R. Jackson searching for his characters’ interiority, their perspectives distill what it means (and what it has meant) to be black in America.

— Noor Brara

Brara, Noor, “Nine Black Artists and Cultural Leaders on Seeing and Being Seen,” *NYTimes.com*, The New York Times Style Magazine, June 23, 2020

‘We would never ask Picasso why he painted white people.’

By Rashid Johnson, 42, a New York-based visual



Rashid Johnson’s “Two Standing Broken Men” (2019). Photo: Martin Parsekian. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, and Hauser & Wirth

What is the white gaze? Which white gaze? Most of my work has challenged the idea that blackness is monolithic. The fact that I and artists like me have so aggressively challenged that position calls into question why we might suggest whiteness is something so simple.

I have people in my community who are white — friends, family, people who influence and participate in my work. If it’s their gaze that we’re discussing, then it’s quite an informed one. If it’s a bigoted white gaze, then it’s different. But I don’t imagine the latter having much access to my work. All of that is to suggest that I don’t believe there is a white gaze that we can speak about without delving into the complexity of whiteness.

Brara, Noor, “Nine Black Artists and Cultural Leaders on Seeing and Being Seen,” *NYTimes.com*, The New York Times Style Magazine, June 23, 2020

Johnson’s “Untitled Escape Collage” (2020). Photo: Martin Parsekian. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, and Hauser & Wirth

We need to have these conversations: What whiteness are we talking about? Is it the white liberal? The white New Yorker? Is it European whiteness? Is there a privilege that is also qualified by a real financial agency as opposed to poverty? This produces different kinds of perspectives. Although we like to imagine that white privilege is inherently linked to white wealth, it’s not. That’s clumsy at best. I’m as guilty as anyone of referencing whiteness with a tremendous implicitness.

I was quite lucky because of how I was raised in Chicago. My mother and father took it upon themselves to introduce me to a black literary and intellectual tradition at an early age. I never had to search. There was never a suggestion that they didn’t exist. There are other artists and black thinkers who have had to more or less discover what they felt was an underground world of black intellectualism, having gone to schools that put more of an emphasis on white and Western traditions. When they discover black thinkers, it’s a revelation to them. For me, it was never a revelation — it was the way things were — so I don’t conjure black literary figures in my work as an opposition to the white underlying concepts and traditions that someone would probably think I’m reacting against. I’m not.

We would never ask Picasso why he painted white people. We wouldn’t position him as an outsider, and yet we consistently find new ways to position the work of black artists as inherently being in response to the obstacles presented by a white world. I’m just speaking from how I understand the world, how I see it. And at the center of my world is not whiteness.

— As told to T.R.

Johnson, Rashid, “Rashid Johnson: ‘Anxiety is part of my life. It’s something that people of color don’t really discuss as often as we should’,” *CNN.com*, May 8, 2020

Rashid Johnson: ‘Anxiety is part of my life. It’s something that people of color don’t really discuss as often as we should’

Written by Rashid Johnson | May 8, 2020

Credit: Sim Canetty-Clarke (courtesy Hauser & Wirth)

nxiety is part of my life. It’s something that people of color don’t really discuss as often as we should. It’s part of my being and how I relate to the world, and being honest with that struggle has been rewarding for me. It has led to the kind of self-exploration that produces fertile ground for my output as an artist.

Over the past few weeks, I’ve continued my exploration of anxiety from the basement of a house in Long Island, where I’ve been temporarily staying with my family during the pandemic. This new body of work, “Untitled Anxious Red Drawings,” is a continuation of my “Anxious Men” series, which I started several years ago as a loose series of self-portraits that became representative of many personal and collective anxieties: becoming a father, inequality and racism, and an collective sense of uncertainty in the world.

These new works are pared down, and I like the spartan quality of them. All I needed was paper and oil sticks -- in vivid red, which I associate with urgency, blood and alarm. I spent time quickly conjuring images that had a relationship to earlier works but are fresh and new because of the circumstances in which they were made. I needed a cathartic release, a way to describe my emotional state. I don’t often make work by responding immediately to a set of circumstances -- I tend to kind of take in information and then translate it over time -- but this was something that I felt needed to happen quickly.

Johnson, Rashid, "Rashid Johnson: 'Anxiety is part of my life. It's something that people of color don't really discuss as often as we should'," *CNN.com*, May 8, 2020

Johnson has been working in a basement while away from his Brooklyn studio. "I have a space that's dedicated to getting messy," he said. Credit: Rashid Johnson (courtesy Hauser & Wirth)

My makeshift basement studio in Long Island isn't like my space in Brooklyn, but it's an open area with decently high ceilings and a little bit of light. I can tack up paper to the walls; I have a space that's dedicated to getting messy. I spend my mornings down there after I exercise and meditate, and in the afternoons I've taken on a new role as an elementary school teacher for my son. I teach him science, math and spelling, while my wife handles writing and history. My mother was a professor, so I've always had a tremendous amount of respect for educators. They're really talented people -- I don't share whatever skill it is they have.

It's not easy to explain the pandemic to an eight-year-old boy. I want to be honest, but I don't want to overwhelm him with information. I tell him that he's safe and that we love him. But he also has to be aware that the world is a complicated place. When I began making "Anxious Men," I grappled with that aspect of fatherhood. How would I translate the world to him? There was so much happening at the time: the migrant crisis, unending police brutality, the election of Donald Trump. There was the sense that the world was finding itself in a place that seemed frustrating, scary and dark.

Though the reasons for anxiety have changed, that work spoke to some of the kind of psychological conditions that are present in us today. I couldn't have imagined when I made "Anxious Men" that we'd be facing such isolation right now. I'm blessed that I can hug my child and kiss my wife. But I live in New York City, and I miss being in proximity to other human beings, and experiencing the touch of humanity. I always associated touch with intimacy, but lately I've thought about the small, random encounters during the day, like being accidentally bumped into on the train or the street. It's humbling, to be moved without your permission by another human being -- not because they intended to intimidate you, but because we all share this world.

One of the things that is quite obvious as a result of this pandemic is how it laid bare the inequalities in America. The virus is not "the great equalizer," as it's been called; though it can be humbling for some, it is devastating for others. Around the country, the virus has disproportionately affected people of color and those with less economic opportunity. We are seeing a qualifiable type of proof of how despicable inequality is and how it functions. There's a spotlight illuminating the disparity right now, and we should all have a heightened investment in correcting the wrongs.

The role of art right now is to not avert its eyes from the crisis and its effects. It's not a time to be didactic; it's a time to be present, to be part of the world. That doesn't mean I think every artist needs to be making new work right now. Artists often wait and observe and gather information, and find a way to interpret the moment. I have no expectations for artists other than for them to keep doing what it is that we do best: to be honest about who we are.

Johnson's routine has shifted during the pandemic: In the mornings, he spends time on his art practice; in the afternoons, he plays the role of elementary school teacher for his son. Credit: Rashid Johnson (courtesy Hauser & Wirth)

Loos, Ted, “Artists Are Hunkered Down, but Still Nurturing Their Inner Visions,” *NYTimes.com*, April 21, 2020

The New York Times

Artists Are Hunkered Down, but Still Nurturing Their Inner Visions

Artists and architects may be sheltering at home, but their creativity still flows — and the results surprise even them. Here’s what 10 famous makers are looking at, reading, and sketching now.

David Hockney, “Do remember they can’t cancel the Spring” (2020), iPad drawing of the artist’s view of Normandy, France.Credit...David Hockney

Under most circumstances, the life of an artist or architect requires a lot of solitary time. But none of the 10 artists and architects I spoke to expected to be sheltering somewhere, hiding out from a deadly pandemic with a small number of family members or close friends.

When asked how they were spending their time, they answered that, despite their fears, the pandemic is proving to be fertile ground — and they sent along some proof. The anxiety of the coronavirus era has already seeped into the work of Rashid Johnson, who suddenly started making blood-red drawings. Steven Holl depicted a pair of struggling lungs, and mourned a close friend — while continuing to design buildings. Adam Pendleton, whose artwork incorporates text, looked out the window and said he saw the words “SEE THE SIN.” Frank Gehry sketched, but his big meeting got Zoombombed. Leidy Churchman started an epistolary romance, and Doris Salcedo doubled-down on her constant theme: memorializing the forgotten.

One thing is clear: Like the generation after World War I, today’s artists will take this traumatic and uncertain time and turn it into something unexpected. As Maya Lin put it, “We’re going to get really interesting creativity out of this.” The following interviews have been edited and condensed.

Loos, Ted, “Artists Are Hunkered Down, but Still Nurturing Their Inner Visions,” *NYTimes.com*, April 21, 2020

Rashid Johnson

The conceptual artist, 43, who works in various media including film, painting, and installation, was at his home in the Hamptons with his family.

Rashid Johnson, “Untitled Red Drawing” (2020), oil on cotton rag. This work was made by the artist in his small home studio two weeks ago. Rashid Johnson

I’ve actually been busy doing drawings similar to one from 2018 called “Anxiety Drawing.” They were black, and now they are red. It’s the first one in this series that depict anxious men. I posted one on Instagram.

There’s a real brutality to them, they feel visceral and really current. It’s just a small move, just by adding a different pigment. And it just speaks volumes to how it has changed the urgency of those works.

These are, if you will, my quarantine drawings. I’m hesitating to use that language because I think it’s probably going to be massively oversubscribed.

This is going to have probably one of the most significant impacts on artist practices for multiple reasons. For one, the limitations of it, meaning what we have accessible to us materially — some artists have had assistants or help in fabrication and that’s been fundamentally a part of a lot of contemporary art practices.

The removal of some of that means getting back to the individual just responding to the world. From that perspective we’re going to see a lot of inner visions, you know? It’s Stevie Wonder time.

I think the most current thing that I’ve really spent any time looking at is Brutalist architecture, mostly in books. There’s a book called “Atlas of Brutalist Architecture.” I grew up in Chicago near a Brutalist hospital on Division Street, and I think there’s a strictness and heaviness that you can recognize in this architecture. It feels foreboding and all-consuming now. There’s a loneliness to it.

Katzeff, Miriam, “Best of 2019,” *Artforum*, December 2019, pp. 188-189

ARTFORUM

MIRIAM KATZEFF

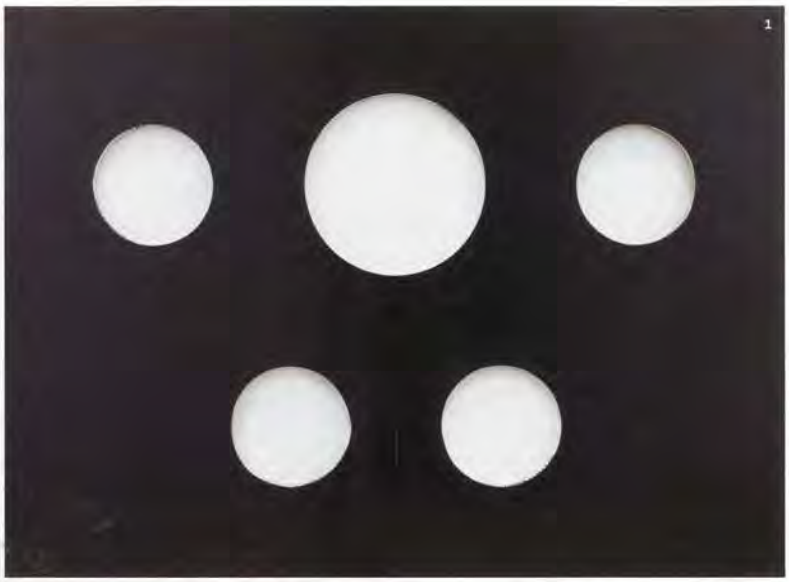
MIRIAM KATZEFF IS THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF ARTISTS SPACE IN NEW YORK. SHE IS ALSO THE COFOUNDER OF PRIMARY INFORMATION, A NONPROFIT PUBLISHER OF ARTISTS' BOOKS, WRITINGS, AND RECORDINGS.

1

STEVEN PARRINO (SKARSTEDT, NEW YORK) With their broad range of subcultural and art-historical influences, Parrino's twisted and torqued paintings often overwhelm their surroundings. Yet the grand setting of Skarstedt's town house muted the harshness of this work, revealing its rich dialogue with postwar artists such as Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni, and Frank Stella. The combination of horror, violence, and punk nihilism that permeates Parrino's art in other settings was not absent entirely, however: A selection of "Amphetamine Monster-Mill" collages, 1994, exposed a sinister undercurrent of disaster and dread.

2

RASHID JOHNSON, *NATIVE SON* Johnson's feature film updates Richard Wright's classic 1940 novel and brings it into present-day Chicago. Beautifully shot, the narrative builds slowly to its frenetic ending. Loyalists might be offended by the liberties Johnson took with the book, but some key elements—such as a liberal white family that collects art by black artists and repeatedly commits microaggressions—feel perfectly fitting for the ambient racism of Trump's America.



1. **Steven Parrino, *Stockade (Existential Trap for Speed Freaks)*, 1988–91**, enamel on canvas, 76 × 104". 2. **Rashid Johnson, *Native Son*, 2019**, HD video, color, sound, 103 minutes 41 seconds. Bigger Thomas (Ashton Sanders). 3. **View of "Josh Kline: Climate Change: Part One," 2019**, 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse. 4. **Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen, *ImageNet Roulette*, 2019**, facial-classification application. Installation view, Fondazione Prada, Milan. Photo: Marco Cappelletti.

3

JOSH KLINE (47 CANAL, NEW YORK) Walking through doors coated with national flags and sand sourced from disparate regions of the world, viewers entered dispiriting rooms containing Kline's visions of cities in ruin. International borders broke down in vitrines housing melting blocks of ice that slowly submerged government buildings. Though we can make personal decisions to reduce our carbon footprint, Kline suggests, the cause of our oblivion is structural—and its inevitability impossible to escape.

4

TREVOR PAGLEN AND KATE CRAWFORD, IMAGENET ROULETTE A short-lived app created by artist Trevor Paglen and Microsoft researcher Kate Crawford, ImageNet Roulette deftly exposed the biases inherent in artificial intelligence to a broader public. Building on the desire for selfie-oriented apps (such as FaceApp), this viral project allowed users to upload photographic self-portraits to be analyzed with classifications from ImageNet, a database of images employed to train machine-learning algorithms. The often offensive, bizarre, racist, and sexist results showed that AI is far from neutral and contains all the human error, prejudice, and misjudgment of an addled teen rating faces on Hot or Not. Shortly after the app's launch, ImageNet announced it would remove 1.5 million photos from its training set.

5. **View of the Whitney Biennial 2019**, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Foreground: Pat Phillips, *Untitled (Don't Tread On Me)*, 2019. Photo: Ron Amstutz. 6. **Henrik Oleson, *Red Square*, 2019**, aluminum, enamel, hardware, tape. Installation view, Galerie Buchholz, New York. 7. **Gregg Bordowitz addressing a crowd in front of the Food and Drug Administration building, Washington, DC, 1988.** 8. **View of "The Conditions of Being Art: Pat Hearn Gallery & American Fine Arts, Co. (1983–2004)," 2018**, Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. From left: Peter Fend and Ocean Earth, *RAPID Methane Gas Station*, 2000; Claire Pentecost, *Molecular Invasion*, 2004; Issue of *Artforum*, September 1998. Photo: Chris Kendall. 9. **Charline von Heyl, *Tondo*, 2017**, acrylic and charcoal on linen, 80 × 80". 10. **View of "Martine Syms: Big Surprise," 2018**, Bridget Donahue, New York.

8

"THE CONDITIONS OF BEING ART: PAT HEARN GALLERY & AMERICAN FINE ARTS, CO. (1983–2004)" (HESSEL MUSEUM OF ART, ANNENDALE-ON-HUDSON, NY; CURATED BY JEANNINE TANG, LIA GANGITANO, AND ANN BUTLER) Entering the art world just as American Fine Arts was closing in the early 2000s, I often felt like all of my favorite discoveries from the '80s and '90s had shown there or at Pat Hearn at some point in their careers. At Bard, I visited this exhibition with an older friend, who noted how strange it was to see AFA and PHG installations re-created in an elevated museum environment. But I thought it was fitting: Here, students who would otherwise only ever have heard about the mythology of AFA and PHG could encounter the work firsthand. The exhibition included iconic pieces by artists closely associated with the galleries, including Lutz Bacher, Alex Bag, and Andrea Fraser, while placing well-known artists such as Mary Heilmann back in Hearn's often-politicized context. Notably, the show also highlighted Tishan Hsu, whose timely art is once again receiving recognition. I was most grateful for the accompanying publication, which provides a range of texts fleshing out the two galleries' social history, and a full exhibition time line.

5

XAVIERA SIMMONS, "WHITENESS MUST UNDO ITSELF TO MAKE WAY FOR THE TRULY RADICAL TURN IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE" (*ART NEWSPAPER*) Prior to the publication of "The Tear Gas Biennial," Simmons's article was the most discussed piece of writing on the Whitney Biennial among my friends. Addressing the many critics who claimed this year's Biennial wasn't "radical enough," the text reflects on the burden white critics place on artists of color to perform radicality in specific ways and calls on those critics to openly acknowledge whiteness. White critics must better educate themselves about the lineages of artistic influence, Simmons writes, and the field of art criticism must diversify.

6

HENRIK OLESON (GALERIE BUCHHOLZ, NEW YORK) Pasted to the wall next to a Judd stack of two empty glass boxes, a sheet of text invoked Deleuze and Guattari's famous "bodies without organs": NO MOUTH NO TONGUE NO TEETH NO BELLY NO ANUS. Artworks throughout the show refused to perform their expected functions: A corner sculpture formed a right angle but was hung askew; a metal-and-glass door suspended in the center of the gallery was the backdrop for another text; and the *Red Square* works, 2019—a sequence of installations that framed the entryways, descaling the gallery and drawing visitors in—were painted yellow on the reverse side, jarring visitors as they exited. Olesen's minimal forms continue to disarm with their details and studied imperfections.

7

GREGG BORDOWITZ (ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO; CURATED BY ROBYN FARRELL AND SOLVEIG NELSON) Since the 1980s, Bordowitz's artwork and activism have centered on people affected by AIDS as the public response to the crisis has evolved from ostracizing victims to sensationalizing their stories to the present-day tendency toward erasure, with the scale of people living with HIV often overlooked. Bordowitz, who has lived with the virus for more than thirty years, creates nuanced portraits that provoke an unexpectedly wide range of emotion. For the video *Habit*, 2001, he intersperses footage of his daily routine with material shot during a trip to South Africa, where he documented the efforts of the activist group Treatment Action Campaign to urge the government to distribute antiretroviral medication.

Organized by the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, Portland, where it was curated by Stephanie Snyder.

9

CHARLINE VON HEYL (PETZEL GALLERY, NEW YORK) Von Heyl's enigmatic paintings encourage the viewer to slow down and consider the complexities of her line, shape, and color and the connections among her disparate works. In her *Poetry Machine #1*, *#2*, and *#3*, all 2018, regal, disembodied female heads perch on graphic platforms against transparent layers. Black line work becomes a fluid pattern overtaking other patterns in *Tondo*, 2017, while in *La Vache Qui Rit (The Laughing Cow)* and *5 Signs of Disturbance*, both 2018, similar shapes and line work reappear as strange hieroglyphics.

10

MARTINE SYMS (BRIDGET DONAHUE, NEW YORK) Installed as a hyperactive installation with photographic wallpaper and photographs laser-cut with text, *Mythiccbeing*, 2018 (pronounced "My thick being"), is a four-monitor interactive installation focused on a gender-neutral avatar of the same name. The title plays on the word *thicc* but also alludes to Adrian Piper's cycle "The Mythic Being," 1973–75, for which the elder artist adopted a male alter ego. At Bridget Donahue, Syms invited visitors to text with *Mythiccbeing*. Its responses—drawn from a voluminous database of the artist's writings—were so darkly witty I couldn't stop texting with the moody avatar. □

Veitch, Mara, “ARTIST RASHID JOHNSON ISN’T THE PLANT-PARENTING TYPE” *InterviewMagazine.com,* November 15, 2019

ARTIST RASHID JOHNSON ISN’T THE PLANT-PARENTING TYPE

By Mara Veitch | Photography Martin Parsekian | Published November 15, 2019

Rashid Johnson © Hauser & Wirth.

Rashid Johnson, the conceptual artist whose latest exhibition ***The Hikers*** opened at Hauser & Wirth this week, isn’t afraid to get his hands dirty. Through elaborately constructed-then-destroyed objects smeared with paint and broken glass, painstaking collage, and verdant sculpture; Johnson probes the tenderest nooks of the human psyche through a disarming mix of humor, vulnerability, and confusion.

A walk through Johnson’s exhibition elicits every reaction; His “Broken Men,” an amalgamation of the domestic surfaces we take for granted, are as heartwarming as they are arresting. The “Escape Collages,” like visual representations of the mind, project a blaring combination of urgent desires and hazy memories. “Untitled Bronze Head” soothes even as it spooks; a giant bronze skull consumed from the inside by roots and leaves.

It’s daunting to think that, for Johnson, this is what mankind’s frenzied time on earth amounts to: a patchwork of collective anxieties, isolated moments, and imagined escapes that culminate in succulents growing out of our eye sockets. But a walk through the gallery with Johnson illuminates the honesty and optimism at the heart of the artist’s work.

———

RASHID JOHNSON: I want to talk about this painting. It’s called “The Broken Five,” and it comes from a prior body work called “Anxious Men.” The “Anxious Men” were really reflections on my own anxiety, and a lot of what I believe to be a collective anxiety. They’ve evolved into these mosaic works, which I’m calling “Broken Men.” There’s this feeling that you could almost scrape off the materials that built up to make them— black soap and wax. You have what I’m considering to be five characters, standing next to each other, and all of them wearing long draping textiles. These expanding lines and patterns are made up of tile, bronze, mirror that’s been broken, wood that’s been branded, as well as quite a few ceramic pieces that I’ve made myself, and in that sense it became almost a collision of sorts.

MARA VEITCH: It’s heartening to see somebody, particularly a man, explore anxiety in a public way. What do you see as the value or risk of doing that?

Veitch, Mara, “ARTIST RASHID JOHNSON ISN’T THE PLANT-PARENTING TYPE” *InterviewMagazine.com,* November 15, 2019

“The Broken Five” © Hauser & Wirth.

“Untitled Escape Collage” © Hauser & Wirth.

JOHNSON: The value is an opportunity to create a cathartic space for myself, and to admit something about my own experience—where my fears lie and where my strengths lie. It’s an interesting thing you point out: Men often struggle to admit their shortcomings, or what they may imagine to be their shortcomings. I spend a lot of time trying to explore that space. I think that the vulnerability that I show makes my work stronger. Ideally, it provides the viewer some agency to express similar emotions.

VEITCH: What is the relationship between deliberate construction and improvisation for you?

JOHNSON: I think about most things that I make as quite topographic. So you imagine a landscape, the different materials in it, then just begin to translate them. Making a painting using a thousand different cuts brings that paint to life. Inside of this exists maybe 300 abstract micro-paintings. And then stepping back, just one large macro. There’s also some aspects that were not quite deliberate. So in a sense, it’s like anything else a human being would make.

VEITCH: It’s funny that you say that anyone would make this. As I look at it I’m kind of jealous… because most people can’t just mess something up. Everyone wants to, but only you can.

JOHNSON: ***[Laughs.]*** Yeah. There’s a fearlessness in making these things. You have to really commit in a way that’s fierce and engaging.

———

JOHNSON: This is one of my “Escape Collages.” They’re made using several photographs, some of which I’ve made myself, some of which are borrowed. There’s an African mask in the background, covered in cowrie shells. As a Western artist exploring Western themes, I’m thinking about the outreach of modernism and cultural appropriation; themes of African-ness and its relationship to the Western principles in which I was trained. This work connects all of those ideas, in some respect. I use black soap and wax to help hold down the surface.

VEITCH: Your eyes never rest looking at this. There’s always something new standing out.

JOHNSON: Yeah. In some sense they’re very sculptural, but they’re built on flat planes as what I guess most people would consider to be painting.

VEITCH: You use some of these materials—black soap, wax, tile—across several bodies of work. Do they function as signifiers of something specific?

JOHNSON: In some ways they’re evolving, but the way that I came to black soap was quite deliberate. It was a material that existed in my home. My mother was an African history professor. We traveled and lived in West Africa for a period of time. Black soap is for people who have sensitive skin. So this relationship to sensitivity is really present in the work. I employed it as a signifier, as a healing substance.

Veitch, Mara, “ARTIST RASHID JOHNSON ISN’T THE PLANT-PARENTING TYPE” *InterviewMagazine.com,* November 15, 2019

“Untitled Bronze Head” © Hauser & Wirth.

I also like the idea that you can wash yourself with the painting. It has some utility outside of being an art object.

VEITCH: There’s so much to see. They feel like a glimpse of a really poorly-treated bathroom. There’s something touching about seeing such a hard-working surface in a gallery.

JOHNSON: That’s right. The domestic spaces and materials that we have such familiarity with—like tile or soap—when they’re elevated in the form of this work, brought to this place, they’ve finally graduated into the most sophisticated of spheres. These works are entirely built around aspiration, in a sense. I grew up in the Midwest, so something like this felt unattainable. ***[Gestures to palm tree images.]*** Like, how do I get there? What does it look like? Is it all that I expected? It’s the idea of escape.

———

JOHNSON: This is made of bronze. There’s something interesting for me about the man-made object that houses the organic object and that kind of connectivity that they share. One kind of helping the other while the other tries to overcome the first. Plants will always burst through and take over. Nature has a way of claiming things that are foreign to it. We all have to think about how these things are going to survive. I want to put one in my yard.

VEITCH: You’ve got to. How do you feel about the fact that plant parenting is the new millennial pastime?

JOHNSON: That’s fascinating. Actually, as often as I’ve used plants in my work, I’ve never considered myself to be a plant parent. But that may be because I actually have a child…

VEITCH: Yeah. You’ve met your parenting quota.

JOHNSON: Maybe I’m good on the parenting front.

VEITCH: There’s something so relaxing about seeing plants inside, but there’s also something dreadful about they way they’re taking over this skull.

JOHNSON: You think so? I think nature knows no boundaries.

VEITCH: That’s what’s scary. They’ll win in the end.

JOHNSON: ***[Laughs.]*** They’ll definitely win.

Smee, Sebastian, “A vital voice of his generation,” *WashingtonPost.com*, July 3, 2019

The Washington Post

A vital voice of his generation

Rashid Johnson is blowing open the idea of Africanness

By Sebastian Smee | July 3, 2019

Artist Rashid Johnson, 42, in front of one of his works in his Brooklyn studio. (Chris Sorensen for The Washington Post)

BROOKLYN — It’s raining heavily when I emerge from the subway at Grand Street in Brooklyn, so for $2.50 I buy a black umbrella from a Chinese thrift store. I’m already damp, but the umbrella gets me in a presentable state the two or three blocks — past the Grand Street Campus High School and a parking lot full of police cars — to the studio of Rashid Johnson.

Tall and well-built, Johnson is moving around the sprawling, street-level space with the help of a Knee-Rover — a scooter with a padded platform for his knee. He broke a bone in his foot fooling around on a soccer pitch with his 7-year-old son, and the recovery has taken months. Johnson’s work is intensely physical so the whole thing has been a “nightmare” — but he says it rolling his eyes and with a self-mocking smile.

The studio is busy. Several assistants are moving things around. The space is filled with wooden crates, tall shelves, mixed-media paintings made with black soap and wax stacked against walls, trestle tables

Johnson uses unusual materials in his works, such as shea butter, plants and black soap. (Chris Sorensen for The Washington Post)

covered in pots, a massive collage, and blocks of blue Styrofoam carved by a chain saw into rough heads. A 19-year-old tabby cat sits on a table at the center of it all, supremely indifferent.

Johnson, 42, has two museum shows opening in July — one in Aspen, the other in Mexico City. He came to prominence in 2001 when curator Thelma Golden included him in “Freestyle,” a hugely influential group show at the Studio Museum in Harlem. He was just 24.

Since then, Johnson’s agitated, inquisitive and increasingly commanding work in photography, film, mixed media and sculpture — all of it teasing out the complexities, absurdities and psychology of black cultural identity — has made him a vital voice of his generation. He is known for works that incorporate shea butter — deriving from Africa, where it is used as a cosmetic and lotion and in some places has sacred associations — as well as black soap, plants, books and photographs, among other materials. His directorial debut, “Native Son,” premiered on HBO earlier this year.

Johnson is married to the artist Sheree Hovsepian, whose studio is a block away. He has been in this studio for seven years, in the area for 15. His daily routine, he says, is simple.

“Usually — when my foot’s not broken! — it starts off with trying to do something physical, like going to the gym or running or lifting weights.” He drives to the studio from Manhattan with his studio manager, and during the 20-minute ride she goes over logistics. Then he works.

Some of Johnson’s artwork in his studio, which is filled with wooden crates, tall shelves, mixed-media paintings and more. (Chris Sorensen for The Washington Post)

Johnson began making art as a photographer in 1996. He was just 19, and had years of study — at Chicago’s Columbia College and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago — ahead of him.
When he was 23, just starting at SAIC — and in a dismal frame of mind — a friend invited him to Chicago’s Red Square bathhouse. He walked into the dungeonlike steam room, and there, sitting naked, was activist and politician Jesse Jackson.

They got chatting, and Johnson fell in love with the place. He would return with copies of the French post-structuralist philosophers he was reading for school, and listen to the conversations of Armenian and Mexican businessmen, communists, judges — and Jesse Jackson. And the steam-room tiles he spent so many hours staring at became a leitmotif in his work.

Both museum shows — at the Aspen Art Museum and the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City — will feature a seven-minute film Johnson recently made, “The Hikers.”

“It is about two younger black men who are hiking, one ascending the mountain on a hike at Aspen and the other descending,” Johnson says. “I collaborated with a choreographer. We worked together to figure out a set of movements that borrow from ballet and from what I describe as ‘anxious movements.’ I was asking, ‘What are the movements like when a black man is walking past a police officer? Or when a black man is suffering from agoraphobia?’

Some of Johnson’s sculptures. (Chris Sorensen/For The Washington Post)

“So these two black characters run into each other and there’s just something beautiful about it. This has happened to me. I’ll be traveling somewhere where there’s less of an expectation that I will run into someone who looks like me. And when I do see that person there’s almost like this platonic love. It’s so unexpected! It’s like, ‘Oh, my God. It’s you. What are you doing here?’ It’s this little fireworks moment.”

“The Hikers” represents a new stage in Johnson’s increasingly supple take on race — race as a function of emotion and inner life as much as politics and injustice.

- - -

Q: You work with some unusual materials. How do you get these vast quantities of shea butter?

A: The shea butter we get through a group called Africa Imports. They distribute African products in African American communities. They’re very aware that they’re disseminating signifiers — products they believe would signal things about African identity to people in African American communities.

Q: Is that what you’re doing, too? Do you think of your art in those terms?

A: I do, I do! They’re doing it wholesale, I’m using art as a distribution system. It’s about what the materials and signifiers say. What they add and what they question. When shea butter takes that Middle Passage journey to a place like Harlem or Brooklyn or the South Side of Chicago, what does it then become? In which ways does it assimilate? In which ways does it allow people to feel like they have a relationship with Africanness?

Q: Do you feel you personally have that relationship?

A: My mother is an African history professor, my stepfather is Nigerian, I grew up with a Nigerian family, we traveled in Africa. So I grew up with a really informed African identity. Unimpeachable. But at times, my mother’s academic background and my stepfather’s actual Africanness and that whole side of my family made me feel less African.

A collection of spray paint in his studio. (Chris Sorensen/For The Washington Post)

Q: Why, do you think?

A: I think I became aware of how Afri-

Johnson has been in this Brooklyn studio for seven years. His wife’s studio is a block away. (Chris Sorensen for The Washington Post)

can American I was. It’s not totally dissimilar to someone who’s been generationally from New York of Italian descent and they go to Sicily and they don’t speak the language. Even the food is different. I think many descendants of Africa want to have a close relationship with the continent of Africa, and I think that’s possible. But in other ways you become very aware of how Western you are. So a lot of the signifiers and materials I work with speak to that global distress. How we pull at it, how we frame it, and how, when you try your best, not unlike shea butter, it becomes quite slippery and you can’t hold on to it.

Q: Your wife was born in Iran. Has your marriage to her fed into your sense of the complexity of this stuff?

A: Absolutely. My wife’s family is Muslim. She wasn’t raised as a Muslim necessarily. Only recently she asked me, “But am I Muslim?” [Laughs]. I said, “I think so.” So that’s another thing that’s quite difficult to pin down: our relationship to religion when we aren’t practicing. Is it cultural? How do you define it? We’re constantly trying to get to the essence of ourselves. But there is no more essence to get to. It’s all of those creolized and miscegenated bits that are making you what you are. There is no way to make it more pure. So my work is partly about the absurdity of the things that marry us to cultural identity. And yet emotionally these things do attach us. If you feel like these things are part of your story, they’re part of your story. I began using these materials as a way to question the sincerity of their use, but it has evolved into an honest negotiation and appreciation of these materials and how they affect the poetry of my story.

Rashid Johnson: “My work is partly about the absurdity of the things that marry us to cultural identity.” (Chris Sorensen for The Washington Post)

Q: This is a big studio. How do you handle the logistics of preparing for two museum shows?

A: It’s not as hard as you’d think. My parameters are: What am I physically capable of doing? I’m still living within the confines of what I can actually put my arms around. I’m responsible for all the mark-making in my studio. It’s not a factory environment by any stretch of the imagination.

Q: Are there times of the day that you set aside for creative thinking?

A: That’s all fluid. I only have about four hours a day in which I can physically engage with artworks in an effective way. It’s strangely very low stress, making art. It’s the only thing I’ve ever known how to do. And it’s the only thing I’ve ever felt really good about. I wouldn’t say confident. But good about. I know that I should be doing it.

Q: Where else is your head at with your work?

A: Recently? Emotions. For me, that’s a more honest space to be in. It’s almost like therapy. You tell the therapist what’s going on and they say something like, “Well, how does it make you feel?” So I’m taking it all in. But it’s hard for me to parse it out. It’s not as if I’ve abandoned my intellectual concerns, because I haven’t. But I think that I’m allowing them to commingle with my emotional concerns.

McWilliams, A.T., "Native Son Gets the James Baldwin Edit," *TheAtlantic.com*, April 5, 2019

The Atlantic

Native Son Gets the James Baldwin Edit

Suzan-Lori Parks's adaptation of Richard Wright's famed 1940 novel reframes some of the book's most controversial details through a critical lens.

A.T. McWilliams | April 5, 2019

The director, Rashid Johnson, and the screenwriter, Suzan-Lori Parks, translate Richard Wright's *Native Son* to modern-day America through a Baldwinian lens, reducing the novel's most depraved depictions of black life. HBO

Selling more than 215,000 copies in the three weeks following its American debut, Richard Wright's 1940 novel, *Native Son*, successfully captivated readers nationwide. The story of Bigger Thomas—a hardened, murderous black 20-year-old confronting poverty in Depression-era Chicago—thrust audiences into a complicated conversation about race and racism in America. The book garnered comparisons to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and earned Wright the title of America's "best Negro writer."

But James Baldwin, Wright's then-25-year-old protegé, was not so generous in his estimation of *Native Son*. Although he first praised Wright's novel, and celebrated the righteous indignation of the work as an "immense liberation and revelation," his later concern with Bigger's portrayal led him to excoriate his mentor in the 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel." In the critique, which later sprouted into the strategically named essay collection *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin admonishes his literary forefather for what he described as *Native Son*'s grating, dimensionless depiction of black life in America. For Baldwin, Bigger's acts of rape and murder perpetuated dangerous stereotypes at a time when black men were lynched for less, and served only to "whet the notorious national taste for the sensational." He argued that with lines like "[Bigger's] [murder] seemed natural; he felt that all of his life had been leading to something like this," Wright had created a character who was too grotesque to be a representative portrayal of black people.

In HBO's new film adaptation of *Native Son*, premiering April 6, the director Rashid Johnson and the screenwriter Suzan-Lori Parks reckon with Baldwin's damning critiques. They translate Wright's plot to modern-day America through a Baldwinian lens, reducing the novel's most depraved depictions of black life and capturing Bigger's humanity. And while the latest adaptation preserves much of *Native Son*'s original plot, Johnson (in his directorial debut) and Parks (who won a Pulitzer Prize for *Topdog/Underdog*) still seek to tell their own story.

In both the novel and the 2019 film, Bigger, played by Ashton Sanders (*Moonlight*), sets out on a dark path soon after being hired as a driver for the liberal philanthropist Mr. Dalton (Bill Camp) and his daughter, Mary (Margaret Qualley). After chauffeuring an inebriated and incapacitated Mary home from a party, Bigger tries to help her into her bed. Mary's drunken commotion awakens her blind mother (played by Elizabeth Marvel), who calls for Mary as she walks down the hall, sending Bigger into a panic. In trying to avoid being caught in such a compromised state, Bigger holds a pillow over Mary's head, unintentionally suffocating her to death. Panicked and fearing for his life (who would believe a poor black man killed a rich white woman by accident?), Bigger resolves to burn her corpse in a furnace. And thus he begins his life as a fugitive—catalyzing a series of brutal acts that reinforced the most heinous perceptions of black people.

Ashton Sanders plays Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, alongside Bill Camp as Mr. Dalton. (Matthew Libatique / HBO)

Baldwin claimed that Bigger’s anger and violence confirmed the “fantastic and fearful image which we have lived with since the first slave fell beneath the lash,” in his essay “Many Thousands Gone” from *Notes of a Native Son*. In Wright’s rendering, Bigger kisses Mary as she sleeps, unable to control his impulsive attraction to white women—a horrific and historic trope. Two and a half decades before *Native Son*, the 1915 blockbuster *The Birth of a Nation* showed Ku Klux Klan members fighting to save white women from black men (played by white men in black face), who threatened the women with barbaric sexual advances. For Baldwin, Wright’s depiction of Bigger etched these ideas deeper into the American psyche.

In the new film, by contrast, Bigger resists Mary’s flirtation, thereby subverting the mythical predisposition of black male sexual assault against white women. Parks steadies the film’s focus on Bigger’s fear—captured by his desperate claims during Mary’s drunken revelry: “You gotta stop. You’re gonna get me fired, alright?” And while Wright’s Bigger revels in Mary’s death, and experienced a “terrified pride in feeling and thinking that some day he would be able to say publicly that he had done it,” Parks’s rendition aims to separate him from such an unnatural deed. Bigger’s act of murder on-screen is just as graphic as the one in the novel: He decapitates Mary’s corpse after a fruitless struggle to fit it into the furnace. And though the updated Bigger shows little remorse for Mary’s death, he also shows no pride. Instead, he seeks to distance himself from the murder and tries to maintain his humanity, saying, “So I won’t make it me. I won’t make it anybody. I gotta find a way to be okay somehow.”

While on the run, Bigger’s violence extends to his girlfriend, Bessie, who, in the original text, he rapes one night before bludgeoning her with a brick. In the novel, the two murders are described as “the most meaningful, exciting, and stirring thing that had ever happened to him.” But when Parks depicts Bigger embattled with Bessie under similar circumstances—standing with his hands wrapped around her neck—he quickly pulls away and collapses, murmuring, “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry” as Bessie runs away to safety. Unlike Wright’s self-satisfied Bigger, the HBO film’s version is burdened by remorse. He is a human who made a grave mistake. Though Mary’s life was lost by his hand, he doesn’t want to be a murderer.

When asked why she cut the rape scene from her adaptation of *Native Son*, Parks said, “It would’ve hijacked his character. That’s not who he is.” But when adapting texts, what is the cost of removing core elements of an original story—even those that are deemed problematic? Though he provided a much-needed critique about the dangers of singular black narratives, Baldwin—and, subsequently, Parks—failed to underscore (or investigate) the intention of Wright’s depictions. Despite its challenges, Wright’s story did succeed in shocking America’s system, and pushing a country to reckon with how systemic racism and poverty might have led Bigger to rape and kill. In his review of the book in a 1963 issue of *Dissent* magazine, the writer Irving Howe noted, “The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies … A blow at the white man, the novel forced him to recognize himself as an oppressor.”

Still, the triumph of Parks’s modern translation is that while she also captures what being black in America might drive one to do, she does not compromise her protagonist’s humanity. Whereas Wright’s illustration of Bigger’s outward-facing rage was deemed sensational and not relatable by many ordinary black Americans (the character was partially based on a 1930s serial killer), Parks focuses Bigger’s anger inward. Rather than his murder of Mary begetting more murder, as it does in Wright’s novel, this film’s Bigger imposes the consequences of his actions on himself—by committing suicide by cop. His death means that he rejected the life of a killer; it is his redemption.

Despite their divergent renditions of Bigger’s demise (Wright’s Bigger is convicted and sentenced to death via electric chair), both Wright and Parks write the antihero’s death as happening at the hands of the state. In doing so, they indict a troubled country mired in discriminatory systems—an oppressive parent who aims to strike fear in her children, only to cast them away, unmoved by the loss of her native sons.

Tillet, Salamishah, “A ‘Native Son’ Reimagined, With James Baldwin in Mind,” *NYTimes.com*, April 4, 2019

The New York Times

A ‘Native Son’ Reimagined, With James Baldwin in Mind

By Salamishah Tillet | April 4, 2019

The playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, left, and the visual artist Rashid Johnson collaborated on the latest film adaptation of Richard Wright’s “Native Son,” setting it in present-day Chicago. Gioncarlo Valentine for The New York Times

In its earliest conception, Richard Wright’s best-seller “Native Son” was envisioned for the screen.

“To make the screen version of a novel into which I had put so much of myself was a dream which I had long hugged to my heart,” Richard Wright told the Portuguese magazine “Revista Branca” in 1950.

The story of a young African-American man from the South Side of Chicago, trapped by the stigma and the stifling conditions of racism, has in fact lent itself to film dramatization more than once. A 1951 feature, starring a 45-year-old Wright after the actor Canada Lee dropped out, was a commercial and critical disaster — it didn’t help that the film, made in Argentina, was extensively edited by American censors. A 1986 version made by Jerrold Freedman and starring Elizabeth McGovern, Oprah Winfrey, Ving Rhames and Matt Dillon did not fare any better.

But it was Wright’s words on the page, and not its cinematic offspring, that inspired the visual artist Rashid Johnson to make his own “Native Son” adaptation — his feature directorial debut — premiering Saturday on HBO.

Tillet, Salamishah, “A ‘Native Son’ Reimagined, With James Baldwin in Mind,” *NYTimes.com*, April 4, 2019

“The idea of a multidimensional Bigger was so compelling,” said Parks of the contemporary version of the central character, played by Ashton Sanders. HBO

Johnson, who was first given the book as a teenager living in Chicago by his mother and history professor, Cheryl Johnson-Odim, describes having long been “obsessed” with “Native Son.” “I think it is everything that is right and wrong with the existential journey,” he said. “I think the book sits in the pantheon of literary narratives that have evolved to help us understand the black experience today, which isn’t a monolithic one. Not every black story fosters a sense of success or optimism.”

This newest version of “Native Son,” adapted by the playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, remains set in Chicago but in the present day and with notable tweaks. (Spoilers follow for anyone unfamiliar with the story.)

Bigger Thomas (a subtly charismatic Ashton Sanders), is a 20-year-old bicycle messenger who finds a job driving for Will Dalton, a wealthy white businessman, and his family. Bigger dons green hair and black studded jackets, is a metal and classical music fan and steadfastly refuses “stereotypical Negro [expletive]”; he aspires to be more than a driver, a drug dealer or social delinquent.

His mother (Sanaa Lathan), a striving law student, and his girlfriend Bessie (a vibrant KiKi Layne) nurture his ambitions alongside their own, while he becomes friends with Dalton’s “woke” white daughter Mary (Margaret Qualley) and her boyfriend Jan (Nick Robinson). Midway through the story that inherits its tripartite structure of “Fear,” “Flight” and “Fate” from the novel, Bigger accidentally suffocates Mary to death, which sends him on the run and his family and friends into a tailspin.

Wright intended for readers to see Bigger as a product of “the moral … horror of Negro life in the United States.” The novel opens with Bigger brutally killing a rat that has infested his family’s one-room South Side apartment, which is owned by his slumlord employer, Dalton. (In the book, the character is Henry Dalton, not Will.) Later he kisses the inebriated and unconscious Mary, and then smothers her to keep her quiet when her blind mother enters the bedroom. On the run, an unhinged Bigger rapes and kills Bessie before the police eventually catch him, put him on trial and execute him.

Several generations of African-Americans artists, particularly those who came of age in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, have praised “Native Son,” with its bold and bloody take on American race relations, as the ultimate protest novel.

Others received it differently. In 1949, James Baldwin, a young writer who Wright had championed and mentored, published an essay titled “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” which critiqued “Native Son” for continuing to perpetuate the racial stereotypes that “it was written to destroy.” For Baldwin, Bigger’s true tragedy was not being poor or black or American, but that “he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being subhuman and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed to him at his birth.”

Tillet, Salamishah, “A ‘Native Son’ Reimagined, With James Baldwin in Mind,” *NYTimes.com*, April 4, 2019

“Wright and Baldwin are so matched together, that it would be foolish and disingenuous to tell the story without taking into account what we know,” said Johnson, seen here on set with Sanders, left, and Nick Robinson. Thomas Hank Willis/HBO

Rather than avoid Baldwin’s insights, like the earlier adaptations did, Johnson’s movie leans into them. “Baldwin’s criticism is unavoidable,” Johnson conceded. “I mean, now, Wright and Baldwin are so matched together, that it would be foolish and disingenuous to tell the story without taking into account what we know.”

With permission from Wright’s literary estate, Parks’s vision diverges largely from the original plot, excising the long trial scene at the end in which Max, a white Communist lawyer unsuccessfully defends Bigger. “Rather than spend 30 minutes of the film in scenes that debate Bigger’s innocence or his guilt, we got to use our dramatic moments and extra minute on the front end showing Big’s friendship with Mary and Jan and Bessie,” Parks said.

In his quest to contend with these two conflicting artistic visions, Johnson believed Parks was the only writer up to the task: Having been a former student of Baldwin’s and a playwright whose complex depictions of black masculinity in such works as the Pulitzer Prize-winning “Topdog/Underdog” and, more recently, “White Noise,” made her the ideal person to update Bigger for a contemporary audience.

By further establishing Bigger’s intimate relationships, the audience, for the first time, sees the depth of his interior life.

“The idea of a multidimensional Bigger was so compelling. That is our biggest difference,” she continued. “Wright created him intentionally as a character that’s driven by his circumstance, so to make him fleshed out and fully formed is an extraordinary move and really our way of recognizing how far we have come.”

Though indebted to Baldwin and Wright, the film’s distinctive aesthetics reflect Johnson’s background as an experimental photographer and Parks’s flair for avant-garde dialogue. In their beautifully constructed cinematic world, Bigger is not maniacal (he does not rape or murder Bessie) and is more sympathetic. But he is also so self-aware that his meta-commentary includes quoting W.E.B. DuBois’s famous passage on African-Americans’ “double consciousness” from “The Souls of Black Folk.”

As much as this latest depiction of Bigger Thomas emerges as an archetype of black millennial ambition and angst, he remains, despite his greatest desires, unable to outrun or outsmart the ways in which his black life matters so little to those police officers with whom he has his fatal encounter. In a final scene that is eerily reminiscent of the video footage of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald’s killing by the Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke in 2014, this “Native Son” does not feel like a movie making up for lost time, but rather one that we know too well, played on repeat, with limited justice in sight.

Del Barco, Mandalit, "'Native Son' Is Reborn, In 'Still Kind Of The Same America'," *NPR.org*, April 3, 2019

'Native Son' Is Reborn, In 'Still Kind Of The Same America'

By Mandalit Del Barco | April 3, 2019

Ashton Sanders plays main character Bigger Thomas in the new film adaptation of *Native Son*, the Richard Wright novel. HBO

In the classic 1940 novel *Native Son*, 20-year-old Bigger Thomas dreams of a life beyond his impoverished Chicago neighborhood.

As in the book, the new *Native Son* movie begins with Bigger killing a huge rat in his house, where he lives with his siblings and their single mother. His troubles accelerate after he gets hired as a driver for the Daltons, a wealthy white family.

But this time, the story is set in contemporary times. The new retelling of Richard Wright's novel debuts on HBO this Saturday, April 6. Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks wrote the screenplay. And the adaptation was directed by artist Rashid Johnson.

Ashton Sanders, who was in the Oscar-winning movie *Moonlight*, plays Bigger. In this version, he sports green hair and a graffiti-covered leather jacket. On set, Sanders explained Bigger is into both punk music and Beethoven.

"Along with the pressures of being a black man in this America, he's also dealing with the pressures of being this *other* other in America — being this Afro-punk and dealing with his circumstances and his environment," Sanders says.

Bigger is tasked with driving Mr. Dalton's wild-child daughter Mary (Margaret Qualley). Mary rebels against her privilege and impetuously tries to connect with Bigger. Mr. Dalton (Bill Camp) may fancy himself as a liberal, but Mary and her boyfriend Jan (Nick Robinson) fashion themselves as political radicals.

At the movie's premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January, writer Suzan-Lori Parks talked about how she updated their story.

"In the original novel, Jan was a member of the Communist Party," Parks says. "So the Communist Party these days is not the same kind of party as it was back in the day. So immediately I said: Well we've got some parties that are also relevant, like Occupy or the anti-fascist movement, that a young person might want to join in that might cause some consternation in the hearts and minds of progressive wealthy parents."

There are a few other changes. In Wright's bestselling novel, Bigger was a rapist and a murderer — portrayed as a victim or product of his environment.

That characterization has been controversial. Novelist James Baldwin once wrote a critique: In his 1955 book *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin blasted Bigger's portrayal as stereotypical and unsympathetic.

Del Barco, Mandalit, "'Native Son' Is Reborn, In 'Still Kind Of The Same America'," *NPR.org*, April 3, 2019

Rashid Johnson directs Ashton Sanders and Nick Robinson on set. Thomas Hank Willis/HBO

But *Native Son* remains popular. Over the years, it's been adapted for stage, and also made into a movie twice. Author Richard Wright himself played Bigger Thomas in the 1951 movie. (Here he is doing his screen test.)
The character Bigger Thomas still resonates, says Ashton Sanders.

"It's always been rough for a black man living in America," Sanders says. "You know, there's always pressures that are put on us. You know, I feel like the black man walks around with an anxiety because of the way that America views him, the world views him, you know? And so yeah, it's still very relevant, because this is still kind of the same America."

At his film's Sundance premiere, director Rashid Johnson explains why he thinks Wright's book is timely.

"His story *Native Son* — however divisive — is an incredibly complicated telling of how we're to examine some aspects of the black psyche," Johnson says.

Johnson also examines the black psyche in his artwork, which has been shown at major museums and galleries around the world. Just before he took off to direct *Native Son*, he had an art opening at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles.

It was a packed house and featured live music, poetry, paintings and sculpture. His work explores cultural identity and race. He mixes media: shea butter, potted plants, stacks of books, vinyl records.

Visitor Kidogo Kennedy pondered one of Johnson's recurring images, a square, black skull scribbled with big, swirly eyes.

"It reminds me: This is Bigger," she says. "That's who I'm looking at when I look at these grimaces and eyes that are bulging. I think of him, I think of *Native Son*, I think of Bigger."

A few weeks later, Johnson was on location in Cleveland, Ohio shooting *Native Son*. Before the cameras rolled on one scene, he spray-painted a similar skull image on a brick wall — one iteration of the characters he calls Anxious Men.

"I just kind of put it in the background," he says. "I think this film has quite a bit of moments of anxiety, and alludes to the idea of anxiety and how it functions in our characters, as well as in society as a whole."

On the wall of an alley for another scene, Johnson spray-painted the word "Run" — another theme he uses in his artwork.

"The idea of escape has been thematically a big part of my practice," he says. "And so it also lives in this film, as far as how Bigger is negotiating with what he's done. And the idea of running and escape I think are also strong themes that live in this film and in my work simultaneously."

That is, he put a little bit of himself into the film.

"I think it's hard not to," he says.

Johnson's 7-year-old son Julius makes a cameo in one scene. And gallery owner David Kordansky plays a record store owner in the film.

Johnson has made short films before, for commissions at the Guggenheim and the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow. But *Native Son* is his debut as a feature film director.

"This dialogue, this is not easy, this part," he says. He quotes one of Bigger's lines from the screenplay. "Thank God I am not acting in this movie."

Still, Rashid Johnson seems at ease directing the actors — quite the opposite of an anxious man.

Rockett, Darcel, “Chicago’s Rashid Johnson talks blackness, responsibility to Richard Wright in HBO’s ‘Native Son’,”
ChicagoTribune.com, March 26, 2019

Chicago Tribune

Chicago’s Rashid Johnson talks blackness, responsibility to Richard Wright in HBO’s ‘Native Son’

Darcel Rockett | March 26, 2019

Rashid Johnson’s “Native Son” will premiere on HBO April 6. (Eric Vogel)

Bigger Thomas. Richard Wright. The names are synonymous with Chicago. So it’s not unusual that an artist from the area took on “Native Son” as his first feature film debut — a visual artist named Rashid Johnson.

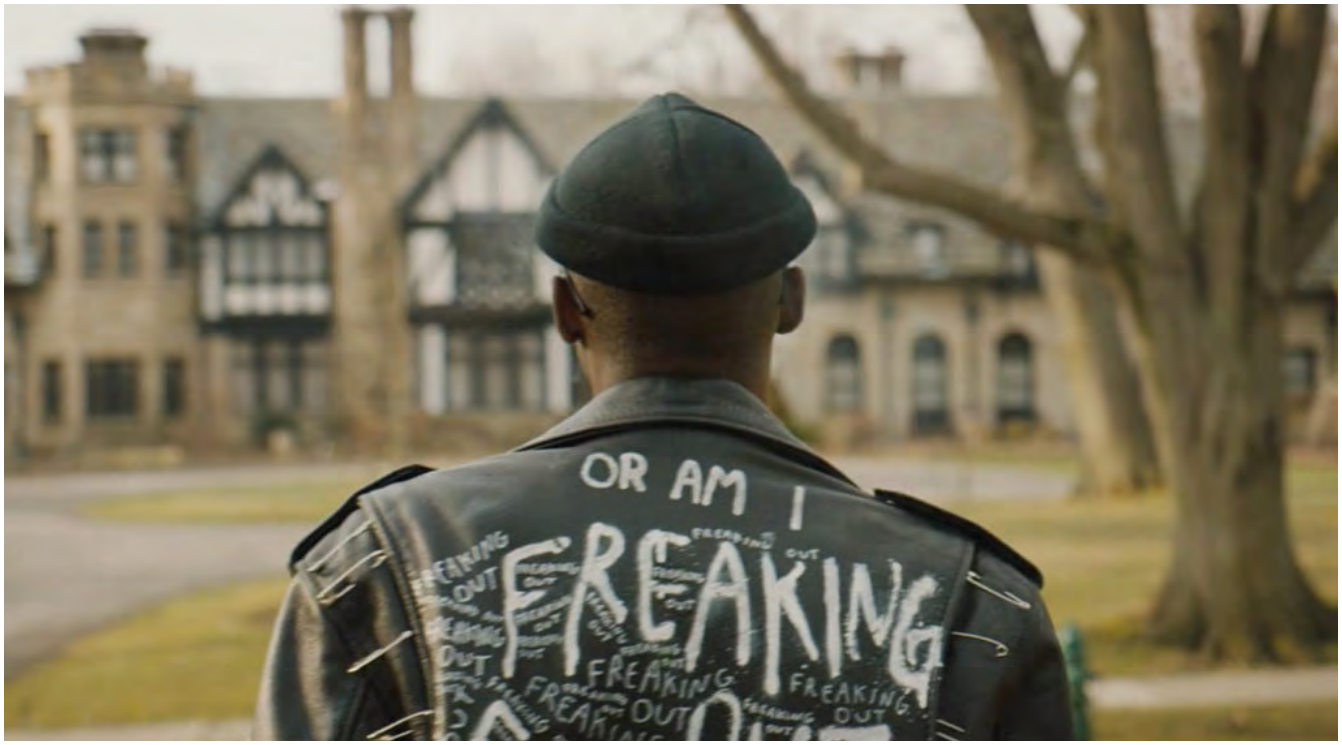
Johnson — a New York City transplant by way of Evanston and Wicker Park — directed the latest reinterpretation of Wright’s masterpiece on race and class. Adaptations on Wright’s 1940 work are numerous; through the years Bigger’s path has been imprinted on the minds of high schoolers and college students alike. Thomas, a South Sider, rapes and murders and dies for his crimes; along the way, the black youth struggles with self-expression. Ashton Sanders (“Moonlight”) plays Bigger Thomas and DePaul and Chicago theater alum KiKi Layne (“If Beale Street Could Talk”) plays Bessie, Bigger’s girlfriend.

Johnson’s take on the character modernizes Thomas, tweaks the paths of other characters in his world and still delivers a commentary on the blackness and the black experience that sadly hasn’t changed much since the middle of the last century.

“My own autobiography and my relationship to the city of Chicago and the history of canonical, black artistic figures in that community brought me to wanting to tell this story,” Johnson said. “You definitely can’t look past the climate that we’re currently experiencing in the U.S. and the way that has effected the view that we all have with issues around class, race, access and agency and opportunity for different folks. Fear and anxiety is at an all-time high. I think this book and this story has so much to do with fear and anxiety and the way that we make decisions when we’re facing existential concerns and our understanding of who we are as opposed to who we may be viewed as. I just thought it was really pressing to start to talk about those ideas.”

We talked with Johnson about his version of Wright’s canonical text. The interview has been condensed and edited.

Rockett, Darcel, “Chicago’s Rashid Johnson talks blackness, responsibility to Richard Wright in HBO’s ‘Native Son’,” *ChicagoTribune.com*, March 26, 2019



A young African-American man comes of age in the south side of Chicago.

Q: What does it mean for you as an artist to take on such a classic?

A: Honestly, it’s a lot of responsibility. But you have to be in some ways aware of that responsibility, then at the same time have a willingness to battle against letting that handicap your vision. Richard Wright is an enormous figure — enormously important to the black literary canon as a whole. In a lot of ways, both literary and visual artists are born of some of the doors that Richard Wright and Wright’s Bigger opened.

Q: Can you expound on the themes of blackness in the film?

A: This story begins to explore what is not often seen in stories that we get to experience as far as narrative film is concerned. The story of a young, black male who doesn’t necessarily fit what people would imagine a stereotypical case. This character is a little bit different, has his own sense of style, own sense of self — it’s really conjuring different notions of blackness. Although most black folks are deeply aware of characters like the Bigger I present, I think there are a lot of folks who are going to have this as an introduction to a black character they are unfamiliar with and I think it’s an exciting opportunity to bring a character to life that film has not necessarily embraced multiple times.

Q: Bigger is confronted with his blackness a number of times and his not wanting to be the stereotypical “black man.” Tell us more.

A: I understand that character quite well. I think a lot of us do. I think there are very few people who fit into the cage that has sometimes been allotted for black characters to live in. We’re not a monolith; we’re a complicated group of folks. And I thought this character as a protagonist was an opportunity to talk about that agency, that complexity, that bit of difference that lives amongst us and in us collectively. Bigger really fights to get past some of those kind of stereotypical positions, but in the end, the systemic kind of cloud just follows him and finds him unable to escape.

Q: How important is it that we keep hearing Bigger’s story, that it keeps being told?

RJ: I think so many of our stories is so important to re-explore or re-examine or retell. When you’re thinking about characters like Richard Wright and people who Wright affected were significant, then you can never tell this story too many times.

Tauer, Kristen, “Rashid Johnson Reimagines ‘Native Son’,” *WWD.com*, March 22, 2019

WWD

Rashid Johnson Reimagines ‘Native Son’

The director turned to Richard Wright’s classic novel for his first feature film, which stars Ashton Sanders.

By Kristen Tauer | March 22, 2019

Rashid Johnson

Rashid Johnson has been thinking lately about microphones.

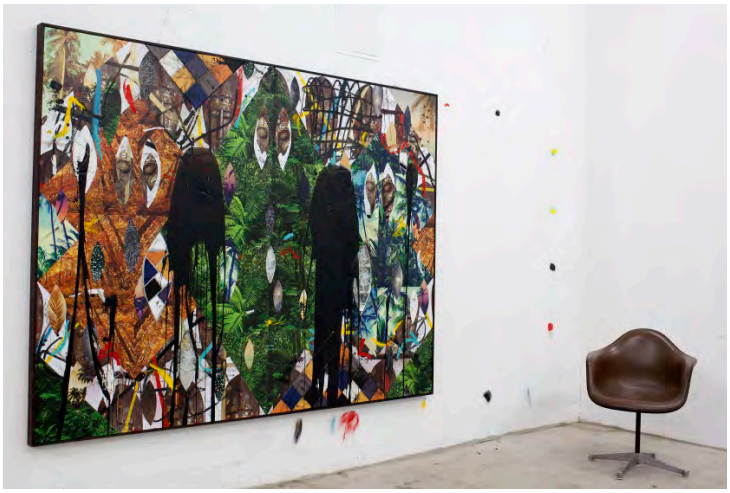
“In the current state that we’re living in, people have so much enthusiasm to have their voices more roundly and loudly heard,” the artist explains from his industrial studio in Bushwick on a recent afternoon. He was describing the motivation for several new works and works-in-progress on the wall for an upcoming show. The mixed-media pieces have built-in speakers, which he plans to utilize to create unconventional outlets for amplification, inviting poets and speakers into the art gallery environment. Touching upon the symbolism of a microphone, Johnson brings up the woman’s suffrage movement, Martin Luther King Jr.’s march in Washington, the fact that hip-hop is the only musical genre in which the lyricist directly mentions the mic.

“This opportunity to amplify one’s voice, the agency that comes as a result of it, is such an incredible historical signifier,” he adds.

Amplifying one’s voice can take many different forms. The 42-year-old contemporary artist, who has established himself in the art world through his conceptual works, turned to narrative film as the loudest vehicle for his latest message, a new cinematic adaptation of Richard Wright’s novel “Native Son” set in modern-day Chicago. The film, which stars young-but-soaring actors Ashton Sanders and Kiki Layne, premiered at Sundance in January and was acquired by HBO ahead of the festival for an April 6 release.

“There were several people in tears, several people who were quite emotional; you could see the energy that they received from some of the ideas in the film, it triggered things in them,” says Johnson, reflecting on reaction to the film in Park City, Utah. Reflecting on the current social climate ultimately influenced Johnson’s interest in revisiting Wright’s seminal 1940 novel, which was adapted onscreen in 1951 and 1986. Recognizing at the outset that adding to that existing canon of work would add baggage to the project, Johnson notes that this was in fact a motivating factor. The artist was interested in engaging with audience preconceptions, both in terms of the story and what they expect from an onscreen black male protagonist.

“It just always sat with me as such a complicated story,” says Johnson of the novel and its antihero, Bigger. “It was during the Obama administration that I thought to myself, this is a really interesting time to explore a character that is more problematic and that has a different kind of lens to which we can view him. Because during the Obama administration, in particular, I think it became unimpeachable that there are black characters who are quite exceptional. And it became less the responsibility of the black artist to punctuate the concerns of black exceptionalism, and it became more an opportunity for us to speak to the different complexities within the experience of the black protagonist. Bigger was, for me, born there.”



Artwork

Johnson credits his mother for introducing him to the book as a teenager. She prefaced the introduction by adding that she found the book problematic and at points troubling. “So that piqued my interest right away,” Johnson says. “In

A still from the film.

my mind, imperfections and the flaws and the pimples on things that make them challenging and harder to read are the things that make them worth engaging with.”

The new film, written by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and screenwriter Suzan-Lori Parks, deviates from the novel in both structure and set-up. Even the seemingly small changes and tweaks in the character’s environment and personality affect the story in major ways. Nonetheless, Bigger’s ultimate fate remains the same. “One of the criticisms of the book by writers and thinkers after Wright’s initial delivery of the book into the world was that Bigger was a character who lacked agency, or the opportunity to dictate his own path,” says Johnson. “In 2019, although we’re facing incredible obstacles, we are still living in a world where we have begun to understand that all of these groups still have a certain agency and opportunity to at least begin to protect themselves, build narratives, think through and explore complicated themes and ideas and concerns from a position of agency.”

Using that as a launching pad, perhaps most notable of all is their choice to elevate Bigger’s economic background. “Some of the things Bigger was going to be facing around race and class were best explored if he had a sense of opportunity to some degree, and that opportunity again would be the thing that could save him,” Johnson says. “The psychological space that he inhabits and the circumstances that he is then exposed to, then puts him back into a position of, to some degree, pragmatically being fated.”

A connection to Chicago permeates much of the project. Like Bigger, Johnson grew up in Chicago, where he also attended art school before moving to New York at 25. Both of his leads, Sanders and Layne, studied acting at DePaul University; both also had their breakout roles in films directed by Barry Jenkins. “As we were developing who this character would be and how he would understand Bigger, Ashton’s face just kept popping up to me,” says Johnson, describing the 23-year-old actor as his only choice for the role. Opting to present an alternative view of black male masculinity, Sanders’ lanky frame aided in presenting Bigger as a character who’s thin but strong, with a fragility that challenges the viewers’ expectations.

“[Bigger] loves punk, he loves Beethoven, he’s engaged, he’s dynamic, and he’s strong,” says Johnson. “But it’s not just his physical presence that gives us a sense of that strength; it’s his intellectual engagement, his cultural sensitivity, and his sense of self.”

One very visual totem of that strength was aided through costume. Throughout the film, Bigger dons a black leather jacket with messages scrawled on it. “It’s a shield that expresses that he has a way that he sees the world and that he’s willing to allow you to see that directly on his body.” he says. “I think fashion often allows us to say something about ourselves prior to even opening our own mouths.”

With the film’s release on the horizon, Johnson is looking toward a slate of upcoming international shows. In April, he plans to direct a balletic video art piece in Aspen. While another feature film isn’t currently in the works, Johnson notes that he’s not closing the door on the possibility down the line. “Right now in the world that we’re living in, storytelling and different kinds of voices and different ways of telling stories is just enormously important,” he adds. “It’s more important than I ever thought it was.” It certainly allows him a large platform to tell stories to a wider, more diverse demographic, over a longer period of time. “It’s really rare to own that much of another person’s time, and it’s quite a responsibility, in all honesty, to beg that much time from someone,” he agrees. “And within that time [you want to] give them something that is rewarding. You want it to be educational but not didactic, you want to be thoughtful, you want it to be engaging,” he continues. “And most of all, you want them to want to do it again with you.”

Whitehead, Anna Martine, “Rashid Johnson’s Directorial Debut, ‘Native Son’,” *Frieze.com,* March 15, 2019

frieze

Rashid Johnson’s Directorial Debut, ‘Native Son’

Why has the artist chosen to adapt a novel that has been criticized for its portrayal of Black characters?

By Anna Martine Whitehead | March 15, 2019

Rashid Johnson, *Native Son,* 2019, film still. Courtesy: HBO/Matthew Libatique

This spring, the visual artist Rashid Johnson will make his directorial debut with a film adaptation of Richard Wright’s 1940 classic novel *Native Son*. This represents a departure for Johnson. He is celebrated as an artist with an expansive conceptual and material breadth yet has never worked in narrative cinema. Successful as a photographer, printmaker, painter, sculptor and installation artist, yellow shea butter and black soap are Johnson’s calling cards: materials immediately recognizable to many people of African descent. You can buy them in plastic carry-out tubs at corner stores in Black neighbourhoods for US$5 a pound and stow them behind the bathroom mirror. Johnson puts them everywhere: he makes busts and paintings of them, covers tiles with melted blackness, or splatters the yellow butter oozing across a wood panel. The items – which, he claims are, on some level, about ‘cleansing’ – have become so important to Johnson that they dictate his palette, which has been until recently remarkably consistent: black and yellow, black and yellow.

For *Native Son*, Johnson teamed up with the Pulitzer Prize-winning screenwriter Suzan-Lori Parks. The subtly brilliant Ashton Sanders, who starred in *Moonlight* (2016) plays the anti-hero Bigger Thomas, with Sanaa Lathan as his mother, Trudy Thomas. It is an undeniably talented cast and crew, but *Native Son* is not an easy text to work with. Although it almost immediately sealed Wright’s fate as canonical in American letters, on its release the novel was criticized for its portrayal of Black characters. In particular, Bigger is a young man filled with hate who fights with his friends, curses his mother, rapes his girlfriend and murders both her and his boss’s daughter. Throughout the book readers are reminded that Bigger’s aggression stems from the absence of a future he must constantly face, an absence created by white supremacy. ‘He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness he would either kill himself or someone else.’ Perhaps anticipating the backlash to come, Wright announced within two weeks of the book’s publication: ‘I don’t know if *Native Son* is a good book or a bad book… and I really don’t care.’

To be sure, Johnson, Parks and Sanders have made Bigger infinitely more likeable, focused and worldly. Whereas in Wright’s version Bigger often festers in his own ignorance, in the film (set in the present day) he reads Paul Beatty, Ralph Ellison and Claudia Rankine. He listens to the music of Bad Brains and Death (two all-Black punk bands from former chocolate cities) – but also Beethoven, suggesting an alterity that he is actively interested in investigating. Bigger’s girl Bessie (played by Kiki Lane) is more fleshed out, and her fate far less determined than in the novel. The white folks are more developed, too – Jan (played by Nick Robinson) is less innocent in Johnson’s version and Mary’s (Margaret Qualley) interactions with Bigger have a complexity absent in the novel.

Whitehead, Anna Martine, “Rashid Johnson’s Directorial Debut, ‘Native Son’,” *Frieze.com,* March 15, 2019

Rashid Johnson, Native Son, 2019. Courtesy: HBO; photograph: Shaniqwa Jarvis

But the question remains, why would Johnson and Parks choose to remake this story in the first place? Early in his career Johnson had a solo show titled ‘Sharpening My Oyster Knife’ at the Kunstmuseum Magdeburg in Germany. The title was drawn from Zora Neale Hurston’s essay ‘How It Feels to Be Colored Me’ (1928): ‘I am not tragically colored … No, I do not weep at the world – I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.’ In an article published in *The New York Times* on 24 February 2015, the writer Ayana Mathis discussed Wright’s novel and observed: ‘I don’t imagine many black people would have embraced such a grotesque portrait of themselves.’ How do we trace Johnson’s journey from sharpening oyster knives to grotesque self-portraits? After all, we are in the era of Jordan Peele (*Get Out*, 2017 and *Us*, 2019), and Oscar-nominated James Baldwin adaptations (*If Beale Street Could Talk*, 2018) and *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016), the seven-minute psychic disturbance by Arthur Jafa which has become a global tear-inducing sensation. How are we to locate 2019’s *Native Son* within this filmic landscape?

When considering where we are as a people – Black people, American people, the people of late capitalism, surveillance capitalism, whatever – I often reflect on E.J. Hill’s installation of a high school running track, *Excellentia, Mollitia, Victoria* (2018) last summer at ‘Made in L.A.’ at the Hammer Museum. At the centre of the work was a podium *Altar (for victors past, present, and future)* (2018). Hill stood on it for three months, eight hours a day. He did not relieve himself, did not sit down, did not collapse. The longer you stood in front of him, the more you realized that he could only carry out such a performance by traveling deep inside himself. *Altar* was in many ways an activation of the other side of Peele’s ‘sunken place’ – like watching a man travel into a dark interiority not by hypnosis but by his own volition, in search of safety and sustainability. Hill’s performance was undeniably vulnerable and yet utterly impenetrable and when I think of blackness I often think of *Altar*.

Thinking of blackness as a deeply complex thing whose richness is protected and obscured from the larger white feels like a way into *Native Son*. Every Black character’s inner turmoil is painfully wrought in both Wright’s version and Johnson’s. And it’s worth noting where Parks stays sometimes uncomfortably true to the original text. Throughout Wright’s novel Mrs. Dalton’s blindness stands in for un-sight – a refusal to see the truth of race and class. Parks keeps that anachronism, despite the fact that it’s not generally acceptable to use blindness as a metaphor for ignorance in 2019. Perhaps she felt that one of *Native Son’s* most lasting marks is that it revealed what to white people had seemed perpetually oblique: namely, blackness. Perhaps she and Johnson felt that work is still necessary even in the era of Peele’s horror films and Baldwin tributes.

Rashid Johnson, *Native Son*, 2019. Courtesy: HBO; photograph: Shaniqwa Jarvis

Baldwin drew a damning line between *Native Son* and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852): ‘This makes material for a pamphlet but is hardly enough for a novel’ he wrote in his essay ‘Everybody’s Protest Novel’ in the *Partisan Review*, 16 June 1949. Watching Johnson’s film, I kept wondering how different it might be if it were transposed into a medium the artist is more familiar with. I imagined a series of still images or installations: of the small dining room where the family’s breakfast is interrupted by a giant rat; or the two Black boys walking in front of the big screen at theatre; the hair salon where the girlfriend works and where we see Bigger escape coolly out the back. The film is full of images of beautiful struggle, blackness and its tensions.

In the film’s details a journey through the last century of struggle through creative expression both normalizes that creativity and points to its di-

Rashid Johnson, *Native Son*, 2019, film still. Courtesy: HBO/Matthew Libatique

versity: Rachael Romero’s anti-apartheid woodcut on the wall of the mother’s room; works by Glenn Ligon and Rashid Johnson in Mr. Dalton’s office; Amy Sherald paintings in the Daltons’s sitting room. The film opens with Bigger placing his pistol on top of a school book, which in turn is on top of a copy of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) on his bed, just before a closeup of his bejewelled chocolate-brown hands slathering yellow shea butter. Through these brief but salient pinpoints in racialized art history, Johnson locates a radical creative legacy that primarily resides in domestic spaces.

One of Parks’s much needed enhancements to the original text is to more fully realize the female characters. But Parks also brings her history of writing from a complex Black woman’s standpoint to her characterization of Bigger. In the hands of Parks and Johnson, Bigger may even be a queer figure, in Cathy Cohen’s left-politicized meaning of the term. In her 1997 essay ‘Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare-Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?’ Cohen contends that the politicization of queer identity had not properly accounted for the multi-marginalized non-queer identified person and did not take into consideration the ways queer marginality is always relational. Cohen argues for an expansion of a queer politic which aligns itself with a ‘marginal relationship to dominant power’– a necessarily destabilizing presence in the face of power.

At times – for example, when his sense of his ‘authentic’ Black masculinity is questioned by friends at the pool hall – Bigger easily steps into the archetype of Bold and Angry Young Black Man. This is the Bigger audiences will remember from Wright’s novel: frightened, enraged. At other moments – softer moments of solitude, as when he reclines in his room listening to cassettes, surrounded by literature and poetry – Bigger’s performative-self stretches into further reaching galaxies where race, class and gender are in a trio with improvisational solos, silences, harmonies and discords. For example, when Bigger sits to wait for Mr. Dalton, alone for the first time in a wealthy white man’s home, the first image he faces is Glenn Ligon’s *Malcolm X (version 1) #1* (2000). Ligon, a queer Black artist whose work challenges normalized ‘Black’ iconography, consistently evades its own categorization by jumping form and style. Why place Bigger face to face with the clownish Malcolm X – in Mr. Dalton’s home no less?

Thinking of Bigger this way – as a dynamic dialogue between the multiple standpoints he occupies, circling around and through Black Manhood and its failures – may help us re-imagine Wright’s *Native Son* as a text with queer implications: intersectional, politicized, destabilizing. In many ways, Wright’s work made career/lives such as Baldwin’s and even Johnson’s possible: it revealed normalized ‘Black Manhood’ *as* failure, as irrevocably bothered by and bothering hegemony. In her contemporary consideration of Baldwin’s response to Wright for the *New York Times*, Ayana Mathis said that: ‘Whether the book […] fails as a work of literature is a question unworthy of a groundbreaking work that continues to inspire debate 75 years after its publication.’ We might watch Johnson’s attempt to revive the story with the same consideration – for its flaws, there’s something indelible in this story, something that continues to disturb.

"The Most Influential Living African-American Artists," *Artsy.net*, February 25, 2019

The Most Influential Living African-American Artists

February 25, 2019

In 1926, the historian Carter G. Woodson instituted Negro History Week. The second-ever African-American recipient of a Ph.D. from Harvard (after W.E.B. DuBois), Woodson wanted to acknowledge the vibrant cultural achievements of African-American individuals that were rippling through the country. At the time, Harlem was brimming with poets such as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, while Louis Armstrong and Fats Waller were developing Chicago's jazz scene. In 1976, President Gerald Ford officially transformed Woodson's initiative into the month-long celebration we honor to this day: Black History Month. While it's impossible to capture the full impact of black artists on art history, we asked prominent art historians and curators to reflect on 20 living African-American artists who are making a mark on painting, photography, performance, and sculpture.

Rashid Johnson

B. 1977, Chicago. Lives and works in New York.

Rashid Johnson, *Antoine's Organ*, 2016. Photo by Martin Parsekian. Courtesy of the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and David Kordansky Gallery.

From Erin Dziedzic, Director of Curatorial Affairs, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art:

Rashid Johnson's works inspire slowly unfolding viewer experiences and express personal and complex histories through objects and mark-making, something that was palpable in his 2017 exhibition "Rashid Johnson: Hail We Now Sing Joy" at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. *Antoine's Organ* (2016), for example, is a massive sculpture with a network of live potted plants, books, lights, videos, Persian rugs, and mounds of shea butter built up around an upright piano at its core. Its open, modernist, gridlike framework provides accessibility, while its contents imply attention, responsibility, and care.

Johnson's diasporic matrix evokes ideas about time and history. It's tactile and textural, deeply personal, and profoundly relevant. The work expands a network of elements related to African and African-American identity and history, inspiring an opportunity to contemplate the past in the present moment. Johnson's art inspires slow, measured reflections from the audience. This aspect of his oeuvre has always resonated with me, one of many important forces offered up in his penetrating body of work—which, among other major themes, addresses art history, literature, cultural identities, and materiality.

Hessler, Stefanie “Rashid Johnson’s ‘Monument’,” *Art-Agenda.com,* February 12, 2019

ART AGENDA

Rashid Johnson’s “Monument”

Stephanie Hessler | February 12, 2019

View of Rashid Johnson’s “Monument” at the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond

Driving along Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia, one traverses the former Confederate capital from the wealthy West End to the central Fan district near the newly opened Virginia Commonwealth University’s Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA). Originally conceived in 1890 as tree-lined home to the memorial for Robert E. Lee, the commander of the Confederate States Army during the American Civil War and slave owner, the boulevard has since seen additions of other massive, plinth-mounted statues, including Confederate general Stonewall Jackson, Confederate president Jefferson Davis, and, since 1996, also incongruously and controversially African American tennis star Arthur Ashe. Half a mile from the Lee memorial, on the top floor of the ICA, Rashid Johnson’s exhibition “Monument” confronts the state of monuments, questioning collective consciousness and whose stories are granted visibility. The show couldn’t be more timely, as the American South is debating the legacy and future of its Confederate monuments, many of which were erected long after the end of the Civil War and well into the twentieth century.

Johnson’s exhibition consists of the new work Monument (2018), a temple-like structure made from a steel shelving system coalescing references to Minimalism, like Sol LeWitt’s sculptures, and mass-produced IKEA furniture. The installation is clad with white neon tubes, exotic plants in hand-crafted ceramic pots, and busts sculpted from shea butter. Stacked on the shelves are multiple books, including comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory’s Write Me In! (1968), recounting his presidential campaign which gained him a mention on Richard Nixon’s list of political opponents; Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick (1851), a reminder of America’s racial unconscious; and James Baldwin’s The Fire Next Time (1963), tackling race relations and religion, next to The Man Who Talks With Flowers (1939), Glenn Clark’s biography of George Washington Carver, an agriculturalist born into slavery who revolutionized farming in the American South through his research into crop rotation as an alternative to cotton monoculture. Also on the shelves are old color televisions screening videos such as Black Yoga (2010), depicting a man doing yoga outdoors on a woven rug, and Samuel in Space (2013), in which a dancer performs movements from ballet and martial arts in a vast field at sunrise. Both highlight the black male body as a site of projections for preconceptions of identity.

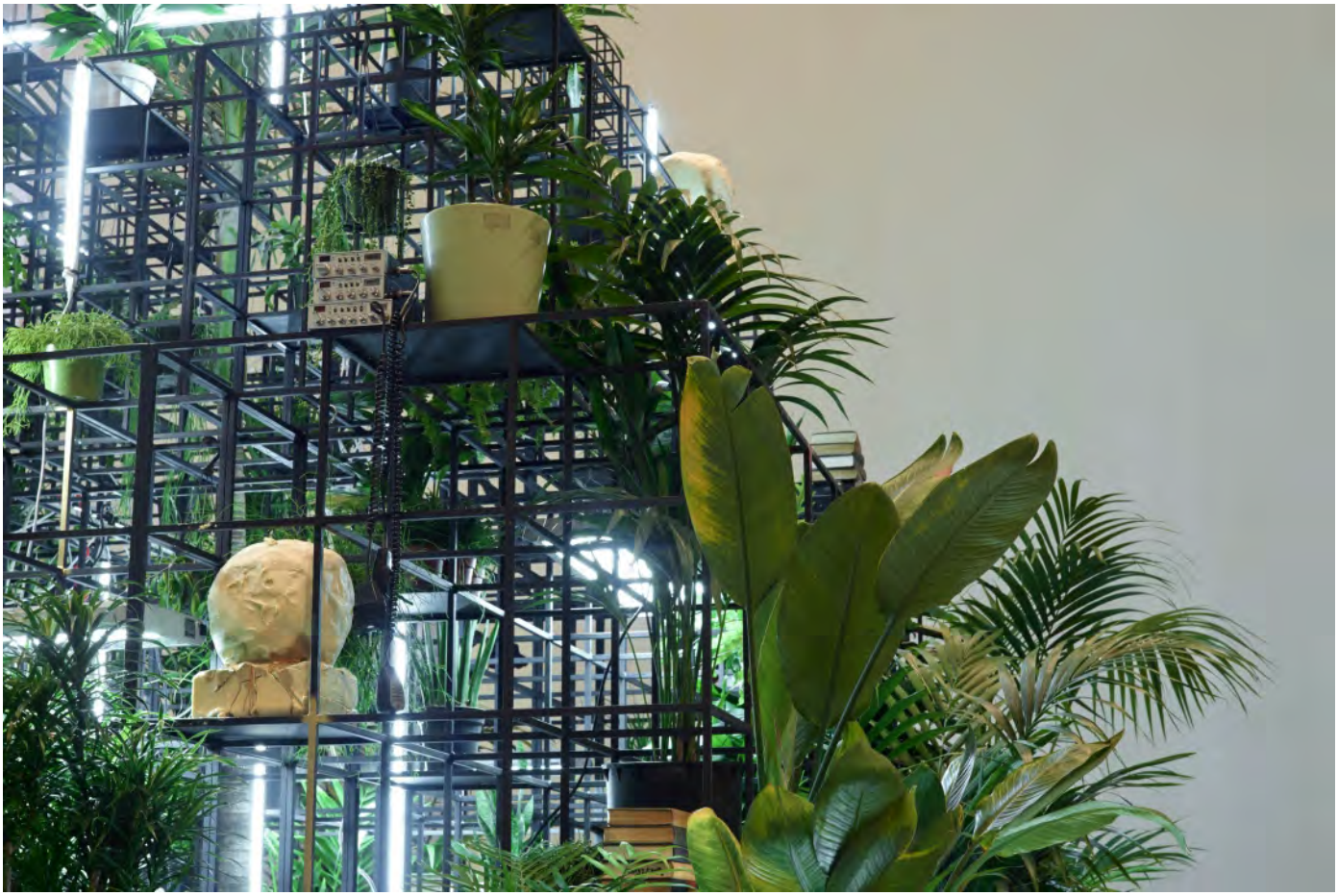
Beyond its nod to Minimalism’s emphasis on “objective” spatial presence, Monument also alludes to forms of labor: capitalism’s alienated serial manufacture of mass furniture, and enslaved work on plantations, upon which the wealth of the country is founded, yet whose monuments honor its exploiters, not its victims. Challenging the regularity of mass production and the alleged neutrality of Minimalism, as well as affiliated tropes of purity and naturalized order enshrined in the political, economic, and legal systems, the plants bespeak their migratory paths, pointing to the travel of people, both voluntary and forced, as well as the miscegenation of cultures. While plants can be out of place, or forced into a taxonomic order, they also require commitment and care. So do our multiple histories, the exhibition seems to imply.

An hour’s drive from Richmond, a much-publicized white supremacist rally opposing the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee took place in Charlottesville in 2017. It is just another example of the difficult, violent battles over the abolition of Confederate monuments. Considering the imbalance between those who are heard and those who remain muted, writing alternative histories is crucial. We cannot content ourselves with merely integrating these narratives, but must ask how histories are construed and what blind spots they produce. The books on display in the installation speak of African American experiences, but are exclusively written by male authors. Johnson’s seizing of Minimalism’s monolithic purity, while highlighting biased history’s stronghold over the collective conscious, produces a critical disposition: the exhibition suggests that beyond toppling monuments, the rules of visibility themselves must change. As Audre Lorde reminds us, the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.

"Provocations: Rashid Johnson and Hedges, Edges, Dirt Explore Nativism, and Expressions of Power,"
Hyperallergic.com, October 19, 2018

HYPERALLERGIC

Provocations: Rashid Johnson and *Hedges, Edges, Dirt* Explore Nativism, and Expressions of Power



Rashid Johnson, *Plateaus* (detail) (2014). Installation view, Louis Vuitton Foundation, Paris, France. Photo by Marc Domage.

The newly opened Institute for Contemporary Art in Richmond, Virginia, presents two exhibitions featuring leading international contemporary artists. *Provocations: Rashid Johnson* and *Hedges, Edges, Dirt* explore socially and culturally specific issues in nuanced ways.

Provocations: Rashid Johnson
Now through July 7

To launch the ICA's annual commission series Provocations, Rashid Johnson has created "Monument," a large-scale work that responds to the soaring expanse of the ICA's top-floor space. Johnson's pyramid-like tower is activated by a weekly performance by musicians, poets, dj's, yogis and others. Continuing motifs from recent projects, Johnson has filled the steel structure with a selection of plants, shea butter sculptures, books, textiles and video. "Monument" is his first project designed to spark collaboration with other artists, and his first major solo project in the American South.

Komp, Catherine, “ICA’s New Sensory Exhibitions Explore Bodies, Borders And Boundaries,” *IdeaStations.org,* October 17, 2018

ICA’s New Sensory Exhibitions Explore Bodies, Borders And Boundaries

By Catherine Komp | October 17, 2018

Rashid Johnson constructed a geometric tower of plants, books and shea butter sculptures for the “Monument” commission at the ICA. The space will be shared by local artists in weekly performances. (Photo: Catherine Komp)

“What does it mean to perceive ourselves and others as native or non-native? As welcome guests or invasive species?” Those questions are explored in one of two new exhibitions that open this week at VCU’s Institute for Contemporary Art. WCVE’s Catherine Komp has more for Virginia Currents.

Transcript:

The smell of the forest leads you into the group exhibition: Hedges, Edges, Dirt. Sixteen Emerald Green Cedar Trees line the entry.

Stephanie Smith: Just wanted to start and give you a moment to breathe in….
Stephanie Smith is the ICA’s Chief Curator

Smith: This is a show that’s not just for looking at, but also for breathing in and for listening to...

The bright color and earthy armona is at first welcoming. But the Iranian-born artist Abbas Akhavan shifts your senses as you realize the tightly packed trees are a wall, a barrier.

Smith: He’s interested particularly in the ways that hedges have been used along with other kinds of gardening tactics, but hedges in particular have been a source of interest for him in the ways that they designate yours and mine, public and private.

Monument by Rashid Johnson. (Photo C. Komp)

Akhavan continues these themes in the next room, where tropical plant leaves of varying hues and textures are woven together on the floor, like a carpet or maybe a raft. There’s no artificial light in the space. The high notes of an untuned wind chime, powered by a small fan, give a sense of the outdoors. The sculpture, a collaboration with Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden, changes as water evaporates from the leaves and they begin to curl and lose color.

Smith: Which extends the interest that I mentioned at the beginning with gardens as sources not only of beauty and aesthetic delight, but also of dominance and control, that mix of hospitality and hostility that we can think about in our relationships with nature and the ways that we sometimes bring them into a kind of domesticated state.

On the second floor, Arizona native Julianne Swartz blends science, sculpture and sound.

Julianne Swartz: This is a group of 18 ceramic and glass objects, they’re vessel instruments, each one is emitting a tone in different configurations.
The sculptures are irregular, round and smooth, almost looking like organs or limbs.

Swartz: Right now you’re hearing a layering of tones but each piece is emitting an individual own tone.

Swartz uses a microphone in each one to read the air mass inside the vessel and find a tone. She then places a speaker inside to amplify the sound.

Swartz: So I record the tones into these vessels through that process with the microphone reading the air mass, but then if I listen to those tones on the computer or on another speaker you can barely hear them. So they need the physical body to have resonance, to have the amplification.

The tones seem to fill your body up or pass right through you.

Swartz: I find myself being able to sit in here and listen to them for a long time. They don’t have content, it’s more vibration, so you can get into the vibration of the tones and just be with it.

Hedges, Edges, Dirt also includes pieces by Brazilian born artist Jonathas de Andrade, Pascale Marthine Tayou, a native of Cameroon, and David Hartt originally from Canada. The ICA’s second exhibition is in the soaring, Cathedral like third floor. Artist Rashid Johnson’s Monument is a geometric tower of tropical plants that rise toward the sky.

Rashid Johnson: There’s a lot of things have been taken into account as far as how this structure was born; one is very much about place and thinking about how it participates in the discourse with the place that it lives. And

Johnson says the shea butter will change color over time. (Photo C. Komp)

in this particular case, thinking about it as a monument--being as that Richmond has so many other monuments that some people cherish and other people feel are quite problematic--was something for me to think about it investigating and kind of entering myself into that conversation and into that local discourse however high or low that fruit hangs.

Many of the planters are hand sculpted and painted by Johnson. In between, are stacks of books by James Baldwin, Paul Beatty and Dick Gregory. Shea butter busts accent the green foliage. Johnson says it’s based on a character in his work called anxious man.

Johnson: We are dealing with and witnessing people experience a tremendous amount of anxiety. And I think that anxiety is a result of societal concerns, of transitions of the time we live in, of the people who govern, etc have made quite a few of us pretty nervous, right? Pretty anxious. And I think sometimes these characters for me are great signifiers to help, almost in a cathartic sense, develop and actually show that anxious character and how they may live. And that dichotomy between that idea of that anxious character and the idea of an incredibly soothing material, being born of a soothing material. So in that sense, it can almost function as a thinly veiled metaphor.

Johnson designed the sculpture so you can walk through it, standing inside and becoming part of it. And it is interactive in other ways too, with the ICA inviting performers and artists to share the space, including the First African Baptist Choir.
Johnson: I really look forward to at this point being a visitor to the work and being a witness and I say witness specifically because witnesses can recall what they see, and viewers we don’t have the same expectation for.

Chief Curator of the ICA Stephanie Smith says the first performance exceeded her expectations.

Smith: It was extraordinary. These voices are stunning, so there’s just the sheer beauty of it. But the thing that’s most powerful to me in this context is the collaboration between an artist who’s come in from another place in order to create this work here with us in Richmond and the voices of our fellow citizens who are just coming together in this beautiful collaboration.

Fronell Weaver: First time I’ve been in here.

Fronell Weaver is a member of the choir.

Fronell Weaver: I think it’s different and I like it and I think it’s open to individual interpretation. I see like a garden, a nice beautiful garden, and it takes me back to the story of the Garden of Eden.

Hernandez, Jasmin, "Aspen Award For Art Recipient Rashid Johnson Talks Film And Collaboration," *CulturedMag.com*, August 7, 2018

CULTURED

ASPEN AWARD FOR ART RECIPIENT RASHID JOHNSON TALKS FILM AND COLLABORATION

By Jasmin Hernandez | August 7, 2018

Amy Phelan, Heidi Zuckerman and Rashid Johnson at the annual Aspen ArtCrush 2018.

Over coffee at the swanky saloon-like Hotel Jerome in Aspen, I speak with the venerated artist and native Chicagoan, Rashid Johnson, the recipient of the 2018 Aspen Award for Art held at this year's ArtCrush. Johnson is genuine and humble about being honored, "Every time it's really rewarding, because I work to build a practice and explore certain concepts and ideas that continue to motivate me. For people to recognize that I've done that and to spend the time to say that they've beared witness, it always means something." Johnson has a near-decade history with the Aspen art community, he has both attended and donated artworks to ArtCrush in the past, and is preparing for a major solo show at the Aspen Art Museum in August of 2019. Heidi Zuckerman, Nancy and Bob Magoon CEO and Director, speaks excitedly about Johnson's ties to Aspen: "because we don't collect objects, we collect artists and ideas, Rashid has been a member of our secret society for a long time. It feels really great to be able to honor someone who has a relationship with the museum."

Throughout his career, Johnson has constructed nuanced and evocative narratives on blackness by incorporating photography, painting, sculpture and installation in his unique practice. Johnson's universe is immersive and visually abundant. Items like black soap and shea butter often appear; handmade ceramic planter pots feature vivid abstract compositions; and mundane objects like colored tiles and crushed mirror shards add a cool dimension to his collages. Literature and performative elements are fundamental as well. In his recent exhibit "The Rainbow Sign," at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, the show's title came from James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time,* which was inspired by lyrics from the spiritual *Mary Don't You Weep*. In the show, neat stacks of Paul Beatty's novel *The Sellout* were thoughtfully embedded in the work *Untitled Microphone Sculpture*, and Johnson invited acclaimed poet and playwright Ntozake Shange to read a poem in concert with performances by musicians Kahil El'Zabar, Alex Harding, Ian Maksin, and Corey Wilkes for the exhibition's opening.

For his upcoming 2019 show at the Aspen Art Museum, the performative element shifts to choreography. Johnson explains, "This one is going to be a collaboration, something around ballet and movement. Right now, there is something really fascinating around black bodies moving in space. What is the agency that one has to move? How does that function on an institutional level, with a poetic connotation, and with the kind of antecedent in history that dance provides from the idea of movement." Zuckerman, who will oversee the exhibit, adds, "He's been talking to some choreographers who have a traditional ballet background, and he's feeding them text that he feels are like the breadcrumbs to his consciousness or his psyche. He's talking about W.E.B. Dubois and a variety of other text sources and he's asking them to think about ballet trough these different source materials. And having them activate rugs that he's going to commission in Mexico with cartography that he's inventing." The Aspen Art Museum will enter a special partnership with the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City, where the video will be shown, and its senior curator Manuela Moscoso will help commission the rug weavers.

We can also expect Johnson's upcoming 2019 film debut of *Native Son*, a creative union with playwright and screenwriter Suzan-Lori Parks based on the seminal Richard Wright novel from the 1940s. The film's cast includes Ashton Sanders (*Moonlight*), Margaret Qualley, Lamar Johnson and Jerrod Hays. Johnson explains: "It's a different kind of protagonist and a contemporary basing of the story that's incredibly complicated, so it's going to be really interesting to see how people respond. To be able to take a story and build from Wright's narrative, and expand into how I think about some of what he would do and say, in the times that we live in, was a huge responsibility that I took very seriously. I hope I make something that's valued in the culture." Yes you will Mr. Johnson, and we will be watching and waiting.

Johnson and Zuckerman in conversation at The Aspen Art Museum, 2018.

Zara, Janelle, “Artist Rashid Johnson Takes a Hike and Wins an Award in Aspen,” *GalerieMagazine.com*, August 7, 2018

Galerie

Artist Rashid Johnson Takes a Hike and Wins an Award in Aspen

2018 Aspen Award for Art winner Rashid Johnson joined collectors

By Janelle Zara | August 7, 2018

Heidi Zuckerman, Rashid Johnson, Amy Phelan, and John Phelan. Photo: © BFA.com / Owen Kolasinksi

If you’re anything like me, a hike at Aspen’s oxygen-bereft, 8,000-foot altitude will leave you short of breath. If you’re anything like Aspen Art Museum director and CEO Heidi Zuckerman, you can effortlessly forge ahead. And if you’ve got anything like the iron lungs of 2018 Aspen Award for Art winner Rashid Johnson, you can speed along easily enough, with time to spare for a casual cigarette break. “I should probably quit,” Johnson told Galerie last week not long after coming down from Aspen Mountain, hardly sounding winded. The brisk, three-hour hike with him and a few close friends of the Aspen Art Museum (including artists Richard Phillips, Tara Lewis, Gabriel Rico, Barnaby Furnas, and Ben Durham, as well as New York architect duo Stonefox) was the early-bird, VIP kickoff to the museum’s summertime fundraising spree of festivities, which culminates annually with the ArtCrush gala. The night of the event, Aspen’s population swells with visiting art word luminaries from around the country: curators and directors from The Hammer, MCA Chicago, the Whitney Museum, and The Bass; gallerists Marianne Boesky, David Kordansky, and Hauser & Wirth senior directors Cristopher Canizares and Graham Steele; and a spate of high-profile collectors. Over the next three days, everyone got a little light-headed—in part because of the altitude, in part because of the copious glasses of wine and champagne being served.

Day one concluded with the wine-pairing feast WineCrush at the home of mega-collectors John and Amy Phelan—he is the co-president of the museum’s board of trustees and she the ArtCrush Chair (as well as a former Dallas Cowboys cheerleader). The party started with champagne and hors d’oeuvres inside the Phelan’s expansive home, where the walls are lined with works by Jenny Holzer and Ellsworth Kelly, and Todd Knopke’s “Closet,” a miniature bookshelf door that opens to a revolving disco ball inside a tiny closet. In the living room, an installation by artist Walead Beshty consisted of a mirrored floor that cracked underfoot when guests walked on it. The theme was Greenhouse Apothecary—”a play on legalization,” Zuckerman clarified—with an accompanying dress code of green, or flora, or clear. The Haas brothers, whose smashing show at Boesky West (Marianne Boesky’s Aspen gallery) was celebrated that week with a donuts-and-coffee reception, did it best: Nikolai wore a pastel green suit with a floral shirt, and Simon was om a transparent PVC raincoat. “Who made your jacket?” an L.A.-based collector asked. The designer shrugged. He had bought it on Etsy. The night concluded with a tented dinner in the backyard, where each place setting was crowned with six wineglasses. Master sommelier Jay Fletcher promised we’d go through at least “two casks” of a rare French vintage. He was not wrong. On Thursday, Johnson, in conversation with Zuckerman, expounded on the solo exhibition of new works he would be opening concurrently at the Aspen Art Museum and Mexico City’s Museo Tamayo next July. During the next year as the museum’s Gabriela and Ramiro Garza Distinguished Artist in Residence, he’ll be integrating choreography in his work and filming dance performances in the landscape across four seasons. “Artists as a whole are deeply affected by place,” Johnson said. The first time he had come to Colorado at age 16, “I opened my eyes in the morning surrounded by these mountains, and it was awe-inspiring.”

And suddenly it was Friday, the finale. Guests rolled up to the ArtCrush tent erected the at Buttermilk ski in various luxury Audis and enormous SUVs, largely dressed in silver clothing, the prevailing answer to the gala’s theme: a Johnson-inspired “Cosmic Utopia,” manifested in Stonefox’s decor as mylar curtains and glowing pyramids. Zuckerman presented Johnson with his award, and over dinner, Sotheby’s auctioneer extraordinaire Oliver Barker led a live auction that peaked with a fierce bidding war over Johnson’s 8-by-10-foot “Untitled Escape Collage” (2018), a work comprising ceramic tiles, mirrors, animal skins, and his signature element, black soap.

The work was valued at $285,000, a price that quickly doubled after an explosion of bids from around the room. When bidding reached $700,000, the crowd marked the moment with gasps. Ultimately, the bidding slowed to a volley of canons between the final two bidders. “I’ll let her borrow it for a weekend,” said L.A.-based venture capitalist Troy Carter, one of the last two bidders vying for the work. “Well, you’ve got to end up with it first,” said Barker. Around the $725,000-mark, the two final bidders crossed the room to give each other a hug. Carter secured the piece with $730,000, and the audience went wild. A small mob surrounded him with an outpouring of pats on the back and congratulations. The museum had surpassed its fundraising goal of $2.5 million that night and spirits were high—everyone felt like a winner.

Oliver Barker auctioning off artworks at the annual ArtCrush gala. Photo: Owen Kolasinksi © BFA.com

Berg, Allison, "Play It Again, Sam," *Hamptons Magazine*, Summer 2018, p. 80

Play It Again, Sam

A PIONEER OF POSTWAR PAINTING, SAM GILLIAM IS ENJOYING HIS FIRST EUROPEAN RETROSPECTIVE. BRIDGEHAMPTON ARTIST RASHID JOHNSON, WHO HAS CURATED FOR THE RENTAL GALLERY AND PARRISH ART MUSEUM RECENTLY, DISCUSSES WRITING AN ESSAY FOR HIS HERO'S EXHIBITION CATALOG.

BY ALLISON BERG

Clockwise from left: "One On" (1970) by Sam Gilliam; Bridgehampton-based abstract artist Rashid Johnson sitting in front of Gilliam's "Helles" (1965); "Swing Sketch" (1968) by Gilliam.

Tell us about your relationship with Sam.
My relationship with Sam's work started in my early 20s. His paintings were in important museum collections but went under-recognized. Several years later, when David Kordansky and I were discussing the current state of abstraction and Sam's role in it, we reached out to him in D.C. I curated his show at David's [gallery] about a year later.

How did you perceive your writing responsibility?
I felt responsible for saying what I see and feel is powerful about Sam's work. I was honest, thoughtful and patient with how I discuss his oeuvre and its importance to art history and the history of blacks working through complicated narratives.

What makes Sam an important part of art history?
Sam is revolutionary in the way he treats the canvas. Removing the canvas from the stretchers is only one aspect. Sam's avant-garde thinking about color, abstraction and impulse explains a time's complexity as well as any representational process. Being an artist who explores politics or ideas doesn't mean you have to sing for your supper. Sometimes, digging into the human condition through gesture and poetry can speak as gloriously as image and content.

Why is 1967 to 1973 foundational for Sam's career?
Those years are fantastic, but you could carve out any five- to seven-year period and my enthusiasm would be the same.

How does this retrospective contribute to Sam's legacy?
Any retrospective intends to provide opportunities for understanding the breadth of an artist's accomplishments. It has been rare for artists of color to have this level of attention, scholarship and financial commitment paid to their work. This show pushes Sam into the canon's reinvestigation. It is exciting to see him embraced in a larger exploration of what has been done and what is important in art history.

The Music of Color: Sam Gilliam, 1964-1973, *Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel, June 9-Sept. 30*

JOHNSON PHOTO BY ERIC VOGEL. ART PHOTOS BY FREDRIK NILSEN. COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES, CA

Tuchman, Phyllis, "'A Whole Meal': Rashid Johnson on His Polyvalent Practice, From Early Photography to Forthcoming Feature Film," *ArtNews.com*, June 25, 2018

ARTNEWS

'A Whole Meal': Rashid Johnson on His Polyvalent Practice, From Early Photography to Forthcoming Feature Film

Phyllis Tuchman | June 25, 2018

Installation view of "Rashid Johnson: The Rainbow Sign," April 7–May 19, 2018, at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles. FREDRIK NILSEN/COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES, CA

Mention artist Rashid Johnson's name and many compelling images come to mind. A signature style does not. That's one of the most exciting aspects of his 18-year career. At 41, Johnson has executed a lot of highly inventive, original series in a variety of media. Since garnering attention in 2001 with black-and-white photographs included in a group show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the African-American artist has gone on to paint, make sculpture, do drawings, create collages, site installations, throw pots, piece together mosaics, shoot videos, stage a play in a bathhouse for Performa 13, and even direct a Hollywood movie that's currently in post-production.

Characterizing Johnson's practice is complicated further by the way this charismatic, multi-talented artist installs his solo shows, putting different bodies of work in separate spaces. He's been doing this for a while now. During a conversation with him in his studio in Bushwick, Brooklyn recently, he compared this process to serving "a whole meal." As he sees it, each display area represents a different course. "You deal with the autonomy of one group of works," he said, "and then you go into the next space." That's how he presented his art in 2016 at Hauser & Wirth in New York and this spring at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles.

There is, to be sure, a method to how Johnson organizes his exhibitions, keeping various categories—or what one might deem landscapes, still lifes, or portraits—separate. Take the case of his Hauser & Worth exhibition. A series of paintings comprised of black faces with spirals for eyes and slash marks for mouths that Johnson made with black soap and wax on white ceramic tiles and titled "Untitled Anxious Audience" ringed a large, rectangular room. These men could have been sports or rock music fans if not for their apprehensive

Tuchman, Phyllis, "'A Whole Meal': Rashid Johnson on His Polyvalent Practice, From Early Photography to Forthcoming Feature Film," *ArtNews.com*, June 25, 2018

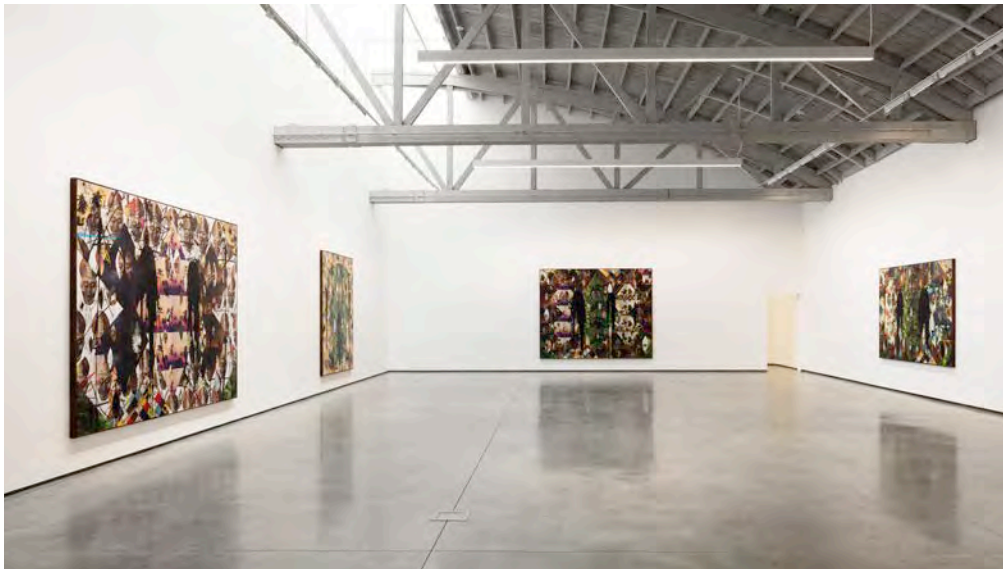
Installation view of "Rashid Johnson: The Rainbow Sign," April 7–May 19, 2018, at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles. FREDRIK NILSEN/COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES, CA

expressions, which suggested that they were witnessing events currently traumatizing the country. In another gallery, there was a massive metal structure reminiscent of those found in stores like Home Depot and Costco. On its shelves, the artist placed cacti and leafy plants in ceramic vessels he himself threw and decorated along with grow lights to keep the lush vegetation alive, plus a host of other elements, including a piano on which a performer played the artist's own compositions several times a week. In this instance, one section of Hauser & Wirth featured portraits; another, a vast landscape.

At Kordansky, Johnson hung on the walls of a sizable space what he termed "Untitled Microphone Sculptures." A cross between three-dimensional painting and relief sculpture, these were Combine-like works worthy of Robert Rauschenberg. Besides hidden speakers, there were planes slathered with shea butter, irregularly shaped colored tiles with updated "Anxious Men," shelves with stacked books (James Baldwin's Fire Next Time, Claudia Rankine's Citizen, and Paul Beatty's The Sellout, among others), and plants in pots thrown by the artist. On the floor in the middle of this light-filled, high-ceilinged gallery were 30 of what Johnson terms "Ugly Pots," presented on a Persian rug, paying homage to David Hammons's Bliz–aard Ball Sale (1983). To my eye, these were all contemporary still lifes.

A smaller room at Kordansky featured the latest ingenious, rainbow-hued, wide-eyed "Anxious Men." Mosaic-like, these panels were created from irregularly shaped tiles and broken mirrors as well as black spray enamel, oil stick, black soap, and wax. Nearby, a branded walnut table that might have existed as flooring in another situation held a mass of yellow shea butter shapes that were not yet fully formed sculptures. In some ways, they called to mind chicks just emerging from broken eggshells. This gallery's contents? Yet another manifestation of portraiture.

Though he works with recognizable images, Johnson thinks of himself as an abstract artist. To some extent, he views this designation as "an opportunity for shorthand." When he's asked what kind of art he makes by people unfamiliar with his practice—for example, by other parents at his son's school—he doesn't quite know how to respond. "When they ask what I do," he told



Installation view of "Rashid Johnson: The Rainbow Sign," April 7–May 19, 2018, at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles. FREDRIK NILSEN/COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES, CA

Tuchman, Phyllis, "'A Whole Meal': Rashid Johnson on His Polyvalent Practice, From Early Photography to Forthcoming Feature Film," *ArtNews.com*, June 25, 2018

Installation view of "Rashid Johnson: Fly Away," September 8–October 22, 2016, at Hauser & Wirth in New York. MARTIN PARSEKAIN/©THE ARTIST/COURTESY HAUSER & WIRTH

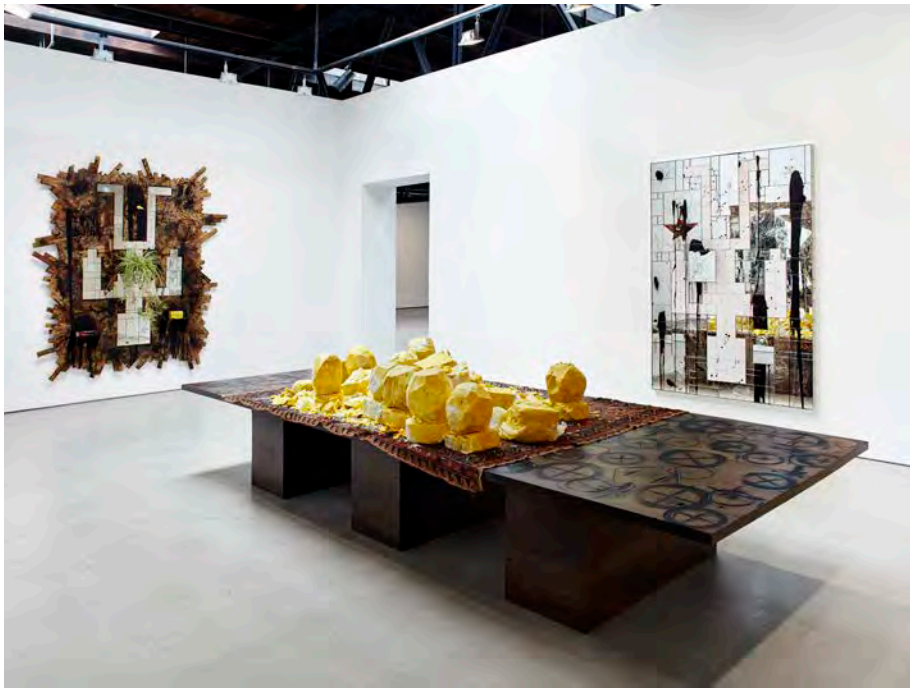
me, "I say, All kinds. And then they'll say, What kinds? So, I start talking about materials."
Johnson's gift for working with all sorts of materials sets him apart from many of his colleagues and contemporaries. He has used and/or uses bathroom tiles, broken mirrors, wallpaper, travel photographs, Persian rugs, plants, black soap, shea butter, oyster shells, animal skins, books, LP records, red oak flooring, metal shelves, radios, and DVD players.

His interest in making things is rooted, to some extent, in his early experience as a photographer. That's what he studied to be at Columbia College Chicago in 2000, when all manner of prints were sweeping the art galleries. Or, as he puts it, "Picture makers were at the cutting edge." "My intellectual curiosity took me there," he explained. "I was interested in being in a critical space and a discourse with the potential for what art-making could be."

As Johnson sees it, "photography gave me a tool to represent the world I was living in." Besides Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank, and Danny Lyon, all of whose works he studied in the library the summer before he began his freshman year, he also admired the Germans based in Düsseldorf who were then art-world favorites, as well as the African-American photographers Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems.

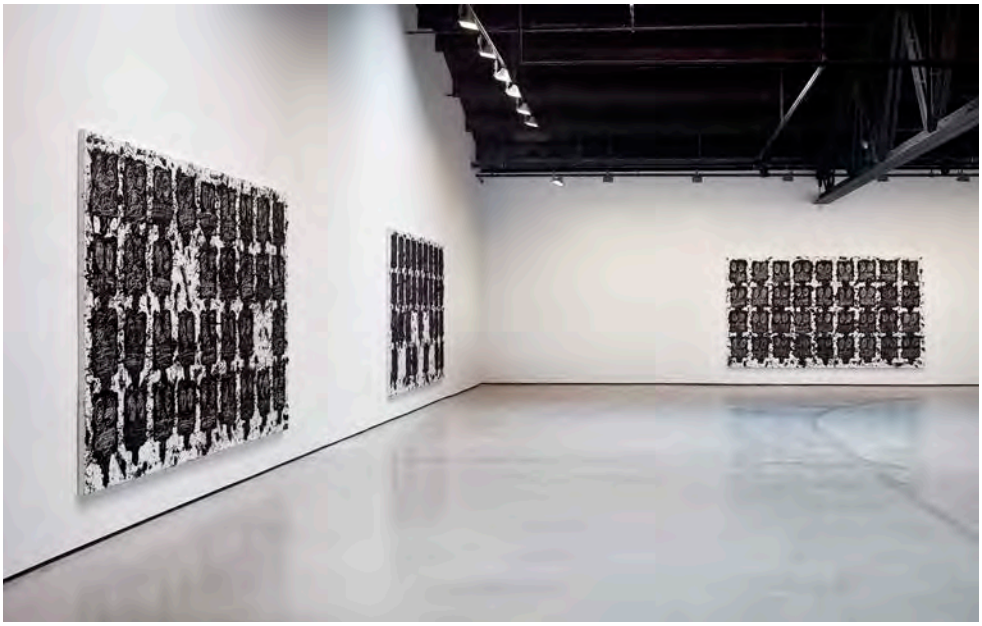
Instead of going away for graduate school, he studied for a master's degree at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which recently awarded him an honorary doctorate. Remaining closer to home—he grew up just outside the Windy City—proved to be catalytic. Because he was young and felt no one cared what he was doing, he has recalled this period as a time when "I could do whatever I wanted. It led me to all the mediums that I use today: painting, sculpture, video, film, even theater." Since he "didn't know anyone who made money from their art," his expectations were limited. He'd probably teach and, if he was lucky, might be awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship one day.

While describing his career to me, Johnson explained that his transition to painting "never started with paint." He'd been using a UV-sensitive photo process. After applying it to surfaces as if he were making photograms, he'd end up with images that weren't quite representational or abstract. He was hooked.



Installation view of "Rashid Johnson: Fly Away," September 8–October 22, 2016, at Hauser & Wirth in New York. MARTIN PARSEKAIN/©THE ARTIST/COURTESY HAUSER & WIRTH

Tuchman, Phyllis, "'A Whole Meal': Rashid Johnson on His Polyvalent Practice, From Early Photography to Forthcoming Feature Film," *ArtNews.com*, June 25, 2018



Installation view of "Rashid Johnson: Fly Away," September 8–October 22, 2016, at Hauser & Wirth in New York.
MARTIN PARSEKAIN/©THE ARTIST/COURTESY HAUSER & WIRTH

With a range of materials, Johnson realized he could express himself "formally, critically, conceptually." When he uses black soap—several black soap paintings were exhibited in "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World" at the Museum of Modern in New York in 2014–15—"it has content. I'm not just making a gesture," he has said. Asked about his use of soap, Johnson answered a question with a question, "Who's going to wash a painting?" As it is, he has noted that many people who use black soap do so to treat skin disorders. "It's a great metaphor," he pointed out to me.

Or take shea butter, another unorthodox, malleable substance that's a cornerstone of his practice. It's derived from a nut in North Africa. It's edible, but its healing powers interest Johnson much more. Like black soap, it's cleansing. It's an Afrocentric product that was sold in little tubs on the street when the future artist was growing up.

Later, while traveling in Ghana when he was in his 20s, he went to an Ashanti village where he learned that shea butter had been used as "a shield." Warriors covered their bodies with it to protect themselves. Johnson is intrigued that this is a material with a long history, one that encompasses "war as well as peace." And when he puts shea butter next to steel, he finds that "they interact in both a formal and visceral way."

Then there are the plants that Johnson incorporates into so many of his artworks. According to the artist, "they speak to landscape, to nature, to caretaking, to so much else." If a work includes a plant, he expects people to take care of it. "They become collaborators, and have a responsibility," he's said.

Now his team of collaborators—and his audience—is growing even wider. Johnson has just filmed a new version of Richard Wright's 1940 novel Native Son. He finished shooting several weeks ago. Asked how he became a movie director, he mentioned that when he was an undergraduate he took photography courses because he wasn't able to enroll in filmmaking his freshmen year.

It will be thrilling to see how he handles a feature film, given his ability to create compelling compositions. With Matthew Libatique, his director of photography, who worked on Black Swan and Straight Outta Compton, he'd discuss "which angles would be in the foreground, what would be in the background, how characters were seen in the frame," he told me.

"I like to tell stories," Johnson said when we spoke. Within the art world, he has been imparting aspects of the middle-class African-American milieu in which he was raised. With black soap and shea butter, he's used materials that are "familiar for some, information for others." That also goes for the books he's stacked and the record albums he's leaned on shelves. And then, there are the titles of his solo shows, such as "The Rainbow Sign," "Sharpening My Oyster Knife," "Message to Our Folks," and "Hail We Now Sing Joy," which he has borrowed from poems, novels, and songs by black writers. Johnson told me, "I'm interested in the way materials affect painting, and how it's read, its legibility."

Burns, Charlotte, “Different Perspectives,” *Monocle*, June 2018, pp. 20-21

MONOCLE

ART / USA

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Rashid Johnson is an artist who defies categorisation, whose work fits neatly into almost no box, despite the fact his latest piece is mostly contained in one. Ahead of his showing at Art Basel's Unlimited presentation in June, we meet the artist whose work has been described as both 'thoughtful' and 'vandalism'.

WRITER *Charlotte Burns* PHOTOGRAPHER *Daniel Dorsa*

The steel skeleton that supports "Antoine's Organ" (2016) is a large and labyrinthine black grid within which life teems, both literally and figuratively speaking. As sensory and stimulating a sculpture as it is aloof and intimidating, this installation by artist Rashid Johnson looms more than 3m high and spans almost 9m across. First exhibited in New York two years ago at the Hauser & Wirth gallery, it is now on show as part of *Unlimited* at Art Basel, curated by Gianni Jetzer, one of 71 large works on display next to the main fair building.

The steel cubes nod to both the US prison system and to minimalist works of art such as Sol LeWitt's cubes. The grid itself is loaded – in every sense of the word. Incredibly verdant, it contains hundreds of assorted plants from various places which, installed together like this, says Johnson, "create a miscegenation of plant life, from cactus to palm trees to more domestic plants and flowers." The sculpture contains grow-lights intended to foster the health of these interbreeding plants, literally keeping this work of art alive.

It also houses sculptures Johnson fashioned from Shea butter; black Persian rugs; films he made at earlier stages of his career; ceramic vessels he crafted. There are stacks of books ("different things that I have read and am re-reading"), many of which are celebrated Afrocentric works relating to race and class: *The Sellout* (2015), a satirical novel by Paul Beatty about a man trying to reintroduce segregation and slavery; WEB Du Bois' 1903 cornerstone of African-American literature, *The Souls of Black Folk*; Randall Kennedy's unflinching *Sellout: The Politics of Racial Betrayal* (2008); Ta-Nehisi Coates's fierce and intellectual letter to his teenage son addressing racial violence in US culture, *Between the World and Me* (2015).

There is also an upright piano located within the grid. Music has long been a point of reference in Johnson's work but this is his first true collaboration with a musician. He was introduced to Antoine Baldwin, a young musician also known as Audio BLK, by a friend who knew he liked jazz. "Listening to Antoine playing so beautifully helped me understand how this piece was to be brought to life," says Johnson, who had been working towards a sculpture like this but without a sonic component. When he heard Antoine's piano playing – which is its own modern sound but seems to nod to the improvisation and spontaneity of jazz; the sweeping melodies of Chopin; the more ominous passages in Beethoven; the discordant insistence of Shostakovich – Johnson had a realisation. "I really needed to put him in the centre of the sculpture; I needed to build it around him and his music. I needed to make it a home for this piano and this pianist."

Listening to Baldwin and other musicians perform inside the sculpture has been "very spiritual", says Johnson. "Being musical has such a profound effect on so many of us." The collaboration also allows him to take a step back from the authorship of his work. "To watch it being performed is a moment in which I get to become a witness. Most often, you're just the maker. Everyone is witnessing you when they witness the work, whereas you never get to see it with fresh eyes," says Johnson. "Now, I get to appreciate it. And that is very liberating."

Questions relating to the colour of his skin "can be reductive", says Johnson. "I don't have the tools or wont to be a guide to the African-American experience"

"For artists there is a nakedness but still an ambition to have your voice amplified, to imagine what you're saying has value"

The sculpture "is about life and how you foster life; how you allow things to grow and facilitate the growth of those things," he says. "It is intended to be a very generous object, a giving tree of sorts. There are a lot of breadcrumbs that lead to my interests and my personal story but it is also the collective story of us, in a sense: music, life, things being nurtured, taught. There is the opportunity for exploration and the sense of domesticity inside the object that, in some ways, makes it become a home."

He says that he likes to think of "Antoine's Organ" "as a positive work made by an anxious man; the idea of our collective anxiety lives somewhere in the work. Maybe work like this is intended to be a treatment centre of sorts." The use of Shea butter is no accident. "It is an incredibly healing material," he says. "People use it who have been scarred, so it speaks to those who have a certain sensitivity and need for healing."

Shea butter comes from West Africa and is often sold in mainly African districts in the US, says Johnson, who "was always taken with the idea of imagining an African-ness; almost applying an African-ness to one's body". He frequently uses the butter in his work, partly as an overture to the art-historical tradition of associating artists with specific materials and partly as a way of inserting himself into that lineage. "I've always been interested in the ownership of material and the fact that artists are, at times in their careers, able to earn the recognition of a gesture and a material," he says. "Think of Twombly and you think about the failure of cursives, of the doodle; think of Beuys and you're thinking about fur and fat; Pollock and the drip; [David] Hammons at times is playing with hair and chicken bones. As a young artist I was thinking about materials I had around me that were

Burns, Charlotte, "Different Perspectives," *Monocle*, June 2018, pp. 20-21

Clockwise from top left: *Rashid Johnson photographed in his studio on 31 May, sitting in front of "Untitled Anxious Audience"; paints of many colours; various works in progress populate the studio space; a feline friend sits atop shipping crates; "Untitled Beach Collage" hangs on the wall; Johnson uses various materials; geometric shapes; in the studio*

"The conversation around identity, class, race, gender and sexuality is all of ours to have. We all play a role in that conversation"

significant, thinking it could be a good way to help people understand my project. I was thinking about how to take ownership of these materials; as well as ways to identify how I was working and what my intention was."

Johnson – who *The New York Times* critic Roberta Smith described as sometimes walking "a fine, angry line between art-making and something like vandalism, creating and destroying" – is not an artist bound by media, style or form. He began working with photography and now embraces almost every form of art: from sculpture to sound; installations to ceramics; painting and drawing to work with mirrors. He has an ambitious, sometimes unusual, though always sure-footed, approach to different media and continues to experiment in exploring familiar themes in unfamiliar ways.

Though "Antoine's Organ" riffs on art history (which has been dominated by white men from the western world), it also points to the vast (under-recognised, underfunded and underappreciated) cultural legacy of African-Americans. Johnson first came to attention when his work was included in the 2001 show at The Studio Museum, *Freestyle*, organised by the institution's pioneering now-director Thelma Golden. In a catalogue essay accompanying the show she coined the term "post-black art" to describe, both ironically and seriously, artists "adamant about not being labelled 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness".

Describing Golden as a "brilliant woman", Johnson says he is part of a generation of artists who are "western-trained while very much aware of a cultural identity and the way it would impact the work. But I am currently and forever black, so I don't consider myself post-black."

Does it get tiring to be asked questions relating to the colour of his skin? "Yeah, it can be reductive," he says. "Conversations that can be redundant are ones in which I am essentially asked to be a guide; I am less interested in that because I don't have the tools or the wont to be a guide to the African-American experience. So when that becomes the case I am frustrated in a familiar way.

"But the conversation around identity, class, race, gender and sexuality is all of ours to have and we are all responsible for playing a role in that conversation," he says. "People are trying to get answers to questions and artists are on the forefront of that. Lots of American artists are exploring – quite honestly, I think, because of the diverse backgrounds so many Americans come from. Mostly being urban dwellers, artists are exposed to the real breadth of cultural complexity. Maybe to not speak to it would be disingenuous."

Johnson is not one to shy away from ambitious projects. His next is his first feature film. He is directing an adaptation by the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and screenwriter Suzan-Lori Parks of Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*. The story is about a 20-year-old African-American man called Bigger Thomas, who lives in wretched destitution in the South Side of Chicago and who is sentenced to death after committing several violent crimes. The novel reflects unsparingly on the hopelessness and anger engendered by extreme poverty.

"My questions go beyond the idea of race or personal identity," he says. "It's about the connectivity of art history; the access different people have to different ways of thinking." His artistic exploration takes into account his and his family's personal and educational backgrounds and tries, he says, "to be mystified by the monolithic thinking that a lot of people imagine black Americans having. I'm interested in The Velvet Underground too. It is not so simple as to imagine that I am trying to teach or perform a version of blackness. I am more trying to amplify my voice in the complex and loaded references and ideas as they are channelled through me."

"For artists there is a kind of nakedness but there is still an ambition to have your voice amplified, to imagine what you're saying has value," he says. "When you do that, you expose yourself to all kinds of reactions and you have to be prepared to receive those things. Artists have to have very thick skin: I never take too much praise because I don't want to take too much criticism. You have to believe what you do is right and you do it for a reason," he says. "I don't pander but I do want to be understood, like anybody else."

Five selected works

Samuel in Space, 2015

Untitled Anxious Men, 2015

Position, 2016

Untitled Anxious Audience, 2016

Untitled Beach Collage, 2017

Rashid Johnson
Lives and works in New York

1977
Born in Chicago, Illinois

2000
Columbia College, Chicago

2001
Group show: *Freestyle*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY

2004
MFA, School of the Art Institute, Chicago

Group show: *A Perfect Union... More or Less*, Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Chicago, IL

2007
Group show: *For the Love of the Game: Race and Sports*, The Amistad Center for Art & Culture at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT

2009
Solo show: *Smoke and Mirrors*, SculptureCenter, Long Island City, NY

2011
Group show: *ILLUMInations*, International Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy

2013
Solo show: *Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta Georgia; Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St Louis, MO

2015
Solo show: *Anxious Men*, The Drawing Center, New York

Group show: *America Is Hard To See*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

2016
Solo show: *Fly Away*, Hauser & Wirth, New York, NY

Group show: *For Freedoms*, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY

Group show: *Visual Art and the American Experience*, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, DC

2017
Solo show: *Rashid Johnson: The New Black Yoga and Samuel in Space*, McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX

Group show: *An Incomplete History of Protest*, Whitney Museum of Art, NY

Group show: *Prospect 4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp*, New Orleans, LA

Group show: *Art/Afrique, Le nouvel atelier*, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, France

2019
Museo Tamayo, Mexico City

Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, Colorado

Knight, Christopher, "Building off of 'Rainbow Sign'," *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 2018, p. E4

Los Angeles Times

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Building off of 'Rainbow Sign'

The Rainbow Sign" has been an important meme in African American life for decades. Now, New York-based artist Rashid Johnson brings it to bear in a new body of work.

At David Kordansky Gallery, Johnson's "The Rainbow Sign" takes the form of 16 monumental collages and mixed-media works. A particular politics of reconciliation with history began with a slave song, the black spiritual "Mary Don't You Weep." The narrative continued through writer James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time" ("God gave Noah the rainbow sign / No more water, the fire next time"), then Noah Purifoy's sculptures and reliefs forged from the charred rubble of the Watts Rebellion and on to concert promoter Mary Ann Pollar's black cultural center and social club of that name, which flourished in Berkeley in the 1970s.

Johnson extends the theme into assertive wall reliefs composed from materials favored in his earlier work — ceramic tile, tar-black spray enamel, shea butter, black soap, broken glass, etc. A group of kaleidoscopic "Escape Collages" incorporates vinyl photographs of natural landscapes (the deserts could be Saharan, the tropical forests sub-Saharan) cut into repeated shapes of pyramids and shields.

Power and protection are conjured in equal measure, along with image-fragments of African masks and scrawled, graffiti-like heads reminiscent of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Rashid's wall-works are descendants of Robert Rauschenberg's Combine paintings, ornamental puzzles made from everyday materials. Elsewhere, panels of bronze mesh evoke the diffusion filter on a condenser microphone, dispersing the visual resonance.

Perhaps the most moving work is the simplest — an awkwardly affecting group of 30 joyfully glazed, kiln-fired ceramic "Ugly Pots," set out as if for sidewalk sale atop a threadbare Persian rug. Vessels are analogous to human bodies, so the display of imminent commercial transactions generates an unexpected jolt of recognition.

David Kordansky Gallery, 5130 W. Edgewood Place, L.A. Through May 19; closed Sunday and Monday. (323) 935-3030, *www.davidkordanskygallery.com*

christopher.knight@latimes.com

Knight, Christopher, “Rashid Johnson at David Kordansky Gallery: Power, protection, plus ‘Ugly Pots’,”
LATimes.com, May 5, 2018

Los Angeles Times

Rashid Johnson at David Kordansky Gallery: Power, protection, plus ‘Ugly Pots’

By Christopher Knight | May 5, 2018

Rashid Johnson, “Untitled Microphone Sculpture (rear),” 2018, mixed media; “Untitled Ugly Pots (foreground),” 2018, kiln-fired glazed clay (David Kordansky Gallery)

“The Rainbow Sign” has been an important meme in African American life for decades. Now, New York-based artist Rashid Johnson brings it to bear in a new body of work.

At David Kordansky Gallery, Johnson’s “The Rainbow Sign” takes the form of 16 monumental collages and mixed-media works. A particular politics of reconciliation with history began with a slave song, the black spiritual “Mary Don’t You Weep.” The narrative continued through writer James Baldwin’s “The Fire Next Time” (“God gave Noah the rainbow sign / No more water, the fire next time”), then Noah Purifoy’s sculptures and reliefs forged from the charred rubble of the Watts Rebellion and on to concert promoter Mary Ann Pollar’s black cultural center and social club of that name, which flourished in Berkeley in the 1970s.

Johnson extends the theme into assertive wall reliefs composed from materials favored in his earlier work — ceramic tile, tar-black spray enamel, shea butter, black soap, broken glass, etc. A group of kaleidoscopic “Escape Collages” incorporates vinyl photographs of natural landscapes (the deserts could be Saharan, the tropical forests sub-Saharan) cut into repeated shapes of pyramids and shields.

Power and protection are conjured in equal measure, along with image-fragments of African masks and scrawled, graffiti-like heads reminiscent of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Rashid’s wall-works are descendants of Robert Rauschenberg’s Combine paintings, ornamental puzzles made from everyday materials. Elsewhere, panels of bronze mesh evoke the diffusion filter on a condenser microphone, dispersing the visual resonance.

Perhaps the most moving work in the show is the simplest — an awkwardly affecting group of 30 joyfully glazed, kiln-fired ceramic “Ugly Pots,” set out as if for sidewalk sale atop a threadbare Persian rug. Vessels are analogous to human bodies, so the display of imminent commercial transactions generates an unexpected jolt of recognition.

Rashid Johnson, “Untitled Escape Collage,” 2018, mixed media (David Kordansky Gallery)

Drohojowska-Philp, Hunter, “Peter Shire and Rashid Johnson,” *KCRW.com*, Art Talk, May 3, 2018

Peter Shire, *Giza*, 2018 Kvadrat Divina fabric, aluminum, paint, wood, upholstery material 60 1/4 x 40 x 39 inches 153 x 101.6 x 99.1 cm (ShireP.1886) Images courtesy of the artist and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles.

Peter Shire, long time resident of Echo Park and one of its more prominent citizens, is an artist who has long used ceramics as a medium for commentary. The only American to be included in Memphis, the Italian post-modern design group, Shire is best known for his form over function teapots. Since the 1970s, he has used their shape as the basis of extreme experimentation. Shire’s visual wit and passion for color evolved over the decades into ever more outrageous small ceramic sculptures that only nod in the direction of a utilitarian origin.

A survey of the teapots along with his furniture and other designs was the subject of an excellent small exhibition at Moca’s PDC location last year. Peter Shire: Drawings, Impossible Teapots, Furniture & Sculpture reprises some of those career-long themes in more current work at Kayne Griffin Corcoran on south La Brea through May 12. Delightful drawings illustrate his obsession with Krazy Kat comics. Many pieces are shown in series. Chairs aligned on a platform reveal how a single bold color or striped pattern can alter the effect of a shape. Each of these chairs has a cylindrical back, skinny bird legs and slab seats but the surface treatment varies and each emerges unique. Shire’s love of puns and word play result in titles for these 2014 chairs: Pecker Eeeny, Pecker Meeny, Pecker Miny, Pecker Mo.

In addition to his trademark teapots, some of which reference Bauhaus angularity and architecture, there are a number of saki pots. Shire draws inspiration from the cultural diversity of East L.A., whether in searing Latin color or glittering Asian ornamentation, always pulling from the low brow and the popular rather than the high art source. Go, see and get happy.

As an important figure in the second generation of Southern California ceramicists to deny the boundaries of traditional crafts, Shire has led the way for a surge of interest in ceramics among younger contemporary artists.

Across La Brea Ave, at David Kordansky Gallery, Rashid Johnson’s nicely honed exhibition, The Rainbow Sign, includes substantial bronze wall pieces incorporating shards of mirror, zebra skin, active sound speakers and plant imagery. All of that is a wonderful palette for the New York City-based artist but the center of the show features something relatively new, dozens of what he calls “ugly pots.” Ceramics have often had a minor role in his work but this particular foray into this use of clay benefits from the appearance of being both familiar and fresh. The show is on view to May 19.

These two always interesting galleries on South La Brea are among the hundreds offering new shows every single month. They are free to the public and like public radio, need all levels of support.

Please give to KCRW to support its coverage of all the arts at a time of unprecedented productivity and creativity in Southern California.

This is the last week to visit the uplifting Jasper Johns show at The Broad Museum but others continue: Harold Szeemann’s archives at the Getty, Olafur Eliason’s light environment at the Marciano, Mark Bradford’s epic abstract paintings at Hauser and Wirth, Meleko Mokgosi’s realist studies of African lifestyles at the Fowler, David Hockney portraits at LACMA, Alison Saar’s powerful sculptures at L.A. Louver, Mark Innerst’s luminous cityscapes at Kohn, John Miller’s game show paintings at Meliksetian Briggs, Francesca Gabbiani’s tragic landscapes at Gavlak. Many more are opening this month and next month and the month after. We’ll cover all of it and more so stay tuned to 89.9 fm or podcast at kcrw.com/arttalk.

Rashid Johnson, *Untitled Ugly Pots*. Photo credit: Fredrik Nilsen, Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

“Rashid Johnson’s Feedback Loop,” *CulturedMag.com*, April 7, 2018

CULTURE

RASHID JOHNSON’S FEEDBACK LOOP

RASHID JOHNSON’S *UNTITLED MICROPHONE SCULPTURE*, 2018.

Rashid Johnson’s new interactive sound sculptures bring together a range of iconic forms he’s developed over the last decade. In particular, they recall the first shelf works he exhibited at my gallery in 2009. Next to symbols of transcendent Africanism, Rashid displayed CB radios and antenna-like constructions. These objects were metaphors for reaching out and connecting to another space: both a hierarchy-free social space, as well as the escape of far-out cosmic space. Sun Ra comes to mind. He’s an artist- musician Rashid and I share a deep affinity for. The new bronze shelf works feature working microphones, bringing these aspirations back to Earth. They materialize a direct feedback loop between speaker and audience. They are open-ended platforms for expression, protest, community.

For the exhibition’s opening, Rashid has brought together a range of potent voices: musicians Kahil El’Zabar, Alex Harding, Ian Maksin and Corey Wilkes, accompanied by the incredible poet and playwright Ntozake Shange. I’ve long been a fan of percussionist El’Zabar, especially. He collaborated with David Murray, who performed on occasion with the Grateful Dead, another shared interest of Rashid’s and mine. Murray produced an entire free jazz album of the Dead’s music—blurring identities and bridging universes.

- David Kordansky

Shaw, Anny, "Rashid Johnson starts filming Native Son in Chicago," *TheArtNewspaper.com*, April 2, 2018

INTERNATIONAL EDITION
THE ART NEWSPAPER

Rashid Johnson starts filming Native Son in Chicago

The US artist finds contemporary resonance in the 1940s novel

By Anny Shaw | April 2, 2018

Rashid Johnson © Eric Vogel

This month, after the opening of his exhibition at Los Angeles's David Kordansky Gallery (7 April-19 May), the US artist Rashid Johnson begins shooting his directorial debut in Chicago—a film adaptation of Richard Wright's bestselling 1940 novel Native Son. Johnson says that he and the screenwriter Suzan-Lori Parks "have been conscious of the times we live in today, and how the novel's characters may play out in a contemporary world".

Details of the feature-length film are being kept under wraps by the production company Bow & Arrow, but as we went to press the actor Ashton Sanders, who starred as the teenaged Chiron in the Academy Award-winning drama Moonlight, was in final talks to take the lead role. Native Son tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a black man in his 20s living in abject poverty in Chicago's South Side in the 1930s. After taking a job in the house of a wealthy family, Thomas becomes involved in the death of a young woman, a crime for which he is captured and tried by bigoted officials and ultimately sentenced to death. At the time it was published, Native Son was described disparagingly by the African-American writer James Baldwin as a "protest novel" and the main character as a negative stereotype. Commentators from later generations have identified the book as a forerunner of the Black Lives Matter movement, published as it was at the dawn of civil rights in the US. But Johnson interprets Wright's thinking more along the lines of other protest movements. "There's a distinct emphasis on how communism and activism function, which I think has stronger parallels with the Occupy movement," he says. "The novel doesn't have necessarily strong black activist protagonists."

As Johnson notes, the idea that black characters need to present themselves as positive role models is long outdated. "There's a trap that's been set, that every black character is exceptional or even capable of exceptionalism," he says. "Making this film after we've been exposed to a character like Barack Obama, we know black exceptionalism exists, which opens the door for us to explore the entirety of the human condition." The Black Lives Matter movement was mobilised before Donald Trump was elected as US president and issues around race, class, gender and sexuality in the US are considerably older than the current administration, but Johnson says these conversations have been "amplified by some of [Trump's] antagonism".

The artist says he is "furious and disappointed" about Trump. "I stand in opposition to everything that he represents: his policy decisions, his personal decisions, the way he employs language, the way that he talks about people." But Johnson senses that voters may be ready for a wake-up call. "People say you get the leader you deserve, but I do honestly believe—and the numbers bear this out—that most people in America don't agree with his policies, strategies and philosophies." He adds that, since Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, "it's time for an interrogation of our electoral system, and an awakening of people to their responsibility to participate in their democracy".

Gebremedhin, Thomas, "Bold Front," *WSJ. Magazine*, April 7, 2018, p. 36

BOLD FRONT

Gallery shows from three acclaimed artists, in three art-world hubs, make for compelling spring viewing. —*Thomas Gebremedhin*

Sarah Cain
On the heels of installations at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and Colorado's Aspen Art Museum, the L.A.-based painter exhibits new work at Timothy Taylor in London. Opening April 18, *Wild Flower* showcases Cain's vibrant canvases—including *Braids and Tassels*, above—which complicate the line between painting and sculpture. *timothytaylor.com*

Rashid Johnson
This month, the conceptual artist debuts two major bodies of work at David Kordansky Gallery in L.A. *The Rainbow Sign*, which takes its name from an African-American spiritual referenced by James Baldwin, sees Johnson exploring cultural identity, history and fantasy through large-scale interactive sound sculptures, collages and paintings. *davidkordanskygallery.com*

Jitish Kallat
On April 26, New York's Sperone Westwater gallery unveils a range of cosmically oriented pieces by the multidisciplinary artist long recognized as a key figure in contemporary Indian art. In one photographic series, details of fruits suggest distant galaxies, while a sculpture on view resembles a fossil or meteorite. *speronewestwater.com*

Touré, “Artist Rashid Johnson Loves Being Black,” *L’OfficielUSA.com*, February 15, 2018

L'OFFICIEL

Artist Rashid Johnson Loves Being Black

by Touré | February 15, 2018

In a wide-ranging interview, Johnson discusses art, race, and plans for his first film.

Photography by Matin Zad

Somewhat recently, Rashid Johnson walked out of a fancy hotel that he was staying in. He just wanted to smoke a cigarette, but even a small action like that can be fraught when you’re a six-foot-three Black man in America.

“I wasn’t dressed well,” he recalls. He knew that made him more vulnerable. “And as I walked out of this hotel, the doorman changed, right? A new guy showed up and he hadn’t seen me leave the building.” Seeing himself through the eyes of the new doorman, Johnson suddenly felt himself in peril. “I’m just kind of this underdressed Black character in slippers or something, smoking a cigarette. And then I’m going to be re-entering this very nice hotel.”

He felt his anger and anxiety rise as he imagined how he would react if the doorman stopped him and questioned his right to stay in the hotel. “This is what Black people do,” Johnson says, meaning that these kinds of heated internal conversations in preparation for moments of racial conflict are not uncommon. In that moment, Johnson planned out how he would respond to the doorman and what he would say to the man’s manager, working himself up for the inevitable fight ahead. He finished his cigarette and walked to the door of the hotel. The doorman turned to him and said, “Welcome to the hotel, sir.”

Rashid Johnson is a 40-year-old visual art star from Chicago whose work has been featured everywhere from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and the Studio Museum of Harlem to the Venice Beach Biennale. The doorman may have been observant, aware of all the hotel’s guests, or even a fan of Johnson’s work who was too intimidated to say something—we’ll never know. But racism can function in such a manner that you come to expect it even more than you actually experience it. Through that sense of apprehension (and many other ways), racism becomes a constant impact on your life, whether or not it is experienced in a given encounter. “The fascinating thing about race,” Johnson says, “is the fact that we know it does affect you, but one of the things that’s most difficult to explain sometimes is how and when you’re experiencing those specific things.”

Johnson knows and embraces the fact that race influences his life constantly—even if he can’t always put a finger on exactly how—and that’s part of why he likes directly addressing race in his work. For him, when you realize that race has a perpetual significance in your life, then you can’t make honest art that doesn’t take race into account. “I’m not offended by being called a Black artist,” Johnson says. “I don’t see being a Black artist as a ghettoizing space. I don’t think it’s negative.” He accepts being thought of as a Black artist because he accepts that Blackness has a deep impact on him, but also because he loves Blackness in all of its complexity. “I’m invested in the investigation of Blackness,” he says. “I’m absolutely invested in that, and I am totally intrigued.”

This investigation of race may not always be immediately clear from looking at his art—Johnson is often abstract. He loves to use burnt wooden flooring and shelves that he constructs in his studio. He makes marks with black soap as it hardens against a white background. He uses plants and adds photographs that he repeats so many times that they morph into something new.

But sometimes, his work is less opaque and you can see the discussion of Blackness more clearly. He uses album covers featuring the Reverend Al Green and Ben Vereen, Black stars of the ‘70s, his youth. He has used photographs of his father. Once he created an image in which a white substance resembling toothpaste was arrayed on a mirror in letters that spelled out “I Talk White,” unearthing a conversation about racialized modes of speech and how some Black people are judged or socially attacked for not vocally performing Blackness in a traditional way.

Touré, “Artist Rashid Johnson Loves Being Black,” *L’OfficielUSA.com*, February 15, 2018

Photography by Matin Zad

Several times throughout my life, I have been told that I sound white or talk white—more often by Black people than whites. It can be a painful accusation: It’s like you’re being told that you’re not doing Blackness correctly or that you’re trying to erase Blackness from your voice in order to assimilate. With just a few words and a mirror, he sparked a conversation about racial authenticity and the definition of Blackness.

That last piece had a huge influence on me as I wrote my 2011 book *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness?* I was looking for artwork that challenged traditional ways of performing Blackness, and Johnson had that. *I Talk White* was a brilliant indictment of the idea that there is one way to be Black. It mocked that idea. And it inspired me. It was key to helping me figure out how to articulate my ideas. Johnson’s work spoke about Blackness, but not in a way that simply lionized the Black past. He pushed at the edges of Blackness and helped me find way to my thesis that Blackness is broad, diverse, and complex enough to support an infinite number of interpretations.

I interviewed Johnson for that book and his work has continued to inspire me, so. I wanted to understand his vision more thoroughly. I met him on a cold Saturday afternoon at his big place on the east side of Midtown Manhattan. I hoped to gain greater insight into his work by looking at some of the smaller yet important elements, like the way he uses black soap.

Johnson explains that, after heating it, black soap becomes extremely malleable for five to ten minutes. “It’s almost like lava,” he says.“It melts, and as it melts, you can kind of shape it. But as it hardens, you have almost like a new landscape, right? It’s almost like a volcanic eruption.”

While he likes the way he can manipulate the material, more important to him are the symbolic qualities of the soap. “I started making that body of work as Trump was running for office,” he says. “I was concerned about that. I was concerned about police brutality. My son was kind of getting a little bit older. I started getting scared that I was going to have to explain it to him. I mean, I know the rules, right? I know how to deal with police, I know how to deal with bigotry—I know all of the shit. You’re not going to fool me. But the idea that I was going to have to explain all that to another fucking human being was just painful for me. It gave me a tremendous amount of anxiety, you know? That I was going to have to tell someone else how to negotiate these same pitfalls, I was just dumbfounded by it. So, I started making these scrawled drawing in black soap and wax. Black soap is this kind of healing material that you can find in West Africa, but you also find it on the streets of Harlem, Brooklyn, and Chicago. It becomes this signifier, a symbol for cleansing material. It’s for people with sensitive skin, so I’m talking about a sensitive issue, about sensitive people, and using this material that’s meant for sensitive people. It becomes this combination of things that are a puzzle that you put together.”

Johnson loves puzzles and constructing them. “Art is really just the game of problem-solving,” he says. “The artist is a problem-solver. The difference is that a lot of the problems that they’re solving are ones that they created themselves.” Working in the studio with his hands, constructing pieces day by day, he likens himself to his father, an electrical engineer who had a studio in the garage of Johnson’s childhood home. Dad built alternators that he then sold. Now, like his dad, Johnson enjoys being alone and working with his hands, putting together complex things that will be sold. Of course, Johnson’s work is a lot more esoteric.

For example, sometimes he places plants within the work. These may be small house plants stacked many feet in the air or larger plants that sit within his work as a decorative item. What’s that about? “There’s something really poetic about plants,” he says. “I grew up with plants in the house. There was this need to take care of them. A lot of what happens in my work is about how

Photography by Matin Zad

Photography by Matin Zad

we’re going to care, you know? Like, who’s going to take care of whoever, is this material going to take care of you?
So, who’s going to take care of the plants? Who’s going to feed them? Who’s going to keep them alive?”

Ok, then, who? Is it you as the creator/father of the work or is it the museum/institution/private collector who now must take care of the plants? Do you include watering instructions that the museum or new owner have to follow?
“I actually build irrigation systems into the works,” he says, flashing some of his engineering ability. “But I just kind of leave it up to people to take responsibility for them. I’m not, like, that caring. I really don’t give a fuck, you know?” Wait, what? What do you mean, you don’t really give a fuck? “The plants can be replaced.”

What if they’re not the right plants? Then the work changes doesn’t it? He says, “I have a big plant work that I helped reinstall at the Louis Vuitton Fondation in Paris. They called, they said, ‘We’re going to install this piece.’ I’m like, ‘That’s great.’ They’re like, ‘Which plants should we get?’ I was like, ‘Well, there’s images of all the plants. You’re welcome to get those plants or you can get some others if you don’t find those exact plants.’” Instead of exacting standards and esoteric demands, he was open to whatever they chose. “I think that was quite confusing for them.” But wouldn’t getting different plants make it a different work? “It’s different every time you install it.”

Johnson decided to become an artist while listening to NPR when he was in college. The legendary Black photographer Roy DeCarava came on the radio and, as Johnson recalls, “All I did was listen to him talk about what picture-making meant to him and the way that he was able to translate picture-making into telling the story of a time and of timelessness. I was like, I want to do whatever that guy does. He called himself an artist and I was like, Well, then I should just do that.” Johnson would go on to graduate school at School of the Art Institute of Chicago, but it may be that his first, and perhaps most important, art school was in the streets of Chicago, where he was a teenage graffiti artist. There, he began to negotiate the impact of his body on his art. But back then it wasn’t about race, it was about size.

He was already over six feet and he realized that small, fine movements were harder for him than for his shorter friends. Johnson wasn’t easily able to draw in a sketchbook or master movements based in the wrist, but when he was out tagging walls and painting from his shoulder, he could excel. He says, “I just take up a bigger space to make the gestures that I think are most effective and most honest for me to be able to make. I’m a firm believer that your hand can only do certain things, so you have to kind of find the way that you naturally move your hand. Whether it’s with a spray can, with a pencil, with a paintbrush—with any utensil. You have a certain kind of movement in your wrist. It’s like a fingerprint in a way. Once you start to understand the way that your wrist and your hand move, then you start to be able to establish your own style. But it starts with learning your body.” At the dawn of his art career, Johnson was focused on how to function within his body and how to best use it to make art. As a growing teenager, he focused on his physical form. As an adult in Trump’s America, he focuses on race.

Indeed, his next big step is to direct a film based on Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son*, a seminal piece of American literature that tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a Black man in the 1930s who accidentally kills a white woman by suffocating her with a pillow while she sleeps. Shooting begins in March, with Ashton Sanders (well-known for his role as 16-year-old Chiron in *Moonlight*) playing Bigger. Johnson’s version of *Native Son* was created in conjunction with the famed writer Suzan-Lori Parks, who wrote the screenplayTheir version is modernized—it’s set today. “I think my Bigger is a little bit more of a vulnerable character,” Johnson says. “He’s this black kid who’s listening to punk, who’s just a little bit different than a lot of the people around him. He still has some of the misanthropy that I think makes Bigger what he is in a lot of ways, but he’s definitely more vulnerable and more fragile than maybe Wright initially intended.” Even as he moves into film, Johnson is still dealing with his core principles and trying to stretch the boundaries of Blackness and challenge its definitions. No matter what medium he chooses—film, photography, sculpture, soap—he’s interrogating and exploring Blackness. It’s a central part of his work because it’s a crucial part of him that shapes how he interacts with the world. But Johnson doesn’t simply let Blackness shape him; he’s a thoughtful consumer of it and an active shaper of it.

To Johnson, like black soap, Blackness is malleable and yet firm, sensitive and complex.

Higgins, Jim, "Artist's creations display comforts, anxieties," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 2, 2017, pp. 1E, 4E

Artist's creations display comforts, anxieties

Rashid Johnson's sculpted grids being shown at art museum

JIM HIGGINS
MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

All hail the grid, the shelving that holds our stuff, the x-axis and y-axis that bring order to our data.

Some may see you as cold, confining and inhuman, but I don't think Rashid Johnson would subscribe to that view.

His art, on display in "Hail We Now Sing Joy" at the Milwaukee Art Museum, relies on grids both to hold objects and materials that he cares about and to contain the anxieties that rattle him.

During a recent media preview and tour, Johnson discussed how pleased he was to be the first contemporary artist to take over MAM's entire feature exhibit space — as opposed to being discussed as the first African-American artist do so.

The massive sculpture "Antoine's Organ" embodies the situation that Johnson discussed of being black while not wanting to be completely defined or pigeonholed as such. "As any kind of American, as any kind of global citizen, you are subject to some degree … to what everyone thinks you are," he said.

More than 10 feet tall, the framework holds hundred of plants and ceramic vessels created by Johnson. The rows are dotted with big yellowish hunks of shea butter, a recurring material in Johnson's art. The artist has also interspersed books that have engaged him, including Richard Wright's "Native Son," Paul Beatty's "The Sellout," Debra Dickerson's "The End of Blackness" and Randall Kennedy's "Sellout" — writing that grapples with the situation, including the possible futures, of being African-American. But to signal that this is neither Johnson's only concern nor the sole source of his tension, he also includes a Søren Kierkegaard book on anxiety and the Alcoholics Anonymous "Big Book."

"Antoine's Organ" makes me imagine a botany pod on an interstellar ship, a tidy, organized attempt to bring essential elements from home on a journey that may take generations.

Beyond its size, what distinguishes "Antoine's Organ" from past grids that Johnson has sculpted is the upright piano inside it. After getting to know Antoine Baldwin, a young musician in New York, Johnson decided he had to include Baldwin in something he was doing. So the sculpture is not fully activated and illuminated until a musician is inside it, playing.

Note that Johnson titled it "Antoine's Organ," not piano. If the plants and ceramics and books collectively represent the artist's brain, as Johnson mused, then a playing pianist can be seen as the heart that brings pulsing life to this work.

MAM will feature local musicians playing inside "Antoine's Organ" at scheduled times throughout the exhibit. Visit *mam.org/rashid-johnson/antoines-organ* for info.

The exhibit also includes three other series of works by Johnson. I found his "Anxious Audience" series the most compelling. Johnson pours liquid black soap and wax on white ceramic tile, then scratches a wiry, worried face through the cooling mixture. "They were self-portraits, cathartic moments," he said during the preview tour. His young son, seeing the rectangular faces, dubbed them robots, a perfectly reasonable interpretation.

RASHID JOHNSON / HAUSER & WIRTH

Rashid Johnson's "Antoine's Organ," on display at the Milwaukee Art Museum, includes plants, ceramics, books and blocks of shea butter.

Johnson has arranged the faces in 4-by-9 grids, but each grid has at least one empty spot, and in each case my eye was pulled immediately to that absence, and to wonder about the *desaparecido* it represents. In some alternative universe, there is a Talking Heads album with one of Johnson's anxious grids on its cover.

Johnson refers to himself as a child of the Western art tradition, and talks with pleasure about artists who have mattered to him, such as Sol LeWitt, Jean Dubuffet and Carl Andre. In a bold gesture, his exhibit includes a low, scarred wooden table on which the artist has heaped blocks of shea butter, an extract from the nut of the African shea tree that is widely used in lotions and cosmetics. He uses it regularly in his art, noting that "materials and their ability to heal" matter to him. The yellowish tinge of the blocks also suggests human fat viewed after a surgeon cuts a body open. Johnson exposes the quivering, insoluble raw material threaded through his creations.

Fowler, William, "'Blackness can be empowering'… meet the American artist adjusting to Somerset life," *TheGuardian.com*, Art, June 4, 2017

theguardian

'Blackness can be empowering' … meet the American artist adjusting to Somerset life

Rashid Johnson uses tribal masks, houseplants and Shea butter to explore issues of roots, race and identity in black America. What's he doing in rural England?

By William Fowler - Sunday 4 June 2017

'I hope he doesn't feel out of place' … Rashid Johnson with his five-year-old son, Julius, in Bruton. Photograph: Gareth Iwan Jones for the Guardian

For the duration of his artistic residency in the small town of Bruton in Somerset, Rashid Johnson will be sending his five-year-old son to the local school. "We did have some concerns," says the artist. "You know, sending him to a school where there were likely to be no children of colour. I hope it's OK. I hope he doesn't feel alone, out of place."

There may be a degree of projection in this paternal anxiety. We're speaking just a couple of days into Johnson's visit to the West Country, where he will be in residence at the Hauser & Wirth gallery in Bruton, but he's already given his show a title. He's calling it Stranger, in a nod to James Baldwin's essay Stranger in the Village, the influential African American author's account of his visit to Leukerbad in 1951. "From all available evidence," Baldwin writes, "no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came." He goes on to describe being followed in the streets by groups of giggling children who shout "Neger! Neger!" and women who want to touch his hair.

"I've travelled pretty extensively," says Johnson. "I've been to west Africa, Asia, I've spent time in Europe. But when I go to a place that feels this distant, when I walk into a store, I'm like, 'I'm a stranger again.' It's not about racism per se, but difference on a more existential level."

Bruton in 2017 is not Leukerbad in 1951, though. As the gallery is at pains to point out, Hauser & Wirth came here to join a cultural community, rather than create one. And this area of Somerset does have a distinctly cosmopolitan feel. Pub chalkboards advertise beer, skittles and flat whites. The Glastonbury festival, held nearby, has been drawing artists from all over the world for the last 40 years. And, although the surrounding countryside remains predominantly white, Bristol, less than an hour away, has had black residents since at least the 17th century.

So does that make the show's title a jetlagged snap judgment, an overstatement? Johnson tactfully encourages me to check my privilege. "Regardless of where you are, the psychological aspect of otherness will follow you," he says, but adds: "I've never seen blackness as a ghettoising concept. I think it can be very empowering. It's fed my understanding of culture, identity and presence, both socially and psychologically."

Fowler, William, "'Blackness can be empowering'… meet the American artist adjusting to Somerset life," *TheGuardian.com*, Art, June 4, 2017

One of Johnson's paintings in the show Stranger at Hauser & Wirth Somerset. Photograph: Gareth Iwan Jones for the Guardian

Fancy a Corona? … another work in the Stranger show. Photograph: Gareth wan Jones for the Guardian

Johnson grew up in Chicago, in an "Afrocentric household". His mother was a professor of African history and his stepfather was Nigerian. It was partly his early experiences visiting Africa that made him keenly aware of the rootlessness of his own identity. "I realised quite quickly that I wasn't an African. And that was a really interesting thing, because I'd thought, in one way, that I was going home."

In America, his blackness conferred on him a certain set of assumptions. In Africa, this was still the case – but the assumptions were different. "Ask an African if an African American is an African," he says, "and you'll get a potentially complicated answer."

So Johnson became an explorer of his own sense of otherness. Earlier pieces, such as I Talk White or the New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club (Emmett), examine directly the possibility of a black voice in the canon of western art. More recently, his work plays with the cliches of exoticism: tribal masks, collages of palms, black wax and metal frameworks peopled with houseplants and sculptural mounds of Shea butter.

"I always think about who gets to employ these objects. There has been a long history of criticism of Picasso for using African imagery. And I think, 'How does my employment of these symbols function, seeing as I'm not African?' Does my skin colour, the diasporic nature of my condition, allow me to use these images with any more integrity than any other artist?" A recent exploration of his ancestry led to the discovery that his genes were 30% European. "Does that 30% not get to engage with the discourse?" he asks.

All this makes him an ideal candidate for the Somerset residency. A tendency to produce contrast is an inevitable byproduct of this gallery's oddness in the roll-call of Hauser & Wirth properties: New York, London, Zurich, Los Angeles … Bruton. As Johnson acknowledges, he is only the most recent in a fairly long line of fish out of water. Pipilotti Rist, the inaugural artist-in-residence when the gallery opened in 2012, was almost certainly the only Swiss video artist in the village. After Johnson will be Koo Jeong A, South Korean builder of phosphorescent skateparks. Also, I'd hazard, a first.

"There's a real sense of the high and the low here," he says. "There are some very cultured, liberal-minded, thoughtful characters here, and then there's people who are more the salt of the earth." Again, the fact that people can inhabit the same space, but different universes, is precisely the kind of tension that Johnson's work is designed to expose. "I think you realise that there isn't a single narrative for any place," he says. "You want to paint these pictures, but they just don't exist."

Fowler, William, "'Blackness can be empowering'… meet the American artist adjusting to Somerset life," *TheGuardian.com*, Art, June 4, 2017

The greenery fights back … the artist with one of his steel-and-plant island sculptures. Photograph: Gareth Iwan Jones for the Guardian

His last show, at the David Kordansky Gallery in LA, was called Islands, and maybe one way to see Johnson would be as a trafficker in symbols connecting the European and African identity, such as the palm trees in his collages. "Growing up in Chicago, the idea of getting to a place that was tropical was all about opportunity: 'I made it to somewhere Caribbean!'" Many of us share the idea of what that exotic location looks like. You see this beach, or this set of palm trees, and you just imagine you're going to have a Corona there."

I ask if Somerset presents a challenge to the universality of his work. In the America of Breitbart and Black Lives Matter, the construction of an authentic racial identity feels like a hot topic. But would that have the same resonance for a British audience? Johnson surprises me with another polite deflection.

"There's this assumption here that I am not a Trump supporter. Every single person I have talked to, who would want to engage in this conversation, has fearlessly spoken about their dislike for Trump, without any intimation that I could possibly be responsible for his being where he is. There's something quite interesting about how my presence alone coexists with a liberal vocabulary, without my having to speak at all."

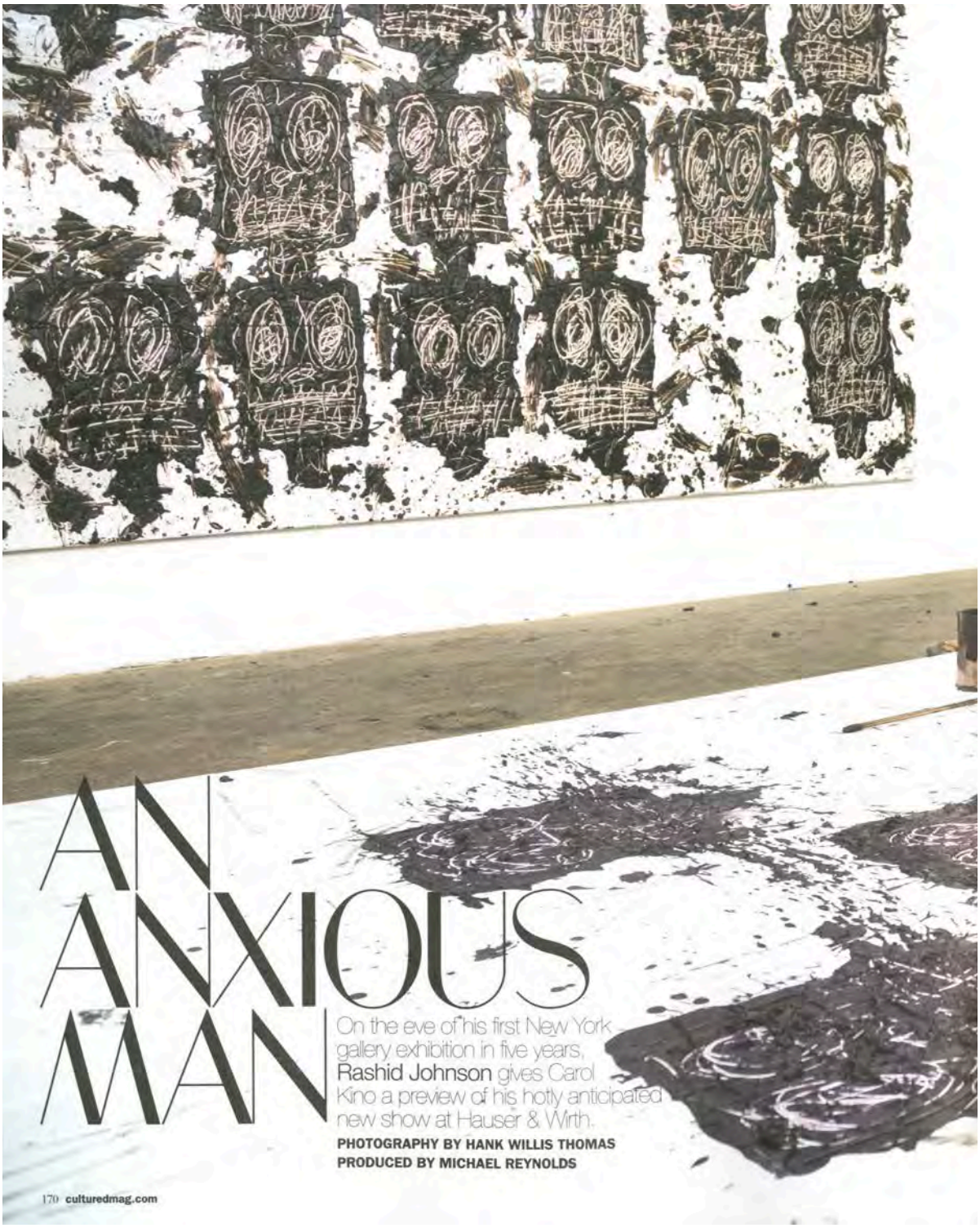
What Johnson points out in his art (and, to this writer's embarrassment, in person) is the extent to which the perception of otherness produces a weird kind of invisibility. Baldwin, writing in Stranger in the Village, says: "The black man insists, by whatever means he finds at his disposal, that the white man cease to regard him as an exotic rarity and recognise him as a human being." This quiet insistence on articulating his identity, in all its ambivalence, is central to Johnson's project. The people who see the Shea butter and the palms and write him off as an Afrocentric artist will be both missing the point and proving it.

We speak again a couple of weeks later and I get a sense that his view of the place has changed. The work has moved on, too. The steel structures that generally dominate the greenery have been turned inside out, so that the greenery dominates the steel: it's a reflection, says Johnson, of the English countryside outside his window.

He tells me about a taxi driver he's met in town. The man hated contemporary art, but has been converted by the artists he has taken to and from the gallery. "He absolutely loves it now. He feels like he's part of the conversation." You can tell the story delights Johnson, an artist who insists on everyone's right to be seen.
Tellingly, Johnson also allowed his own preconceptions to be upset. His son has made friends. "He's been really embraced by the community," he says. "When he's happy, I'm happy."

Kino, Carol, “An Anxious Man,” *Cultured*, Fall 2016, pp. 170-175

Kino, Carol, “An Anxious Man,” *Cultured*, Fall 2016, pp. 170-175

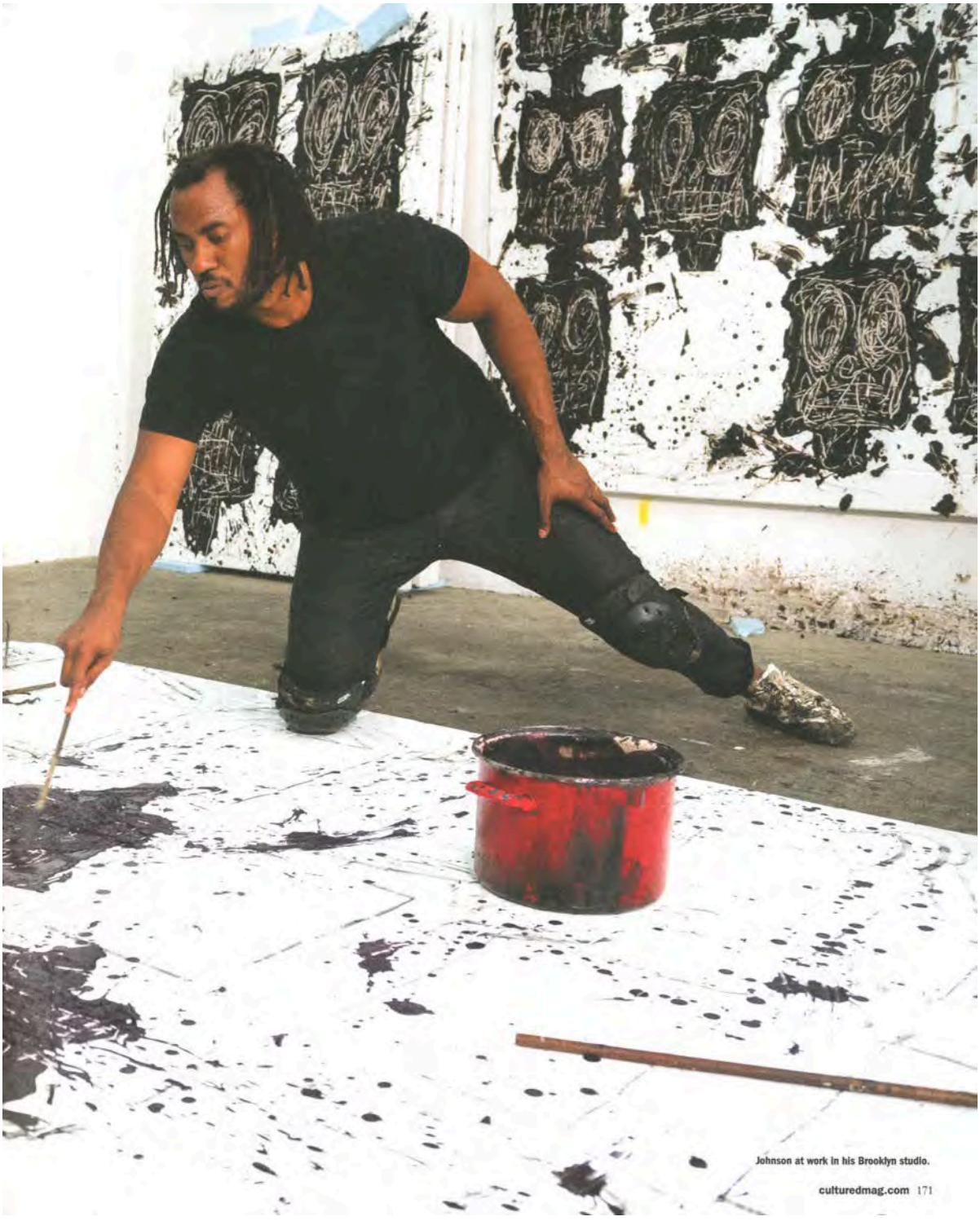


AN ANXIOUS MAN

On the eve of his first New York gallery exhibition in five years, Rashid Johnson gives Carol Kino a preview of his hotly anticipated new show at Hauser & Wirth.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HANK WILLIS THOMAS
PRODUCED BY MICHAEL REYNOLDS

Kino, Carol, “An Anxious Man,” *Cultured*, Fall 2016, pp. 170-175



Johnson at work in his Brooklyn studio.

Kino, Carol, “An Anxious Man,” *Cultured*, Fall 2016, pp. 170-175

RASHID JOHNSON

made his name as the youngest participant in “Freestyle,” a 2001 show at the Studio Museum in Harlem that put some of today’s best-known African-American artists, like Trenton Doyle Hancock and Julie Mehretu, on the map. Although Johnson debuted with three classically composed portrait photographs of a homeless black man he met in his hometown, Chicago, today he is lauded for more conceptual work, expressed in a vast range of media, including painting, sculpture, installation, performance and video. Yet while his materials and his vocabulary are widely variegated, Johnson’s concerns have stayed consistent, says Thelma Golden, now the Studio Museum’s director and chief curator, who selected him for the show. At the core you always see “a deep engagement with the history of conceptual art,” Golden says, “but also the history of black people.” And the work always “operates on an emotional level and an intellectual level at once.”

By now, Johnson, 40, has also shown in galleries, museums and biennials around the world—a major exhibition at Moscow’s Garage Museum just closed. And he was recently named to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation’s board of trustees, the first artist appointed since Hilla Rebay, the Guggenheim Museum’s founding director and curator.

Among Johnson’s more remarkable traits is his humor and humility—as is immediately clear on a steamy summer day in his Bushwick studio. He prowls nervously around an architectural model in a corner, the maquette for his show at Hauser & Wirth, his first New York gallery exhibition in five years. Looking at the model, he discusses the gallery’s intimidating size. “I’ve never made a maquette this large before,” he says, noting its soaring ceilings and famously column-free rooms. “The openness of the space forces you to work as an architect.” Then he laughs, adding that the show will likely be about “the success or failure of Rashid Johnson” in that arena, too.

Yet failure seems unlikely, for if anything has marked Johnson’s career so far, it has been his willingness to embrace new challenges, and his ability to use them all as springboards for artistic growth. So, it’s no surprise to see that he is using this show to present three new series, as well as the largest sculptural installation he has ever presented in this country. (The largest anywhere was at the Garage.)

The exhibition, which runs through October 22, opens with six works from *Anxious Audiences*—paintings covered with grids of scrawled, apprehensive faces that grew out of the *Anxious Men* series Johnson debuted at New York’s Drawing Center last fall. “I think of them almost as audiences to the bizarre political theater we’ve been witnessing,” he says, suggesting not only the Presidential race but also the many horrifying deaths that ripped through the news last summer, including the Orlando and Nice massacres, and a string of unarmed black men shot by police.

Kino, Carol, “An Anxious Man,” *Cultured*, Fall 2016, pp. 170-175

Johnson standing on one of his *Escapist Collages* in progress. "Constant escape is an underlying narrative," he says.

Kino, Carol, “An Anxious Man,” *Cultured*, Fall 2016, pp. 170-175

As anxiety began mounting in the world, with "global immigration issues, attacks on America and attacks within America by police on young black men," Johnson says, the notion of exploring just his own anxiety seemed inadequate, and he began drawing multiple anxious faces instead.

These works lead to *Escapist Collages*, paintings on colored tile layered with photo decals of tropical imagery, as if suggesting a way out. "Constant escape is an underlying narrative" in this series, Johnson says, pointing out other decals of Harriet Tubman and the Afrofuturist musician Sun Ra, who claimed he came from Saturn. "I don't think anyone is without wanting to escape, even Donald Trump supporters."

Next come the *Falling Men*: wall assemblages that transform Johnson's signature materials of white tile, oak floorboards, mirror shards and black soap and wax splatters into upside-down stick figures who seem to fall through space. "There's a quietness to these that's almost a respite," Johnson says. "Like the gift of death Derrida talks about." Even in that busy studio, with assistants sawing and hammering in the background, the robotic figure with a potted fern planted where its pubic hair should be, conveys a weirdly visceral sensation.

At the show's heart stands *Antoine's Organ*, Johnson's first installation to incorporate live music. Inside its plant-laden grid is a piano and a musician, Antoine Baldwin, who plays his own jazz several hours a day. No doubt it's because of this live soundtrack—added to the overarching themes of escape, redemption and soaring new heights—that the show is called "Fly Away," after the 1929 gospel standard "I'll Fly Away."

"Rashid is someone who is always experimenting in the studio and trying to innovate," says Cristopher Canizares, senior director at Hauser & Wirth. "But I can't think of a moment when he has debuted so many new series and taken such innovative strides all at one time." Yet another such moment may soon be on the way: this show is a warm-up for Johnson's upcoming museum exhibition, opening in February at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri.

Oddly enough, this massive show found its roots in Johnson's *Anxious Men* show at the Drawing Center last fall, one of the more intimate exhibitions of his career. The series at its heart was sparked when curator Claire Gibson, who "had admired Rashid's work for a long time," as she recalls, asked him to consider "the use of the drawn gesture that unified all the different bodies of his work." Johnson was soon marking individual faces into the black soap and wax he uses to make murky black abstractions. (He calls this mixture "cosmic slop," after the famous Funkadelic song.)

Yet as anxiety began mounting in the world, with "global immigration issues, attacks on America, and attacks within America by police on young black men," Johnson says, the notion of exploring just his own anxiety seemed inadequate, and he began drawing multiple anxious faces instead. "I was coming to the realization that my anxiety was not mine exclusively," he says. "It also had something to do with fatherhood."

His son, Julius, just turned five, and Johnson is impassioned when speaking of the strong influence that he and his wife, artist Sheree Hovsepian, have had on his life and work. "When something happens to me, it happens to my family—to the human family," he says. "Thinking more responsibly about all of us—that happens with maturity."

Kino, Carol, “An Anxious Man,” *Cultured*, Fall 2016, pp. 170-175

Smith, Roberta, “A Mixed-Media Focus on Race,” *The New York Times*, Weekend Arts II, September 16, 2016, pp. C15, C21

Fine Arts | Leisure

Weekend Arts II

The New York Times

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2016 C15

A Mixed-Media Focus on Race

ROBERTA SMITH

ART REVIEW

Rashid Johnson's impressive exhibition "Fly Away," at Hauser & Wirth's Chelsea gallery, unfolds over four spaces, each containing very different works in painting, sculpture or installation. They form a quasi narrative, loosely linked by recurring, often Afro-centric, materials and motifs, in which race is the central concern, expanded by references to history, décor, personal identity and art.

While many artists opt for overblown when given free rein in this nearly 10,000-square-foot showroom, Mr. Johnson approached the challenge judiciously. He has spread out his abundant talents, giving different works their own gallery — and for the most part he keeps the scale intimate. His work is in many ways Conceptual, but conveyed by a strong material intelligence in any medium.

The first gallery is the only one that verges on overblown, but it puts visitors, especially white visitors, on alert, and the more time you give it the more you'll get from it. This gallery holds six large paintings, each with up to 36 black, expressionistic faces in a big grid. Rather than painted on canvas, the

Continued on Page 21

JAKE NAUGHTON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Fly Away *Rashid Johnson's show at Hauser & Wirth includes, foreground, "Untitled (shea butter table)," and, on wall, "Falling Man."*

Smith, Roberta, "A Mixed-Media Focus on Race," *The New York Times*, Weekend Arts II, September 16, 2016, pp. C15, C21

A Mixed-Media Focus on Race

From Weekend Page 15

faces are rendered as if with a big, soft black crayon on white ceramic tile redolent of Western kitchens and especially bathrooms. The point is unmistakable — filth versus purity — but it is contradicted once you notice that the crayon is really a mixture of wax and black soap. (A little Googling reveals that it is often called African black soap, known for its healing properties, and first made in Ghana.) So there's no binary, just two forms of cleanliness.

Rapidly drawn, like a graffiti tag, with slashes for mouths and spirals for eyes, the frazzled faces are stacked like pictures in a yearbook, or perhaps men in a cellblock. They bring to mind the work of Basquiat, Dubuffet and Gary Simmons, but mainly they surround us with an arena filled with angry or fearful spectators. Each painting is titled "Untitled Anxious Audience," which works both ways in an art gallery. It helps to remember that anger and fear are the emotions woven through "Between the World and Me," Ta-Nehisi Coates's haunting memoir of growing up black and male in America. One phrase worth remembering: "the people who believed they were white."

Look extra closely and you'll see that the faces are also slashed with repeating lines that form loose, often diagonal grids, as if the artist himself found them unbearable. This is another point about Mr. Johnson's art: He sometimes walks a fine, angry line between art-making and something like vandalism, creating and destroying.

The next, much smaller gallery contains three complex, improvisational paintings, each titled "Untitled Escape Collage," that create an Edenic mood. Sort of. Mr. Johnson has collaged large, diamond-shaped photographs of palm trees or lush tropical plants onto now colorful expanses of ceramic tile. Sometimes big ellipses are cut from them, creating a subliminal suggestion both of masks and Ku Klux Klan hoods. In the best painting the ellipses rain down like spearheads. The works are completed (or elegantly defaced) with spray paint, scratchy daubs of black soap and big, velvety pours of the melted soap mixture.

In their colorfulness and use of photography these pieces represent a new course for Mr. Johnson, and combine aspects of the work of Richard Prince and Julian Schnabel with his own sense of urgency. They seem a bit muddled so far, but that may be part of the point. Ambiguity is a frequent tactic: Escape could refer to a getaway to a vacation paradise, or to evading slave-traders who tore Africans from the paradise they already inhabited.

"Fly Away" is on view through Oct. 22 at Hauser & Wirth, 511 West 18th Street, Chelsea; 212-790-3900; hauserwirth .com. Antoine Baldwin will perform on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 3-5 p.m., and Saturdays, 1-4 p.m.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TAKE NISHIMURA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Above, one of a set of six works by Mr. Johnson titled "Untitled Anxious Audience," part of the exhibition at Hauser & Wirth in Chelsea; left, "Antoine's Organ."

If you choose to leave the large arena of face paintings through a second door, you'll find yourself in another small gallery, and a kind of banquet hall. Three handsome paintings (or reliefs) adorn the walls, contrasting mirrored tile with either white tile or burnt red oak, similarly completed with the black soap and spray paint. Their Deco vibe may momentarily distract you from the large inverted stick figures formed by the mirrored tiles that dominate each piece, all titled "Falling Man." He's a rudimentary, early Pac-Man-like creature, a free-falling loser in a video game or real life. Once you see this mirror man who only reflects, the works take on a sudden desperation.

The mood fits the sculpture at the gallery's center. Titled "Untitled (shea butter table)," it consists of a large walnut table burned with brands and lopsidedly draped with a Persian rug (another valued non-Western commodity) on which rest large chunks of the yellow shea butter. One of the world's first moisturizers and a major ingredient of black soap, this butter is made from the seeds of the African shea tree. Prized by the ancient Egyptians, it is still used by cosmetics manufacturers today. Here it suggests soft gold that has been fought over — many chunks are shattered — or perhaps David Hammons's disintegrating snowballs.

"Fly Away" culminates in a final large gallery with "Antoine's Organ," a type of installation Mr. Johnson has developed over the past four years and has not shown in New York before. At once exultant and instructive, this large, looming rectangle of black metal shelving is profuse with leafy potted plants and some cacti — a bit of real Eden to pore over, become intimate with. The shelves also hold recurring stacks of books by black authors, from W. E. B. Du Bois's 1903 "The Souls of Black Folk" to Mr. Coates's 2015 effort, as well as the Alcoholics Anonymous handbook, whose cover is entirely black.

Renée Green's "Import/Export Funk Office" (1992-93) may come to mind: similar shelving that presented material mapping the flow of hip-hop music among several cities. Mr. Johnson's work also includes four short videos he made in the early 2000s, sometimes humorously focused on blackness; there's also more shea butter, sometimes crumbled on Persian rugs, sometimes carved with expressionistic faces. Most planters were hand-built and glazed by Mr. Johnson, and often exceedingly beautiful. This again is a new, promising move.

Finally, high inside the shelving is a gleaming upright piano on which the pianist and producer Antoine Baldwin, also known as Audio B.L.K, plays his own flowing jazz compositions Tuesdays and Wednesdays, from 3 to 5 p.m., and Saturdays from 1 to 4 p.m. They are transporting, but the piece is equally engrossing in silence.

"Antoine's Organ," which might be called a conservatory in the form of a library, is outstanding. It thoughtfully assembles several of life's essentials: knowledge, nature and art, along with incessant growth and exchange — a combination that should foster tolerance.

Smith, Roberta, “A Mixed-Media Focus on Race,” *The New York Times*, Weekend Arts II, September 16, 2016, pp. C15, C21

At Rashid Johnson's exhibition, “Fly Away”: left, one of three works titled “Untitled Escape Collage”; right, visitors to the show are reflected in one of three works titled “Falling Man.”

Lynne, Jessica, “Where anxiety lives: Jessica Lynne on Rashid Johnson,” *TheArtNewspaper.com*, Exhibitions, November 6, 2015

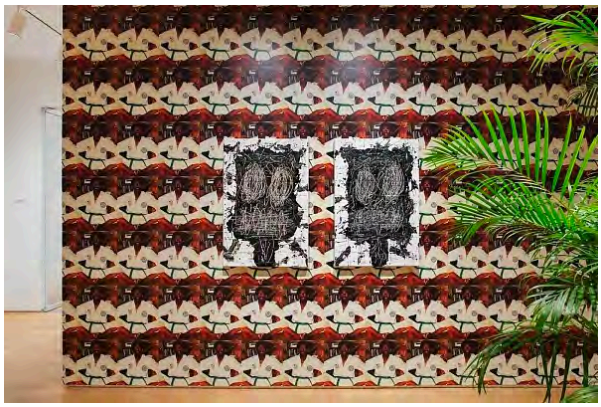
THE ART NEWSPAPER

EXHIBITIONS

Where anxiety lives: Jessica Lynne on Rashid Johnson

The artist’s Drawing Center exhibition channels the disquiet of black life

by JESSICA LYNNE
6 November 2015



Installation view of Rashid Johnson: Anxious Men at The Drawing Center in New York. Courtesy of The Drawing Center. Photo by Jose Andres Ramirez

Rashid Johnson is not “post-black.” The term, which has been used to describe his work since his participation in the exhibition Freestyle at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2001, was coined by the museum’s then-chief curator Thelma Golden (she is now the director) to refer to those who reject labels like “black artist”—“though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness,” she wrote in the exhibition’s catalog. When Claire Gilman, a senior curator at the Drawing Center in New York, used the term to introduce Johnson to a small crowd gathered for a walk-through of his current solo show, Anxious Men, the artist offered a humorous pushback: “I’m currently black,” he said with a laugh. It was meant for comic relief, but it struck at the seriousness of the exhibition.

Anxious Men is Johnson’s attempt to grapple with “negrosis,” a phrase he uses to describe the relationship between blackness and anxiety. The show, which includes a group of portraits drawn onto white tile with black wax soap, is a clear meditation on the social circumstances many black men face daily, such as the possibility of police brutality. It is also, Johnson explained during the walk-through, his attempt to communicate these circumstances to his young son.

Though Johnson’s approach to figuration is quite abstract, it is not difficult to detect melancholy. The expressions of the depicted men are overwhelmingly sombre. There is little variation in the work except in size. The works are mounted onto walls covered in wallpaper with a repeating photograph of Johnson’s father. In the photo, his dad sits cross-legged in a taekwondo uniform. On the bookshelf in the background, there is a copy of The Autobiography of Malcolm X. Johnson’s father wears the expression of a man concerned about parenthood or perhaps, more specifically, about his own ability to be a black father to a black son in this world: negrosis. Johnson’s use of repetition in the photograph and in the drawings implies that this is an unavoidable anxiety.

Lynne, Jessica, “Where anxiety lives: Jessica Lynne on Rashid Johnson,” *TheArtNewspaper.com*, Exhibitions, November 6, 2015

Rashid Johnson, Untitled Anxious Men (2015). Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo by Martin Parsekian

The exhibition is framed by the soundtrack to the 1977 comedy film Watermelon Man, directed by Melvin Van Peebles. In the film, a white insurance salesman wakes up one morning to find that he has become black. His identity crisis—navigating the world as a perceived threat, as a black man—emphasises the truth of Johnson’s work: that to be “currently black” is a fraught lived experience.

Yet Johnson is never didactic. Aside from the score and wallpaper, there are no other allusions to race. There are no explicit markers that refer to black American life, nor pointed messages condemning or acknowledging acts of police brutality. And still a mood of introspection looms over his portraits and we are made to contend with an artist who refuses to divorce himself from the social realities of this world.

Those familiar with his work—which often takes the form of mixed-media sculptures and installations—might be surprised that the Drawing Center is home to this exhibition. It is the first time Johnson has exhibited drawings. Still, his signature approach to materials is recognisable. Black wax soap is consistently part of his work. Together, the sound, drawings and wallpaper create

As I walked through the gallery, I was confronted by my own negotiations with identity. Do I too suffer from negrosis? Is there a remedy for this diagnosis? Zora Neale Hurston once wrote that she did not weep at the world because “I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.” Each day, I wake with the intention of sharpening my own oyster knife, and some days I fail at that task. How can I assume post-blackness if the world sees me as nothing but? Like Johnson, I have not yet transcended the material consequences of my blackness, of which anxiety is part.

Yet the cultural specificity of Johnson’s preoccupations does not impede a universal reach. Indeed, it is as if Johnson is asking us all: Wh ere does your anxiety live?

Jessica Lynne is a writer, arts administrator and co-editor of the online journal, Arts.Black

Rashid Johnson: Anxious Men, The Drawing Center, New York, until 20 December

Shaw, Cameron, "Looking Deeply at the Art of Rashid Johnson," *The New York Times*, Arts, November 1, 2015, AR 14

JIMMY JOHNSON, VIA RASHID JOHNSON/HAUSER & WIRTH

RASHID JOHNSON/HAUSER & WIRTH

JOSE ANDRES SAMBRA/ VIA THE DRAWING CENTER

Look at This Through Other Works

Tracing a pathway of images through Rashid Johnson's art.

By CAMERON SHAW

As John Berger explained in his book "Ways of Seeing," the meaning of images is changed by what we see alongside them. The Internet exaggerates this potential of looking and thinking about works of art, with galaxies of images — relevant and not — available at your fingertips. But looking broadly in the real world can be just as productive. Here is a selection of artworks (all currently or recently on view in New York City) that can help visitors navigate "Anxious Men," an exhibition of work by Rashid Johnson, on display at the Drawing Center in SoHo through Dec. 20.

"Anxious Men" combines scrawled drawings, undulating wallpaper, houseplants and a screeching soundtrack. It's a departure from the found-object assemblages with sensuous Shea butter that were the highlights of previous shows like "Message to Our Folks," a solo exhibition that originated at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2012. This one-room installation is distinctly flat, which is not a slight. Through this visual flattening, Mr. Johnson compresses the history of how black identities are presented and perceived.

The series of loose portraits in black soap and wax animates what Mr. Johnson has termed the "now space" of being a black man in America: characterized by fear. The portraits have an undeniable urgency. Mr. Johnson's handling of materials is visceral; the quasi-faces fill their white frames in a way that feels unavoidable, necessary. Yet he places these portraits against a backdrop from the 1970s: The wallpaper is made from a repeating photograph of Mr. Johnson's father, Jimmy Johnson; the soundtrack is Melvin Van Peebles's song "Love, That's America" from his film "Watermelon Man," also on repeat. The effect is deliberately out of time, a common feature of Mr. Johnson's work, which frequently mines the cultural markers of his upbringing just outside of Chicago.

CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, VIA WHITNEY MUSEUM

MALICK SIDIBÉ/JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

GORDON PARKS, VIA GORDON PARKS FOUNDATION

Top left, Rashid Johnson's father, Jimmy. Below that, one of Rashid Johnson's untitled works from the "Anxious Men" series. Above, the Rashid Johnson exhibition at the Drawing Center. Far left, "Portrait of My Grandmother" by Archibald Motley. Near left, a work by Malick Sidibé.

Shaw, Cameron, "Looking Deeply at the Art of Rashid Johnson," *The New York Times*, Art, November 1, 2015, AR 14

But Mr. Johnson's new works are tinged with sadness and despair. If his penchant for retro once felt proud and self-aware, it now reads as a melancholic reminder of the reductive popular understanding of black male identity.

Twelve untitled pieces in "Anxious Men" rely on the same basic motif: a rectangular head atop a spindly neck, round eyes bugging out, a gash mouth indistinguishably frozen between smile and grimace. They are not the polished intellectuals of his "The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club" photographs or the graceful movers of his video "The New Black Yoga"; they are vulnerable men on the verge of a breakdown — messy, cartoonish, stressed out, brutalized.

The exhibition "Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist" at the Whitney Museum of American Art offers one lens through which we might view "Anxious Men." Motley's early career portraits — like that of his paternal grandmother, from 1922 — sought to reflect the interiority of his subjects as a challenge to stereotypic depictions of black life. Motley wrote, "I sincerely hope that with the progress the Negro has made, he is deserving to be represented in his true perspective, with dignity, honesty, integrity, intelligence and understanding." This earnest stance was contradicted later in Motley's own work, but Mr. Johnson's anxiety can be read, at its essence, as a failure of this time to ever arrive in popular American culture.

Mr. Johnson smears and scratches his mixture of black soap and wax, allowing it to cake, clump and splatter. Against the backdrop of sterile, white tiles, it is sometimes hard to look at, like something has been exposed and not meant to be seen.

At the same time, his treatment of these materials is deeply engaged with the history of painting, particularly the black monochrome, which is even more explicitly referenced in his earlier "Cosmic Slop" series, also made of black soap and wax. "Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting," on view at the Guggenheim, contains several examples of that Italian artist's tar paintings, like "Nero Contrame" (1950), in which an underpainting lies below the visible surface. The color black becomes a study in nuance: what could appear flat is rich, textural and layered, not simply an act of negation or an absence.

PABLO INIGUEZ, VIA MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Mr. Johnson has used this 1977 image of his father in previous installations. Taken the year the artist was born, the photograph shows his father wearing a taekwondo uniform, looking self-possessed and open. He is seated before a collection of books and electronic equipment that have factored into other of Mr. Johnson's sculptural works, offering a way of understanding his father as a man of wide-ranging personal tastes, a man seemingly resistant to the flattening that the "Anxious Men" fear most, the flattening that puts them in mortal danger.

Gordon Parks's photograph of Black Panthers, which was recently on display as part of the Whitney's inaugural exhibition, represents a turning point for black masculinity in the media. The formidable collective identity of the Panthers in Parks's image counters the eclectic individualism of Mr. Johnson's father. And Parks's photograph was taken the same year as the release of "Watermelon Man," a satire in which a white man wakes up to find that he's black (the role was played by Godfrey Cambridge, partly in whiteface). The specter of these two references, which suggest that to be black can be seen as both a grave threat and a laughing matter, is the heart of the contradiction that plagues Mr. Johnson's "Anxious Men."

The artist mined history to create a sense of timelessness in his show "Anxious Men."

The wallpaper as aggregate, in its repetition and patterning, gives way to a host of associations of its own, evoking empowerment and agitation. The strong horizontal rhythm and Pan-African color scheme recalls David Hammons's "African-American Flag" (1990), currently flying in front of MoMA P.S.1 as part of "Greater New York." In Mr. Hammons's design, elements of the black-liberation flag are combined with the flag of the United States, but neither completely subsumes the other. Instead the two coexist — suggesting that being black and American contains a persistent, perhaps irreconcilable, tension.

ALBERTO BURRI, ADAGP, PARIS

And yet there's a buoyancy to the wallpaper's excessive quality, mirrored by a Malick Sidibé photo of a young man, now on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the exhibition "In and Out of the Studio: Photographic Portraits From West Africa." Mr. Sidibé's photographs of Mali youth were largely discovered by European and American audiences in the 1990s and have defined an image of a cool and confident West Africa, compatible with the positive sense of Pan-Africanism at the root of Mr. Johnson's use of Afro-centric cultural materials. Mr. Sidibé has used the same striped curtain in his studio since 1960, the surfeit of pattern becoming shorthand for the exuberant, textile traditions of the diaspora.

Above, "Nero Catrame" a work from 1950 by Alberto Burri. Above that, a photograph of members of the Black Panthers from 1970 by Gordon Parks. Far left, "African-American Flag," from 1990, by David Hammons.

Ahmed, Fatema, “Rashid Johnson,” *Apollo Magazine*, August 29, 2015, p. 16-17

Ahmed, Fatema, "Rashid Johnson," *Apollo Magazine*, August 29, 2015, p. 16-17

RASHID JOHNSON

37
NEW YORK

The most striking exhibit in Rashid Johnson's recent solo show, 'Smile', at Hauser & Wirth in London was the wallpaper. The walls of one section of the gallery were covered in a repeating print of a notoriously ambiguous photograph by Elliott Erwitt: a 1950 portrait in which a black boy from Pittsburgh holds a toy gun to his right temple, beaming as he does so. On the walls hung rectangular bronze panels, with sections cut out of them, and splashed in places with the mixture of black soap and wax that Johnson often uses. In the middle of the room stood *Fatherhood*: a sculpture consisting of a frame of steel cubes, on which Johnson had placed houseplants, books, and busts made of shea butter (another favourite material). Beyond a partition wall hung a series of black soap and wax paintings on white ceramic tiles, called *Untitled Anxious Men*.

The Chicago-born, Brooklyn-based artist has a knack for creating eerie, quasi-domestic environments – of 'hijacking the domestic', as he puts it; the mishmash of unorthodox materials and traditional artistic forms is typical of his work. The bronze works have a personal association. They derive from a ritual of his mother's, which was to bronze her children's shoes – a popular custom in the 1970s and '80s, he explains. And when he stumbled across the Erwitt image, he realised it was the glue for the show: 'I was thinking about the boy and about my childhood, and about memory production and anxiety and trying to put all those things together.'

Johnson's formal training – first at Columbia College, Chicago, then at the Art Institute of Chicago – was in photography. Since then, he has become a conceptual artist who is as interested in the individual objects he creates as in the overall effect they produce. 'I'm very interested in the making of my work as objects,' he explains. 'It's a very important aspect of how things come to life for me… More often than not I'll have an idea and then seek out the material that illustrates it. I don't feel the need to use oil paint exclusively, or silver gelatin for photographs.'

In 2012, Johnson had a solo exhibition in his hometown, at MCA Chicago, which presented his preoccupations of the previous 14 years in objects that blended the personal with themes from black American history. In the same year, Johnson's first solo exhibition in the UK, 'Shelter' at the South London Gallery, drew on the same sources. Bringing together his interests in the history of postcolonial African countries and in psychotherapy, Johnson asked himself, 'What would it look like if Mobutu Sese Seko were to get Freudian analysis? What would that space look like? What would that daybed look like? Sometimes I will just produce funny questions and then use the artwork as an opportunity to illustrate those questions.'

For all the playfulness, there's an undeniably serious undertow to his work. Johnson is an artist who is interested in anxiety and fear, and contemporary American society – the relations between police and black men in particular – gives him plenty to be anxious about and explore. 'We're best when we admit [fear] exists,' he says.

Fatema Ahmed

Fatherhood, 2015
Rashid Johnson (b. 1977)
Black steel, grow lights, plants, wood, shea butter, books, 351×305.5×152.5cm
Installation view of 'Rashid Johnson. Smile' at Hauser & Wirth London, 2015

Dover, Caitlin, “How Rashid Johnson’s Powerful Work Conveys Ideas of Flight,” *Blogs.Guggenheim.org,* August 10, 2015

GUGGENHEIM

How Rashid Johnson’s Powerful Work Conveys Ideas of Flight

by Caitlin Dover

Five African American men stand on a deserted beach; above them, the sky is tinged with the pink of a sunrise or sunset. Dressed in identical outfits of black and white, they each stand on a Persian rug laid over the sand. Slowly, the men begin to perform fluid movements that are evocative of various categories of dance and exercise: they hold balanced poses, expertly wield wooden staffs, twirl and launch themselves into the air.

This is artist Rashid Johnson’s 2011 video work The New Black Yoga, now on view in the Guggenheim’s exhibition Storylines: Contemporary American Art. A rug like the ones shown in the work lies in front of the monitor showing the video, allowing visitors, as Johnson puts it in the interview above, to “embrace the work.” “It’s really my nature to create an environment,” he says.

Speaking to the activity enacted by the men in his film, he mentions that he tried yoga at one point in his life to alleviate anxiety. “At that time, I started to think about the idea of movement, and how I could move to de-stress.” Johnson was also interested in the concept and implications of leaping free of the earth. Here, he mentions a group of virtuoso tumblers who performed in Chicago when he was growing up—“incredible athletes” who were practically able to soar—and Virginia Hamilton’s influential 1985 children’s book The People Could Fly. The book includes a story of a winged African people who lose their powers when they are enslaved in America, but then regain their magical wings and fly to freedom. Johnson says the video piece incorporates this “idea of black characters jumping into space, and the challenge that they presented to gravity . . . this idea of the attempt at flight. Throughout [the film], there [are] a lot of opportunities for them to try to leave the ground, almost mimicking flight.” He adds, “That [is] an aspect of the film that I think really begins to tell the story of why I made it.”

Elephant Magazine, Issue 22, Spring 2015, p. 164-169

The project asks a host of other questions of the viewer, too, some of which relate pointedly to all those people and social phenomena not shown in the images. As Thomas says: 'White women are considered to be the most valuable in the world. If this is how the most valuable bodies are represented, how are others treated?'

Some friends have expressed a worry that the project might be seen as further entrenching the patriarchal male gaze. 'I was like: I hope not!' But of course it's contentious territory for a male artist—the fact that Thomas is an African-American male artist only further complicates the question since, as he remarks: 'Black men have been killed in this country for looking at a white woman the wrong way or whistling at a white woman.

'But if you ask me: Is this a project a woman should be making? I would say it is.' It's intended, he says, as 'a provocation rather than a final statement'. As with his first *Unbranded* series, 'The complexities, the hypocrisy, the contradictions, are what it's all about.'

Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915–2015 *opens at Jack Shainman Gallery on 10 April*

RASHID JOHNSON

POST-MASTER

RASHID JOHNSON first came to attention in 2001 in *Freestyle*, the show that launched the idea of 'post-black art'. Though it has since drawn further labels—atemporal, aesthetic-conceptualist—his bold practice continues to defy categorization. Text: **FISUN GÜNER**

Rashid Johnson's most recent exhibition in London at Hauser & Wirth couldn't have felt more politically charged in terms of the current state of race relations in the US. High-profile cases of young black men killed by the police (who all appear to have immunity from the law), including a 12-year-old boy in Cleveland shot dead by a policeman in November last year while playing with a toy gun, have once again highlighted the issue of police institutional racism.

When I go to Mayfair to meet the artist, I find the walls of the main gallery papered over with repeated images of a black-and-white photo by Magnum photographer Elliott Erwitt. Taken in 1950, *Pittsburgh (Black Boy with Gun to his Head)* depicts a young black kid grinning broadly while pointing a toy gun—though the gun might pass for a small replica, rather than a toy—at his temple. It's an image with which Johnson has long been familiar, having first come across it as a 17-year-old assiduously prepping for art school in his local library. Awaiting his first term in the fine art department of Chicago's Columbia College, Johnson spent a lot of time in the library afraid that his fellow students might shame him with their vast knowledge of art history. Seduced by the abstractions of Clyfford Still, Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock, he also became fascinated by street photography.

'I wasn't aware of street photography before that,' Johnson, who's now 37, says. 'I thought art photography was more Ansel Adams—landscapes and photographs of flowers—so finding this more gritty street photography was really a learning experience for me.'

Rashid Johnson *Untitled (daybed I)*, 2012, branded red oak, zebra skin, black soap, wax, rug.

Elephant Magazine, Issue 22, Spring 2015, p. 164-169

'And then I came across the Erwitt image, which I've since used in a number of works, though this is the first time I've used it in multiplicity, as a way to frame an exhibition. And I think the thing that makes that image so dark, so loaded and complex—because, really, if you think about it, it's just a kid playing with a toy—is that it's a dark black boy in a black-and-white photograph that obviously reads from an earlier time—from the 50s and 60s—and that speaks to our concerns about segregation and about black Americans under these circumstances. And so then we start to project.'

The issue of segregation is a live one for Johnson. He moved from Chicago to NewYork ten years ago, having grown up in Evanston, a fairly affluent suburb 12 miles north of downtown Chicago (his mother is a professor of African-American history). 'Chicago, without question, has an issue with segregation,' he says. 'It was really institutionally built to separate the races. When I went to college I really began to see how much blacks and whites were divided. I mean, I noticed it when I was growing up, but this was entirely a new experience for me.' New York, which has a 'far more developed sense of diversity', couldn't be more different, he adds.

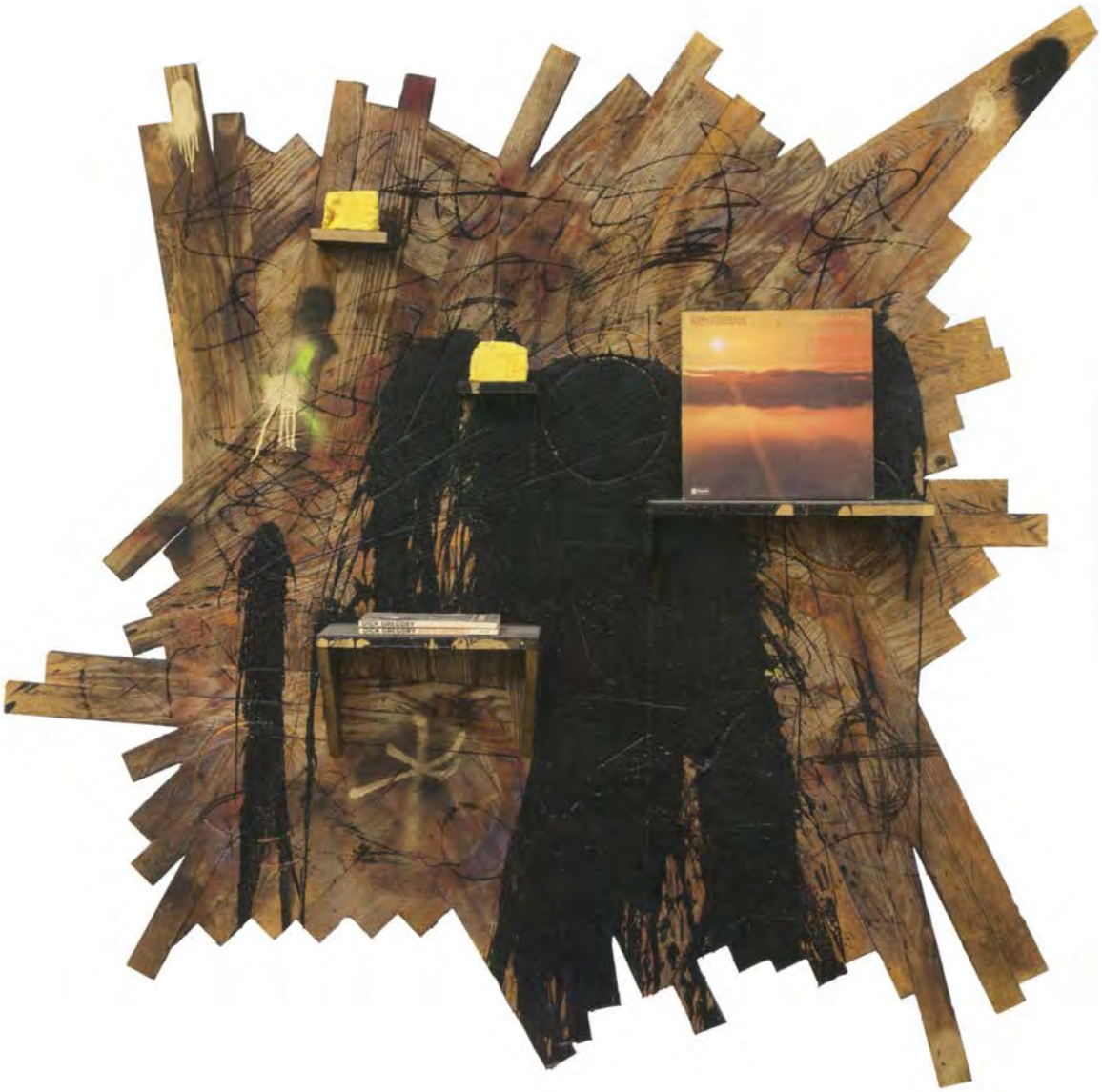
"IN NEW YORK THERE'S LESS RECOGNITION OF SOMEONE'S DIFFERENCE BECAUSE YOU ARE SO MUCH MORE CONSISTENTLY SURROUNDED BY DIFFERENT PEOPLE. SO EVERYONE IS IN A SENSE 'THE OTHER'"

'There are significantly diverse racial groups in NewYork,' Johnson explains. 'So I think as a result of that there's an inherent tolerance, less recognition of someone's difference because you are so much more consistently surrounded by different people. So everyone is in a sense "the other". There's this tremendous sense that people are coming to NewYork with the same goal,' Johnson says. 'And that goal is to experience NewYork, or to strive for something, to search out opportunities. So many people who go there come to it with ambition, whereas most other cities in America, people are just from that city. They haven't ventured outside their own experience to get there.'

Johnson, who now lives in Manhattan, moved to the city in order to gain further exposure as a young artist, fully aware that it was either NewYork, or that second art capital of America, Los Angeles. Another reason for the move was that he was simply hungry for new experiences. 'Home had always been Chicago, which has incredible architecture and great beauty, and there's the people and the food, but I felt ready for that change. I felt I needed that change, and those other experiences, both for my work and for myself.'

Rashid Johnson *Message to our Folks*, installation view, mca Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago ıl., 2012. **Overleaf: Rashid Johnson** *Sunshine*, 2014, burned red oak flooring, black soap, wax, shea butter, vinyl, book.

Elephant Magazine, Issue 22, Spring 2015, p. 164-169



Elephant Magazine, Issue 22, Spring 2015, p. 164-169

PHOTO: MARTIN ARAMBASIC

"JAZZ IS REALLY THE SOUL OF THE WAY I THINK ABOUT ART BECAUSE OF ITS IMPROVISATION"

Johnson had already shown in galleries in both Chicago and New York when he was included in a groundbreaking group show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which is devoted to giving contemporary African-American artists a still much-needed platform, in 2001.

Curated by the museum's then deputy director, now director, Thelma Golden, *Freestyle* showcased 28 young black artists, 11 women and 17 men. In the exhibition's catalogue Golden used the term 'post-black art' to describe the work of a 20- and 30-something generation of black artists who were 'adamant about not being labelled "black" artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness'. For the show, Johnson showed three large-format photographic portraits of a homeless man he had met in Chicago. Hand-brushed with mineral pigments, the portraits glowed with a rich, painterly sheen, like Old Masters.

What does he think of the term now? Should we consider, 14 years on, using the term 'post-post-black'? 'I understand why curators come up with such terms,' Johnson says equably. 'I think it makes sense for them to do it, as a way of giving the viewer the opportunity and the language to look into what the artists might be trying to do. But I'm currently in an exhibition in New York [*The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*, at MoMA] where we're described as "atemporal" artists. So I'm "atemporal", I'm "post-black", I'm an "aesthetic conceptualist"—all these things have been projected on to my practice. Obviously, to all of them, it was never my expectation to fit whatever those things were describing. But I'm fine with that. And yeah, it's a little reductive and it doesn't look wholly at my work, but I'm fine with it—though I do always say that I find myself to be still "presently black".'

Johnson works in a wide range of domestic and consumer materials, using products such as black soap with which to paint, and moulded blocks of bright yellow shea moisturizing butter, adding these to various large-scale installations. Both are products used by African-American consumers. Mirror units, the glass cut into mosaic pieces and often smashed or cracked in places, also feature in his work, as do pot plants and other ordinary items associated with the home.

You can also find books by African-American authors and vinyl record covers featuring jazz musicians he admires propped on to shelves. In the Hauser exhibition an Ikea-type black steel shelving unit—he mentions the serial units of Sol LeWitt as well as those of Donald Judd, whose 'lack of gesture' he admires—was also installed in the main gallery, surrounded by all those Elliott Erwitt reproductions, as

Rashid Johnson *Another Star*, 2014, bronze panel, black soap, wax.

Elephant Magazine, Issue 22, Spring 2015, p. 164-169

well as improvised-looking black paintings in which the boy's huge grin was repeated as a white cut-out shape, like sinister, disembodied minstrel grins. The unit teemed with potted plants under hot, glowing grow lights—in an additional nod to Dan Flavin—and featured mounds of shea butter crudely carved or moulded to resemble huge primitive head. The piece was called *Fatherhood*, borrowing the title of a book containing comic anecdotes and observations about fatherhood by Bill Cosby a small stack of which provided a makeshift plinth for a pot plant.

Even before the allegations of rape surrounding the actor and comedian, Johnston had been interested in Cosby as a 'complex and dark figure', one who, throughout his career, has been outspoken about the perceived failures of the black community, as fathers, as mothers, as citizens. The one-dimensional archetype of the good father that he most famously embodied in his role as Dr. Heathcliff Huxstable in *The Cosby Show*, and the rather more uncomfortable reality, provided an opportunity for Johnson to invest aspects of his work with dense narrative layers exploring ideas of race, manhood and fatherhood (Johnson himself has a three-year-old son).

Anxiety, neurosis and psychotherapy are also clearly themes that are given free rein in his work. A recent series of black soap, wax and spray enamel paintings on white bathroom tiles was simply called *Anxious Men*. They were given a gallery to themselves in his Hauser exhibition. With their huge blob-heads and scratched-in gestural marks, they resembled the playfully naive yet wretchedly tender Art Brut figures of Jean Dubuffet, although the paintings were executed in a far looser, improvised manner. Johnson listens to a lot of jazz when he's in the studio. He listens to hip-hop, and artists like the Grateful Dead and Tom Waits too, but, he says, 'Jazz is really the soul of the way I think about art because of its improvisation.'

Given the way anxiety and the fractured self are abiding themes in his work, it's not surprising to hear that Johnson's been undergoing psychoanalysis for the past four years. New York is the artist's adopted city, and there, as he concedes, analysis is 'almost mandatory'.

David Salle *Ballantines*, 2014, oil, acrylic and pigment print on linen.

Knight, Christopher, "On high ground with 'Plateaus'," *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 2014, p. D5

FREDRIK NILSEN David Kordansky Gallery

"PLATEAUS," a large installation by Rashid Johnson, reframes the cube form.

On high ground with 'Plateaus'

"The most interesting characteristic of the cube," artist Sol Lewitt once said, discussing the form that generated much of his influential sculpture, "is that it is relatively uninteresting."

Given the enormous influence of Lewitt's art, his "uninteresting" form eventually became very interesting indeed. Like the Yucatan jungle swallowing up an ancient Mayan pyramid, the cube was inevitably colonized and overgrown.

Rashid Johnson swallows up Lewitt's open-cube sculptures in his provocative new "Plateaus," a monumental installation at David Kordansky Gallery in its handsome new location. One of the more interesting aspects of Johnson's use of this "uninteresting" form is the way he further frames it within a highly personal and political context.

A nearly 20-foot-tall step-pyramid of open cubes in black steel, "Plateaus" has here been invaded not by wild nature but by domestic potted plants. Rolled-up rugs, fluorescent tubes (in this context a cross between grow-lights and Dan Flavin light-sculptures) and slabs of shea butter, some of it formed into rudimentary sculptural busts, also fill the cubic shelves.

Shea butter is a common yellowish-ivory fat extracted from the nut of an African tree, which has been used in cosmetics and ointments since ancient Egyptian times. Johnson's shea-butter busts stand like sentinel ghosts in his industrial pyramid machine.

Stacks of books also turn up in the underbrush — nearly 60 of them, including seven copies of the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous and six of Harvard law professor Randall Kennedy's "Sellout: The Politics of Racial Betrayal," a controversial study of the practice of currying favor within white-dominated society. Richard Wright's classic 1940 novel, "Native Son," is by far the most numerous — here as well as in five wall-relief sculptures in an adjacent room. "Plateaus" holds 46 used copies.

These three books present religion-derived self-help from self-destructive delirium; a pressing dilemma faced by any African American artist working in white-majority culture; and a story of tragic inevitability and personal redemption.

They create a trenchant structural outline as distinct as Lewitt's open cubes. Johnson's homey pyramid contains multiple plateaus — understood as occupying high ground while simultaneously acknowledging that progress is stalled.

David Kordansky Gallery, 5130 W. Edgewood Place, (323) 935-3030, through Oct. 29. Closed Sun. and Mon. *www.davidkordanskygallery.com*

Morton, Tom, “The History Man,” *Frieze*, Issue 165, September 2014, pp. 134-139

Morton, Tom, “The History Man,” *Frieze*, Issue 165, September 2014, pp. 134-139

THE HISTORY MAN

Rashid Johnson talks to *Tom Morton* about fiction, humour and homage

Morton, Tom, "The History Man," *Frieze*, Issue 165, September 2014, pp. 134-139

'I am an American, Chicago born – Chicago, that sombre city – and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way.' So begins Saul Bellow's seminal novel *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), although these words might equally serve to introduce Rashid Johnson, an artist born in 1977 under Chicago skies, whose early work in photography has given way to a practice that now embraces sculpture, wall assemblages, gestural abstractions and (more rarely) films, performances and curating. What weaves these strands together is an abiding interest in the African-American cultural canon, and a treatment of the historical record that renders it as malleable, and as full of possibilities, as the substances (among them shea butter, black wax and black soap) he deploys in his work to alchemical effect.

Johnson has said that the artist 'functions as a time-traveller', and has described his work 'as a means or portal to effectively rewrite history, not as a revision but as a work of fiction. I'm interested in using it as an agency to address time.' Nowhere was this more evident than is his 2013 restaging of Amiri Baraka's play *Dutchman* (1964) – an extraordinary meditation on race, sex, violence and complicity – in the Russian and Turkish Bathhouse in New York's East Village as part of Performa 13, a production that will travel to Chicago's Red Square Bathhouse this September. We met in Athens and London to discuss narrative, spirituality, humour, homage and sharing a steam room with the Reverend Jesse Jackson.

TOM MORTON
Your recent exhibition at The George Economou Collection, Athens, was titled 'Magic Numbers'. In physics, this term is associated with an unusual degree of atomic stability, making it an intriguing title for an artist who often works with unstable materials, and for whom fluidity – of forms, formats and histories – is key.

RASHID JOHNSON
It started with a play on physics. I was making all this work for the show, and these numbers kept popping up: a film with five characters, a triptych of bronzes, seven gestures in a painting. I was listening to De La Soul's album *De La Soul Is Dead* (1991), and I got to thinking about the group's earlier track 'The Magic Number' (1988). Naming it after that came from a poetic space. Every time you talk to somebody about a number, it has some sort of history: 'Oh seven, man, you know what seven is.' Or five, or three: it's the idea of numbers as multiplicity, as multiple conscious spaces.

TM *The Economou show centred on a 16mm film work,* The New Black Yoga *(2012), in which we see a group of five young African-American men perform a choreographed routine on a sunset-strafed shoreline, resembling both a dance rehearsal and a paramilitary drill. Why build the show around this particular piece?*

RJ It was an opportunity to put a focus on a part of my project – film – that's been under-discussed. The human form in space, the 'character', hadn't been foregrounded in my work so much recently. It was a great moment to refocus on that, and to refocus on the humour and the narrative of the work, as opposed to the flatness of the painting, or the opportunity with the sculpture for people to leave the narrative at whatever distance they want. This film makes you focus on a narrative structure, makes you try to identify these characters, and then use that as a springboard for understanding the rest of the work in the show. The goofiness of *The New Black Yoga* is really important. It's intended to be 'off'. You don't know what they're doing, what their goal is. The choreography seems totally dismantled. I'd seen Melvin van Peebles's film *Watermelon Man* (1970), which concludes with the protagonist in a room with ten other guys, and they're making this gesture with broomsticks that looks like a militant action. It goes totally unexplained by Van Peebles. The film just ends. I thought to myself: 'Holy shit, I want to finish this.' That's the catalyst for a lot of my projects. I want to expand on a conversation, to help unravel it. It's very much about building.

TM *I'm interested in this idea of 'character' in your work.*

RJ One of the things I've often looked to do in my work is to produce a black character with a tremendous amount of agency – capable, proud, dynamic, uninterrupted – who's negotiating problematic circumstances, but who's essentially able to rise above and grow from those circumstances, almost an example of what Harold Cruse in his 1967 book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* called 'Negro Exceptionalism'! I'm also interested in the potential of describing an even more complex character, who's not necessarily risen from his ordeal, and who's negotiating it in a very fearful way, which doesn't produce a redeeming person, but a flawed person. Unlike a lot of the work by black artists I saw growing up, I'm interested in individual responses to experience, what happens to the person, how *they* respond, the psychological ramifications. It goes beyond race, or specific conditions such as slavery – anybody can go through something that's tragic. Think of the beginning of Albert Camus's *The Outsider* (1942): 'Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure.' He's trying to produce empathy so people don't think he's a fucking piece of shit. That kind of investment in a character's response interests me.

Even when there's no image of a protagonist in the works, as with the shelf pieces, there's a concern with utility, a feeling that someone is supposed to employ them, to ignite them, to bring them to life. He's always been there – in some ways I see him in my own life – and this leads to the idea of multiple consciousnesses. On any given day, he can be dynamic, gifted and exceptional, or fearful, disgusting and dismantled, terribly tragic and flawed. Then there's the audience's interaction with the works, their consideration of how these objects might be viewed, valued, used, respected or disrespected. There's a relationship to narrative-building, to new society building. This strategy has been one that's given me a lot of space to explore, a lot of flexibility, without the inhibitions of autobiography. Making fictions, without necessarily being all that fictional!

TM *You're currently preparing to take your production of Baraka's* Dutchman *to the Red Square Baths in Chicago.*

RJ I grew up having LeRoi Jones's collection of poems, *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), read to me by my mother when I was about four years old; that was my bedtime story. In the late 1960s, Jones changed his name to Amiri Baraka. I've always been fascinated by this transition: the fact that there would never be a gravestone for LeRoi Jones, for instance, so he would effectively live forever. I've always been a fan of Jones's poetry and interested in his activism. I saw a revival of *Dutchman* in 2007 and, a couple of years later, I brought a copy of *Dutchman* to read in the Russian and Turkish Bathhouse in New York. It was an impulsive pick. Baraka's play talks about the heat of the subway, and I started to think about heat and the history of interesting New York black narratives, such as Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing* (1989), where the heat of the summer is the protagonist. Sitting in the bathhouse, I thought: 'This is exactly the space, exactly the opportunity for me to collaborate with Baraka.' It's so much

'I'm interested in individual responses to experience — what happens to the person, how they respond, the psychological ramifications.

Previous page
Cosmic Slop 'Dutchman', 2013, black soap and wax, 245 × 130 × 7 cm

1
Dutchman, 2013,
performance documentation at Performa, New York

2
New Black Yoga, 2011,
film still

Courtesy
Previous page: the artist, George Economou Collection and Hauser & Wirth, London; photograph: Fanis Vlastaras and Rebecca Constantopoulou • 1 the artist and Performa, New York; photograph: Paula Court • 2 the artist and Hauser and Wirth, London

Morton, Tom, “The History Man,” *Frieze*, Issue 165, September 2014, pp. 134-139

about homage, so much about finding a way to intervene, to place yourself in that historical discourse [laughs]. It's always been something I've done, piggybacking off stories, people I'm fascinated with, like in my early photographs *Self-Portrait with My Hair Parted Like Frederick Douglass* (2003) or *Self Portrait Laying on Jack Johnson's Grave* (2006). My mother's a historian, and history always seemed like the most important thing. How do I put myself in it, how do I become a character in it? This leads us back again to narrative literature. An interest in the canon. Being inside the canon. I actually think of the canon like a cannon. Everyone has their own vision of this thing. This expansive, not-incredibly-welcoming finishing space.

TM *Does bringing* Dutchman *to Chicago, the city in which you were raised, have a particular resonance for you?*

RJ I started going to the Red Square Bathhouse at the beginning of graduate school. I had no money, all this anxiety, and it sort of led me to this dungeon, where I could sit and think, and read and sweat. Where else can you go all day for 15 bucks? I fell in love with the place. I'd be there with Armenian businessmen, Mexican businessmen, communists, judges, politicians, Jesse Jackson. These guys all had known each other for 30 years from the bathhouse. Outside, they had different goals, different expectations, different communities. Everyone being disrobed made it very democratic. I felt so privileged to witness it. I was like: 'This is theatre, this place is theatre!' Returning to the Chicago bathhouse to stage *Dutchman* is one of the first times I've had to use my own nostalgia, and place something inside that. I'm excited to see how the play functions there.

TM *A number of your works suggest spiritual, or at least ritualistic, practices, from the altar-like appearance of some of the wall works, to your Beuysian quasi-shamanic use of 'charged' materials such as shea butter, to what appear to be runic devices. Do you have a spiritual practice of your own?*

RJ My family was Catholic but we weren't *really* Catholics – I was just baptized because my mother promised my great-grandmother she'd do it. In some ways, I was always searching. I had the requisite Buddhist moment as an 18-year-old kid, but I didn't find any comfort in trying to invade something that didn't feel sincerely mine. What I've realized is that my practice – and I use that word specifically because I don't like the idea of an artist having a practice; if you're always practicing, then when does the game start? – became my format, my ritual. I don't want to say my religion or my denomination, but it was the most consistent thing in my life. I felt my soul needed it, that I couldn't necessarily live without it. So, it became important to me to keep some forms, some materials and some signifiers very much as part of the ritual act, participating with them, allowing them to grow and take on different attributes, became important to me. I'm not that dissimilar from the person who needs to be in church on Sunday for spiritual fulfilment. I need consistency in different parts of my life – whether that's working out or doing yoga or being in the studio. If I don't have that, I experience a loss of self. I can't necessarily understand what my purpose is. In some ways, when I started to work with ritual tools which had that kind of religiosity, I was playing with the humour of the situation, making it up; but, like all interesting things, it became the story. The humour wasn't lost, but it became the most honest thing I could do.

TM *Does your work require long periods of research?*

RJ I've described myself to friends as a Plumber's Union artist. I get up in the morning, do some physical exercise, play with my kid – I like his energy, the way he leads me into the day. I start work when other people are starting work. It's the idea of the artist as worker, not someone with a special freedom. I've got a couch at the studio, and lots of resource materials. I often begin the working day by reading, looking. I'll call my mother and speak to her about a book she's introduced me to, or call a friend from grad school. Some days are just for research. I tend to get into the labour of my project by the afternoon and finish around five, then maybe have a drink with a friend, then dinner with my family. I also have a therapist I've seen for years. It's just part of my schedule. I talk to my therapist about my work quite a bit, and I'm sure they find it to be one of the more challenging aspects of our meetings!

1

2

Morton, Tom, “The History Man,” *Frieze*, Issue 165, September 2014, pp. 134-139

TM *Over the years, you've made several works that explicitly reference leading African-American artists of older generations, among them your photograph* Self Portrait in Homage to Barkley Hendricks *(2005) and* How Ya Like Me Now *(2010), your 'remix' of David Hammons's* Bliz-aard Ball Sale *(1983). In 2013, you curated the exhibition 'Sam Gilliam: Hard-Edge Paintings 1963–66' at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, presenting early canvases by this still art-historically undervalued African-American artist, predating his breakthrough abandonment of the stretcher, and the 'drape' works for which he's best known.*

RJ That show was very much about hero worship. With a lot of artists's works that I deploy or hybridize in my own, I haven't had a working relationship with them, but I was able to go to Sam's studio, he said: 'Do what you want to do.' I saw a small hard-edged painting, and I asked him when and where he started making them, and he said around 1962 in Washington D.C. At that time, there were constant marches on the city; the world was changing around him: John F. Kennedy is assassinated; Martin Luther King is assassinated. Sam was right there, and he's painting a straight line in baby blue! I'm fascinated by the fact that he was able to think outside of the box, at a time when it was probably very difficult to step outside of an understanding of your position – whether that was embracing Negro Radicalism or Negro Conservatism or any number of stances he could have adopted. He placed himself in a conversation that was very much about art. Art became this oasis, this island. He was in dialogue, say, with Kenneth Noland, at a time when the world was falling down around him. I thought he was amazing for that.

TM *Your sculptures are overwhelmingly made for – and often allude to – interior spaces. One exception is* Shea Butter Irrigation System *(2013), created for the courtyard of the Ballroom, Marfa, in which an agricultural irrigation rig was adapted to anoint the Texas desert with melting gobbets of shea butter, black soap and wax. Does the idea of making further open-air sculptures interest you?*

RJ I'd love to get outside again. That piece was a huge learning experience for me. So much of my material is intended to live inside. Maybe I'm agoraphobic, so it would make sense that my art is too! I love small interior spaces, where you can lay down with a book and nerd out. Being in a big open space is intimidating to me, in art and in life. Maybe it's an obstacle I can overcome.

TM *What's next?*

RJ I'm working on a show for David Kordansky Gallery in September, which explores some of the concerns of Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* (1940), and on a project for the Museum of Modern Art, New York, opening in December; it takes on a single body of my work, the 'Cosmic Slops' (2007–ongoing), which really puts me in a painting conversation. I've never looked at myself as any sort of medium-specific artist. I'm really from that post-medium generation. We're just like: 'Why would

1

2

I be handicapped? What kind of fool would do that?' But to see a specific body of work that exists within the discourse of painting – which is something I've a real investment in, whether that's through performance, mark-making or the mobility of flat space – I'm excited to see how that's going to live. ◆

Tom Morton is a contributing editor of frieze*, a writer and a curator, based in Rochester, UK. His exhibition 'Panda Sex' opens at State of Concept, Athens, Greece, in November.*

Rashid Johnson lives in New York, USA. His exhibition 'Magic Numbers' was held earlier this year at The George Economou Collection, Athens, Greece. His production of Amiri Baraka's 1964 play Dutchman*, commissioned by Performa 13, and restaged with support from Monique Meloche Gallery and MCA Chicago, will be held at Red Square Bathhouse, Chicago, USA, from 16–21 September. His solo show 'Islands' will inaugurate David Kordansky's new space in Los Angeles, USA, from 13 September to 29 October.*

1
Shea Butter Irrigation System, 2013, the Ballroom, Marfa
central pivot irrigation unit, shea butter, black soap, wax, 4.2 × 2.7 × 3.4 m

2
Self-Portrait with My Hair Parted like Frederick Douglass, 2003,
Lambda print, 1.4 × 1.9 m

3
Souls of Black Folk, 2010,
black soap, wax, books, vinyl, brass, shea butter, plants, space rocks, mirrors, gold paint, stained wood, 289 × 316 × 61 cm

Courtesy
1 the artist and Hauser & Wirth, London; photograph: Fredrik Nilsen • 2 the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago • 3 the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, New York photograph: Farzad Owrang

Morton, Tom, “The History Man,” *Frieze*, Issue 165, September 2014, pp. 134-139

‘I’ve never looked at myself as any sort of medium-specific artist.
I’m really from that post-medium generation.
We’re just like: ‘Why would I be handicapped? What kind of fool would do that?’

3

Kunitz, Daniel, “Review: Rashid Johnson’s ‘Magic Numbers’,” *Modern Painters*, August 14, 2014

BLOUIN ARTINFO

Review: Rashid Johnson’s “Magic Numbers”

by Daniel Kunitz, Modern Painters
August 14, 2014

A still from Rashid Johnson’s “The New Black Yoga,” 2011.

“Magic Numbers,” which takes up three floors at the George Economou Collection in Athens (through August 28), makes for a rhythmic, tuneful show. In the center of a large mirror piece, Rashid Johnson’s *Good King*, 2013—one of a number of works commissioned for this show—two identical covers of the singer-songwriter George Benson’s 1975 album *Good King Bad* stand propped on a shelf. One is upside down, the other right side up, so that the inverse images of the singer’s head and raised bare arm seem to form an infinity symbol, or perhaps a yin-yang sign. Such doublings, mirrorings, and repetitions recur throughout Johnson’s work, explicitly recalling a concept the artist has consistently explored, what W.E.B. Du Bois termed double-consciousness. The African-American writer and thinker defined double-consciousness as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

In *Good King*, which is composed of rectangular and square mirror tiles of many different sizes in a manner that recalls Mondrian’s geometric abstractions, the viewer’s reflection, itself a doubling, is also fractured. And as with the album covers, the found objects that are frequently incorporated into Johnson’s work stand as both literal things and transfigured, or metaphorical, components of the artwork. Here, four blocks of shea butter—two quite small, two larger—rest on shelves, as do two potted plants. Interfering with these symmetries are poured splotches of black soap dispersed over the surface of the mirror, like reminders of death in counterpoint to the live plants. Although Johnson utilizes relatively few materials, he constructs of them a dense lattice of associations, a synthesis of oppositions: good and bad, life and death, abstraction and representation, literal and metaphorical.

A table constructed out of mahogany in a midcentury modern style serves as a frame for, as the title has it, a *Shea Butter Landscape*, 2014. Upon the gorgeous expanse of soft yellow moisturizer spread across the top, the artist has inscribed various marks,

Kunitz, Daniel, "Review: Rashid Johnson's 'Magic Numbers'," *Modern Painters*, August 14, 2014

Rashid Johnson's "Good King," 2013

establishing a tensile interplay between gestural expression and hard-edged design. Johnson considers shea butter one of his "meaning materials," evoking Africa and the African diaspora, its plasticity suggesting mutability and changes of state.

Gestures as well as what is arguably the most meaningful of materials, the human body, animate *The New Black Yoga,* 2011, a short film playing in a room with five Oriental rugs on the floor. These echo rugs in the film that are set on a beach, near the waterline, where at sunset five black men enact a series of movements derived from dance, yoga, and martial arts. Johnson made the film after attempting a yoga class in German, a language he doesn't speak, while visiting Berlin. The men wield what look like kung fu fighting staffs, and their fluid, stylized routines emphasize masculinity while mimicking aggression. The wonderful score by Eric Dolphy, a song called *Improvisations and Tukras*, which uses the voice—chanting phrases like ta, dig da tay to tablas and tambouras—as an instrument, reinforces the sense that the piece is about translation or interpretation of movement. Yoga, as those in the West know it, is very much a translation, some would say garbled, of ancient Indian practices.

The rugs on the floor of the *New Black Yoga* installation have been branded (Johnson is known for branding a number of materials, an ingenious recuperation of the horrific slave-era marking device) with palm trees and crosshairs. And while there is little doubt that Johnson's symbols, like his materials, are carriers of meaning, one can easily overdetermine what they actually signify. Johnson is adept at twanging the line between decoration and denotation. The crosshairs image, for example, which reappears here fashioned from black powder-coated steel, in *Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos*, 2012, inevitably suggests targeting and the focusing of sight—whether by the viewer or by the artist remains unclear. Yet it is also a basic abstract motif, meant not just to be beautiful but to beautify.

Consider, too, *Hollywood Shuffle*, 2013, a painting on burned red oak flooring. In it, five pours of black soap create humanoid shapes, calling to mind the five men of the yoga film. Is five the magic number of the show's title? Perhaps. There are five primary pours in another painting from 2013, 1, 2, 4, two on the outermost of its three cast-bronze panels and one in the center. But what of the numbers in the title? The answer might lie in what the pieces in the show share, what Johnson refers to as molested surfaces, something he likens to graffiti.

The sorts of swooping, scribbling, slashing marks that cover the figures in *Hollywood Shuffle* are inscribed across the entire surface of a painting in black soap: *Cosmic Slop "Hotter Than July,"* 2013. It's a worthy addition to the tradition of monochrome black abstraction. But surely we're not meant to decipher its signs. At once violent and elegant, the molestation of the surface in the piece does indeed call to mind a carved tree trunk or heavily tagged wall. Still, the thing about graffiti is that, like Johnson's work, it vibrates between two ranges, of significance and ornamentation. Even when it is indecipherable, even at its most decorative, graffiti means intensely, specifically: *I was here.* In light of that statement, one might deem all artists taggers.

Of one thing we can be certain—Johnson has a keen ear for double meanings. The black soap he consistently employs looks like tar, looks like dirt, and yet is used for cleaning. And so while others ponder which of the many numbers found in this show are "magic numbers," I'll take Johnson the music aficionado at his dyadic word. All his pieces are like tunes: abstract and signifying at the same time, rhythmic, transforming of their audience and magically transforming common elements. Each is its own enchanting number.

Nathan, Emily, “Rashid Johnson: Dutchman, Russian & Turkish Baths, New York,” *Financial Times*, November 7, 2013

FINANCIAL TIMES

Rashid Johnson: Dutchman, Russian & Turkish Baths, New York

By Emily Nathan

Amiri Baraka’s 1964 play is restaged in a suitably sweaty environment

Rashid Johnson's 'Dutchman'

Dutchman, playwright Amiri Baraka’s political allegory of race relations, shocked viewers when initially performed at the Cherry Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village in 1964; it provoked outrage when re-conceived there in 2007; and its latest revival, as a performance artwork by Rashid Johnson for the Performa 13 biennial, leaves its audience sweating. The Chicago artist has retained Baraka’s script, but in place of the set on which the original was staged – a New York City subway car – Johnson has transplanted his version into the moist chambers of the East Village’s historic Russian & Turkish Baths.

As viewers arrive, they are asked to remove their clothing and don a cotton robe before proceeding downstairs, where each of the play’s three acts takes place in a different steam room (warm and wet; cool; scalding). This mise-en-scène ensures that the drama is experienced not only as a narrative but as a progression of physical sensations: the crush of bodies, the smell of burning wood, and the close, oppressive air transform the suffocating space of Baraka’s train-car interior into a visceral reality.

Nathan, Emily, “Rashid Johnson: Dutchman, Russian & Turkish Baths, New York,” *Financial Times*, November 7, 2013

The story opens as Lula – sensual, predatory, white – sidles up to her unwitting prey, a young black man named Clay. She says she caught him staring at her ass, takes a seat, and lets her the robe fall away to reveal a cherry-red bikini. Writhing with discomfort, Clay denies her accusation, and a tortuous seduction begins. Though Lula’s flirtation is abusive, spliced with racist mockery, irony and contempt, her victim is blinded by desire. “You middle-class black bastard,” she sneers, when he declines to get up and dance for her. “Forget your social-working mother for a few seconds and let’s knock stomachs. You ain’t no nigger, you’re just a dirty white man.” But Clay is unfazed.

In the first room, Clay manages to resist Lula’s still-moderated assault with his temerity. In the flat grey light of the second room, the air cools down as things heat up. “Things work on you until you hate them,” she purrs in his ear, and her prescient diagnosis propels us into the third and final room, flaming hot. As the audience oozes sweat and struggles to breathe, the discourse devolves into violence. “You’re afraid of white people!” Lula taunts, and Clay, finally, erupts. “I sit here in this buttoned-up suit to keep myself from cutting all your throats,” he howls. “Murder, just murder, would make us all sane.”

The piece is rife with metaphor: the tiered benches of each steam room recall an amphitheatre, which in turn evokes a Roman tragedy – and if an expectation is created, it is not disappointed. Johnson describes himself as a “post-black artist”; *Dutchman* suggests that race is present all around us, as real and invisible as heat.

★★★★★ *13.performa-arts.org*

Beckwith, Naomi, “A post-black-power child: Rashid Johnson’s historical references enact a complex historical reckoning,” *Flash Art*, Number 290, May/June 2013, pp. 128-131

Beckwith, Naomi, "A post-black-power child: Rashid Johnson's historical references enact a complex historical reckoning," *Flash Art*, Number 290, May/June 2013, pp. 128-131

FEATURE

A post-black-power child

Rashid Johnson*'s historical references enact a complex historical reckoning*

by NAOMI BECKWITH

It was a warm, summer evening in New York, and I found myself dining outdoors with a group of artists, mostly young men, who were speaking in a quick, witty clip about an endless stream of tenuously connected things. There was talk of early Black Sabbath albums; John Lurie's cult TV series *Fishing with John*; little-known, reclusive painters; and beer. Among the group was the artist Rashid Johnson, who slipped in a reference to a television game show entitled *Know Your Heritage.* And no one knew the reference but me. It's not that I had spent that many more hours than everyone else combing the web for odd bits of esoterica; it's just that I grew up in the same place at the same time as Rashid Johnson and was familiar with the Chicago-based quiz show that aired every Saturday in February — *Black History Month* — and tested local high school students on their knowledge of black history.

Born in the decade following the Black Power movement, when there was a sense of social urgency for black people to have knowledge of and pride in black achievements in the United States, I knew most answers to the game show questions and took black history for granted as a basic part of my cultural and formal education. I suspect Rashid Johnson — also a post-Black-Power child with a mind ripe for esoterica — knew most of the answers as well. Indeed, Johnson speaks rather openly about his parents' '70s-era Afro-centrism leading to his own informal education in black history, and it's clear that an early engagement with these historical narratives heavily informs Johnson's interdisciplinary practice. Initially trained in photography in the late '90s, one of Johnson's earliest works is a portrait series that features homeless black subjects — a very early gauntlet thrown down to the tradition of who, in terms of race and class, is assumed to be a worthy subject of a fine-art portrait — and later photo series referenced black historical subjects like the very heroes we would be quizzed about on *Know Your Heritage* such as Thurgood Marshall, Emmett Till and W.E.B. DuBois.

These later series also took on the singular quality of using contemporary subjects such as models, friends or even the artist as stand-ins for these historic figures. In these photos, Johnson goes into a completely subjective mode of representation so that a responsibility toward historical accuracy is kept at arms length and his contemporary community appears equally visible as a subject. By the time Johnson creates the series "New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club," fantasy and fiction wholly provide conceptual structure for the photographic project, and history is an aesthetic exercise. In all of the photo projects, Johnson often used arcane processing techniques or anachronistic staging to lend the works an "aged" patina. Thus Johnson is seen very early on taking up the symbols, tropes and subject of "history," only to turn it on its head as a foil for an immediate, contemporary condition. Johnson's work soon moved into other media, namely text works, sculptural objects and painting, while often returning to photography in many guises. A precocious early sculpture is a John McCracken-esque plexiglas plank filled with the hair product commonly known as "pink lotion." The joke being that pink lotion, long used to give sheen to black hair, now lent an art object the post-minimalist sheen of a Finish Fetish work. Johnson works fluidly with text, and in 2004 he created *Death is Golden* by "writing" that phrase in gold spray paint on paper as a literal pun, a wry take on "street art," and a sly reference to Paul Beatty's historically possible but implausible anti-hero Gunnar Kaufman, who in the 1996 novel *White Boy Shuffle* unintentionally advocates mass suicide for black people.

Johnson came into art-world prominence with his "shelves," post-minimalist sculptural objects that are distinct as their own forms yet also as physical supports for an assemblage of disparate objects such as books, plants, glyphs, albums and incense. In a manner similar to Marcel Broodthaers's way of using common objects as stand-ins for cultural identity, the shelves feel like fetishes from the Afro-centric late '70s, when Johnson was born. The shelves are a study in order balanced with chaos. Some shelves are created with cut mirrored glass, adhered in a gridded, tile-like fashion, with the occasional black splotch dripping down the surface. However, the earliest shelves were framed from wood and over-painted with a mixture of black soap and black wax, acting as a painting as well as an assemblage. Painting is a core language for Johnson, who has contended with the traditions of the monochrome and expressionism since his student years.

The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club (Dr. Minton), 2010. Silver Gelatin Print, 111 x 82 cm. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth, Zurich/ London/New York

Beckwith, Naomi, “A post-black-power child: Rashid Johnson’s historical references enact a complex historical reckoning,” *Flash Art*, Number 290, May/June 2013, pp. 128-131

“Shelter,” 2012. View of the exhibition at the South London Gallery, London. Courtesy David Kordansky, Los Angeles, and Hauser & Wirth, Zurich/London/New York. Photo: Andy Keate

His ongoing “Cosmic Slop” paintings are the technical precursors to the shelves as the first objects to utilize the black soap and wax pigment, a material that conveys Johnson’s painterly gestures — the pouring, pressing and splattering of the pigment — and sometimes his symbolic markings. Materially, the “Cosmic Slop” works are a form of encaustic: a technique created in ancient Egypt that harkens, in more contemporary form, to Jasper Johns’s iconic proto-pop works. Incredibly cryptic, the paintings signal expressionism but also contain ideograms that suggest the channeling of a message from a lost (or future?) civilization whose language we have yet to decode.

All the above works demonstrate how Johnson selects as his sources the history, lore and material culture of black America and wraps them within the form and techniques of art history — much in the same way that David Hammons — whose work Johnson often references — often creates art objects from the material and cultural habits of his Harlem vicinity. Rashid Johnson’s use of historical references are often read as a historical reckoning; at times, Johnson feeds into those slightly activist readings that consider his work an attempt to complicate perceptions of black history and African-American class dynamics. That concern, however, is engendered more by audience reception — a reception already primed by a steady diet of stereotyping, media images and pessimism toward black males. This desire toward complexity is an oft-seen concern among artists of color, and it peaked especially during the heyday of identity politics when Johnson was studying art. That drive toward complexity also follows from an instinctual sense that artworks are somehow competing with mass-media images, possibly because of the easy way in which pop-culture references find their way into fine art practice.

Yet there is something more complex happening on an aesthetic and conceptual level in Johnson’s work that is seen not in the materials and subjects he chooses, but rather in the way he selects and activates those materials. Consider two important things: many of the materials Johnson selects for his objects are books and music created at the key points in his life or intellectual development, and many of the photographic models he chooses are acquaintances. In other words, Johnson’s works speak to his own personal history and identity formation, not a generic black history. But unlike Mary Kelly, say, who used a social “field notes” format as a way of examining one’s personal (read political) life, Johnson’s reflection eschews the master disciplines of

Beckwith, Naomi, “A post-black-power child: Rashid Johnson’s historical references enact a complex historical reckoning,” *Flash Art*, Number 290, May/June 2013, pp. 128-131

science and narrative, and instead revels in fantasy, or else engenders a set of mental associations with objects as in a surrealist game.

Johnson stands on the somewhat dainty shoulders of an artist such as Karen Kilimnik, who brazenly creates sculptures and installations and paintings in which her own sense of self-value and personal narrative begins to intertwine with mass-media culture by way of objects gathered from her personal space. Kilimnik’s work demonstrates how a contemporary artist’s imagination these days tends to be shaped less by primordial drives and more by one’s relationship to an immediate and material culture. The artist then finds oneself in the position to rework these symbols and material over and over again in a continuous process of absorption and discharge that can take on many shapes and forms — or can be formless, as in the case of both Kilimnik’s and Johnson’s abstract works. When faced with an endless stream of references, the key is to avoid neuroses, usually formed, according to Sigmund Freud, when one suppresses key aspects of one’s identity. I doubt Johnson has any true fear of neurosis, but it is no coincidence that he is interested in a character such as Gunnar Kaufman, who is trying to perform multiple conceptions of his self as a black man. However, I also have no doubt that Johnson is aware that Freud’s model of the subconscious was shaped by the psychoanalyst’s interest in ancient history and Egyptology.

Consider “Shelter,” Johnson’s recent exhibition at the South London Gallery, which takes the Freudian couch as a motif — the couch is multiplied, each covered in zebra skins as if to be Africanized, appearing in several configurations and, at last, standing up as if in Oedipal defiance of its psychoanalyst master. In other words, Johnson’s contemporary mélange of images, ideas, gestures, historical references, materials, friends, family, fact and fiction isn’t about craziness. It simply expresses the contemporary condition in which multiple possibilities and references make up the self. Johnson’s gift is his keen ability to read images and symbols on multiple and unexpected levels. Take, for example, the crosshairs that grace the cover of Johnson’s first monograph [*Message to Our Folks,* exhibition catalogue, MCA, Chicago]. Long seen as a symbol of gun violence, crosshairs mark out a target for a gun’s shooter. It is also part of the logo for Public Enemy — the hardcore rap group who reigned in the late ’80s and early ’90s with a mix of consciousness-raising calls to arms and the zany antics of its hype man Flava Flav. By appropriating that symbol, Johnson places himself squarely in hip hop’s lineage — a black cultural production that was known for its aggressive stance at the height of the culture wars. Yet in the realm of art history — of which Johnson is clearly a student — the target takes on a different register. It is most often associated with Jasper Johns’s proto-pop encaustic paintings, which I already identified as precursors to Johnson’s painting works. Thus Johnson is making a clever pun that synthesizes the complexity of his cultural references — high and low — into a common symbolic language. And, if Johns’s early painting works were an attempt to make icons appear uncanny, then, in today’s moment, we find Johnson attempting to make the uncanny appear plausible and the indecipherable make perfect sense.

Naomi Beckwith is Marilyn and Larry Fields Curator at the MCA *Chicago.*

Rashid Johnson was born in 1977 in Chicago. He lives and works in New York.

Selected solo shows:
2013: Ballroom Marfa, *Marfa (TX).*
2012: David Kordansky, *Los Angeles;* South London Gallery, *London;* Hauser & Wirth, *New York;* MCA Chicago / High Museum of Art / Kemper Art Museum / Miami Art Museum. *2010:* Massimo De Carlo, *Milan;* Carlson, *London;* Guido W. Baudach, *Berlin;* Salon 94, *New York.*

Selected group shows:
2012: Shanghai Biennale. *2011:* Venice Biennale. *2008: “30 Americans,”* The Rubell Family Collection, *Miami. 2001: “Freestyle,”* Studio Museum in Harlem, *New York.*

Ace, 2013. Mirrored tile, black soap, wax, 184.2 x 125.7 x 7.6 cm. Courtesy David Kordansky, Los Angeles

Schama, Chloe, "The Art of Inspiration," *WSJ. Magazine*, April 2013, pp. 68-69

STUDIO VISIT Rashid Johnson, left, and Sam Gilliam at the elder artist's Washington, D.C., studio space.

MENTOR/PROTÉGÉ

THE ART OF INSPIRATION

This spring, rising art star Rashid Johnson pays homage to the colorful, defiantly abstract paintings of 79-year-old Sam Gilliam by curating an exhibition devoted to Gilliam's early works.

BY CHLOE SCHAMA PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHU PLACEK

"SOME OF THESE ARE GESSOED?" asks the artist Rashid Johnson, gesturing at several colorful canvases leaning against a wall in 79-year-old Sam Gilliam's airy Washington, D.C., studio. "No," Gilliam corrects, speaking more deliberately than Johnson's enthusiastic clip. "They're all raw." Johnson, 35, furrows his brow, bends over and peers at one of the paintings as though it contains code.

Last summer, Gilliam—known for his vibrant, often monumentally scaled paintings—received a call from Johnson, who wanted to curate an exhibition of the older artist's work. Gilliam first made his name in the 1960s as a member of the Washington Color School, a group of D.C. painters that used similar techniques: staining large unprimed canvases, embracing abstraction and energetic color. Unlike many black artists of his generation, he shied away from addressing race head-on, producing geometric paintings, and then, in the late '60s and '70s, the large, draped canvases for which he is best known. In 1976, three Gilliam canvases covered almost an entire external wall of the Philadelphia Museum of Modern Art—like a giant's tie-dyed laundry hung up to dry. "I wanted to brighten things up," Gilliam says, "rather than just be concerned with the problem."

In recent decades—though still admired among contemporary art aficionados—Gilliam has slipped into semi-obscurity. A review of his 2006 retrospective at Washington's Corcoran Gallery in *The Wall Street Journal* was titled "A Master of Color Too Long in the Shadows." Johnson hopes to change all that.

A rising star of the art world, Johnson has had dozens of solo shows, including one at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 2012, the same year he was nominated for the prestigious Hugo Boss Prize. Around Gilliam, however, he is an eager and attentive pupil. Johnson first learned of Gilliam in the early 2000s while in his twenties and still an undergrad in his hometown of Chicago. It seemed to Johnson that Gilliam had been overlooked in favor of black artists who had engaged more directly with identity politics. This spring, Johnson will curate a show of some of Gilliam's early work at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles (March 28–May 11), where both artists are signed.

"Surprised the hell out of me," says Gilliam about the initial call from Johnson, an amused smile playing across his face.

Schama, Chloe, “The Art of Inspiration,” *WSJ. Magazine*, April 2013, pp. 68-69

GILLIAM ON JOHNSON

“The Washington Color School gave me a chance to fit into a future, rather than fit into what was domestic. In Washington, in the ’60s, you could see where you wanted to go; you could see what you were thirsty for. You could feel the beckoning of the future—the ability to open up, to think about universals, spiritualism, all the things that a world contains.

Rashid is different. He’s more of a documentary-type artist. He talks about history. He thinks about the questions that the man on the street wants to think about. That’s been the tenet of the younger generation: to handle close problems rather than to be more objective. Rashid is more like a lot of artists today: writes well, speaks well and thinks well. I’m a picture artist; he’s conceptual.

Young artists today walk into the art world on their own and do what they want to do. It’s the making of the career that’s hard. They can’t find the shiny path that seems to be what successful artists have. The conflict between what happens in the studio and what happens on the outside is still there—the public wanting things to go a certain way and the artist wanting things to go another way in terms of a career. Figuring out what a career is, how to work, when to work and what to work on—that’s the dilemma you talk about with younger artists.

I encourage young artists to know what’s in books but to go beyond books, to see what is going on outside of school, because that’s what you’re actually training for. To see the variables. The fact is, I’m still the same, perhaps, as I was when I was younger. The idea of the work is still the same. You see something as an extension of a certain time or a certain date, rather than the observation that the optimism of the ’50s and ’60s still continues—quieter but still the same. I see a kind of optimism when I talk with Rashid.”

CONCEPTUAL APPROACH From top: Johnson’s *Souls of Black Folk*, from 2010, features vinyl, shea butter, space rocks and other mixed media; part of the artist’s 2012 exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, “Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks.”

JOHNSON ON GILLIAM

“[Gallerist] David Kordansky and I came down to Sam’s studio for the first time about a year ago. It felt like a life-changing experience for both of us to see the breadth of the work. We saw a small early canvas and we were like, ‘What are these?’ And Sam said, ‘I made more of them, I was making them in the ’60s.’ The show that I’m going to be curating focuses pretty heavily on some of those earlier works. It gave me an opportunity to wrap my hands thickly around a moment.

I think that Sam’s work deals with bigger human concerns about art and life. You think about Sam making these abstract geometric paintings in 1965. And you think about all the things that are happening in 1965—it’s very specific to avoid representation of those things. It’s kind of like escape as a protest: I’m going to refuse to participate in this problem, and I’m going to continue to manufacture and make things that I think are part of this bigger conversation.

One of the things I specifically learned [from Sam and his generation] was that when racial discourse was brought to their work, there was a lot of opportunity for projection. What I really hoped to do with my work was to at least be able to define my relationship to race. My composition often goes toward the black middle class, or the black super-wealthy, or strong historical black figures. After starting my work thinking about those signifiers—having loaded my narrative with that stuff—it’s given me the flexibility at this stage in my life to deal a lot more with art-making and material. I wanted my art to deal with very formal concerns and to deal with very material concerns, and to deal with antecedents and art history, which for me go very far beyond just the influence of African-American artists.

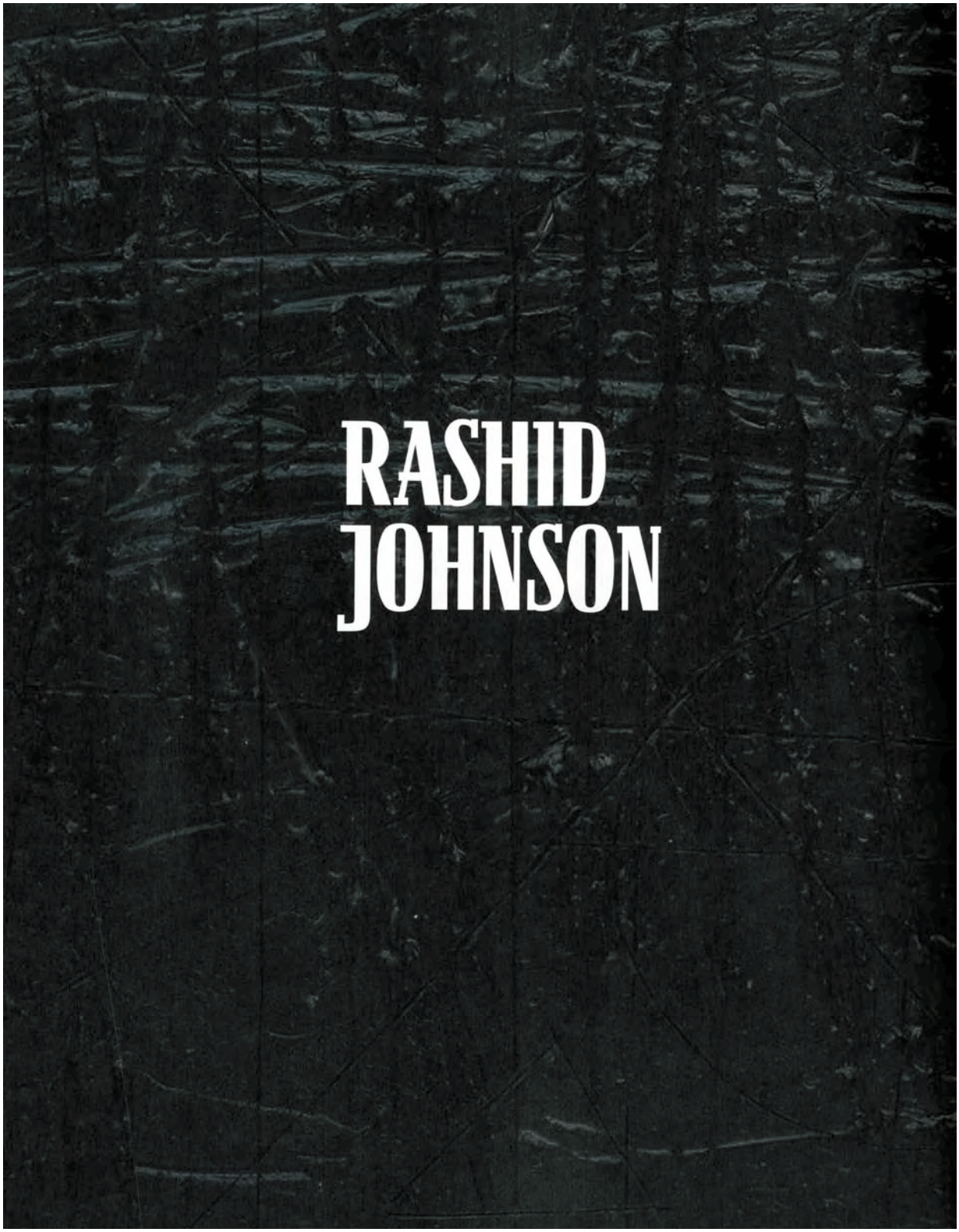
There’s a tremendous amount of respect between us. In some ways I’m still very intimidated by Sam. It’s been great to be able to talk to him, to talk a little about his influences. I don’t want to bug him too much. I just want to pick up what I can. He’s been really generous letting me follow him around, asking him questions for the exhibition. I thought maybe he’d say, ‘OK, well, let the kid have a couple of pieces,’ and maybe even dictate to me what he thought was the correct approach. But he’s really given me a lot of flexibility. He’s kind of like, ‘Run, young fellow, you like this stuff.’ ”

ABSTRACT IMPRESSION For the exhibition of Gilliam’s work at David Kordansky Gallery this month, Johnson, acting as curator, draws heavily from Gilliam’s early paintings. From top: Gilliam’s 1969 *Red Stanza*; 1965’s *Ionesque*.

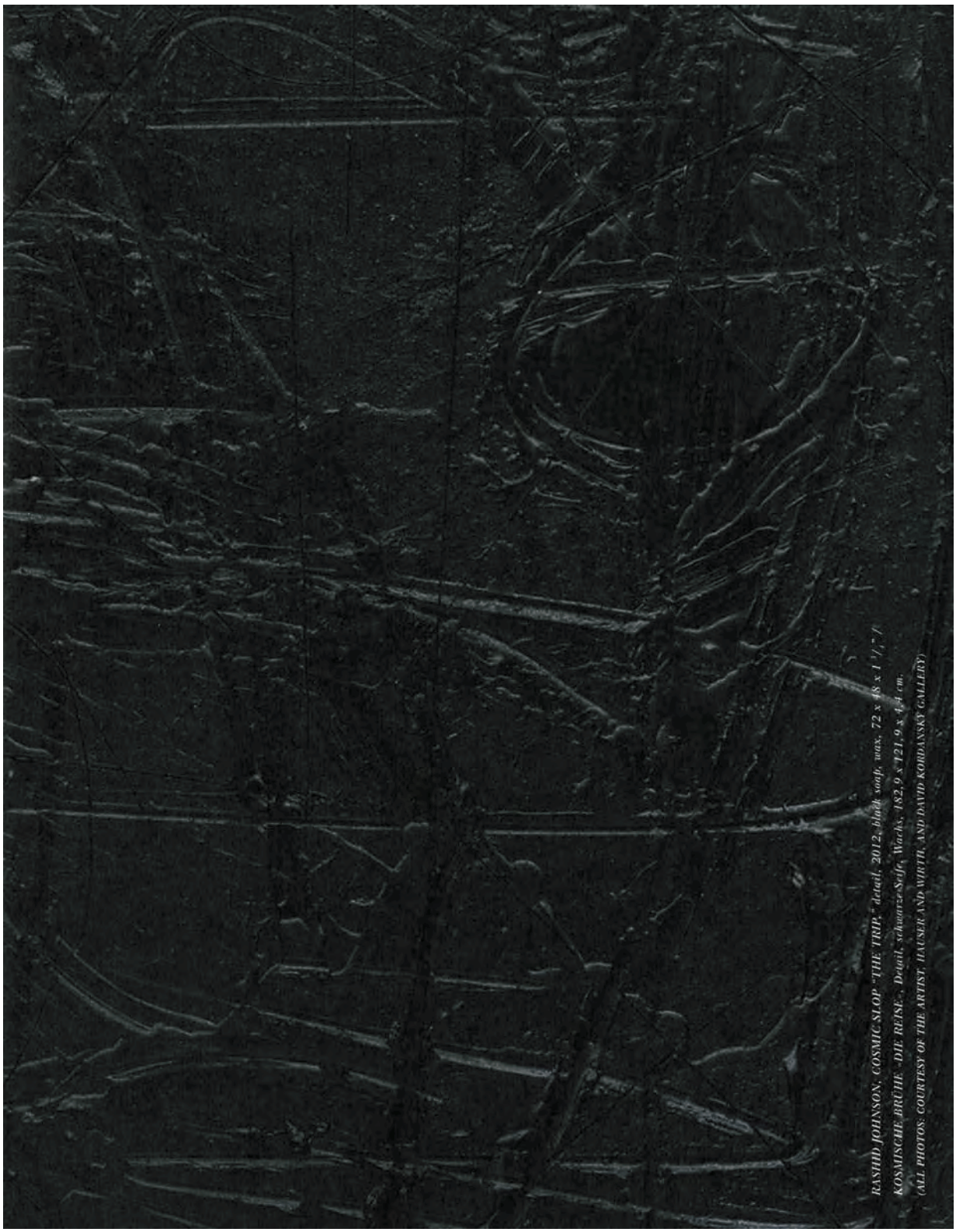
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: SAM GILLIAM, *RED STANZA*, 1969, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS 24-5/8" X 18", COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, L.A., CA; PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN FRIETCH; SAM GILLIAM, *IONESQUE*, 1965, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 70.5" X 49.5", PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRANDON WEBSTER; RASHID JOHNSON, "MESSAGE TO OUR FOLKS," 2012, MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART CHICAGO, PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATHAN KEAY; RASHID JOHNSON, *SOULS OF BLACK FOLK*, 2010, BLACK SOAP, WAX, BOOKS, VINYL, BRASS, SHEA BUTTER, PLANTS, SPACE ROCKS, MIRRORS, GOLD PAINT, STAINED WOOD, 114" X 124.75" X 34.25" COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, L.A., CA; PHOTOGRAPHY BY FARZAD OWRANG

Edited from Chloe Schama’s interview with Sam Gilliam and Rashid Johnson.

Morton, Tom, “Infinite Blackness,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 122-128



Morton, Tom, “Infinite Blackness,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 122-128



RASHID JOHNSON, *COSMIC SLOP "THE TRIP" detail*, 2012, black soap, wax, 72 x 48 x 1 1/2" / 182.9 x 121.9 x 4 cm.
KOSMISCHE BRÜHE - "DIE REISE" - Detail, schwarze Seife, Wachs, 182.9 x 121.9 x 4 cm.
(ALL PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, HAUSER AND WIRTH, AND DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY)

Morton, Tom, “Infinite Blackness,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 122-128

Rashid Johnson

TOM MORTON

INFINITE BLACKNESS

“Run”: the word makes several manifestations in Rashid Johnson’s recent works—sprayed onto white tiles, gouged out of great slabs of black soap and wax, scratched across the surface of mirrored panels like a tag or a curse, an imperative or a warning. Its recurrence is ambiguous, the trajectories it describes multiple. Run: away or towards? From what, and to where? We get to thinking of fugitives on the Underground Railroad, and of the rapper Jay-Z’s assertion during the 2008 United States presidential campaign that “Obama’s running so that we all can fly.”[1] We think, too, of the “escapes” that have marked post-emancipation African American experience: the migration from Southern to Northern states, Marcus Garvey’s “back-to-Africa” movement, and even Sun Ra’s vivid sci-fi fantasy of leaving Earth to return home to Saturn. Run: significantly, the word connotes fluidity, the instability of objects and categories, solid things melting and merging.

TOM MORTON is a curator, writer, and contributing editor for *frieze* magazine based in London. He was co-curator (with Lisa Le Feuvre) of the recent “British Art Show 7: In The Days of the Comet.”

Johnson’s sculptures, photographs, and videos proceed through reference and sheer density of information. His best-known works, shelf-like wall pieces such as WANTED (2011), gather together found items that allude variously to African American intellectual history, pop culture, the anointing of the skin, the free circulation of ideas, and the unstable stuff of value. Stacked books are a regular feature, here, their titles (*The Souls of Black Folk*, *Death by Black Hole*, *Time Flies*) and prominent African American authors (sociologist and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois, astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, the complicatedly conservative comedian Bill Cosby) speaking of whole explosive cosmoses contained within their covers, like energy packed in a hydrogen atom. LP sleeves are also common, including artists like the psychedelic funk outfit Parliament and soul singer turned pastor Al Green. Shea butter is also common—the substance is derived from the African shea nut that is used in moisturizers and cosmetics, in Johnson’s work it recalls Joseph Beuys’ magically charged measures of fat. Houseplants also appear on the shelves, alongside CB radios and ordinary stones transformed into “space rocks” by a coat of gold spray paint. Taken

Morton, Tom, “Infinite Blackness,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 122-128

RASHID JOHNSON, SOULS OF BLACK FOLK, 2010, black soap, wax, books, vinyl, brass, shea butter, plants, space rocks, mirrors, gold paint, stained wood, 114 x 124 3/4 x 24 1/8" / SEELEN DER SCHWARZEN, schwarze Seife, Wachs, Bücher, Schallplatte, Messing, Sheabutter, Weltraumgestein, Spiegel, Goldfarbe, gebeiztes Holz, 289,6 x 316,9 x 61,3 cm.

together, we might imagine these things as agents of change. By their grace, a mind is expanded, and a soul gladdened. Rough skin is softened, and carbon dioxide transformed into oxygen. A silence is broken, and dull geology gleams and glitters.

Borrowing Lawrence Weiner's deadpan definition of a table, Johnson has described his shelves as "something to put something on."[2] While the particular formal properties of these beautifully crafted structures are always in play (indeed, the 2010 works LEFT + RIGHT, ART ENSEMBLE, and LOVE SOULS derive their contours from the floor plans of the residences of Du Bois, the philosopher Bertrand Russell, and the novelist William Faulkner, figures whose

Morton, Tom, “Infinite Blackness,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 122-128

RASHID JOHNSON, HOW YA LIKE ME NOW, 2010, Persian rug, gold embroidery, shea butter, 7 1/8 x 102 1/2 x 143 1/2" / WIE GEFALLE ICH EUCH JETZT, Perserteppich, Goldstickerei, Sheabutter, 18 x 260,5 x 364,5 cm.

pacifist sympathies the artist strongly admires), on a very basic level, their function is to encourage us to contemplate the relationships between the elements they contain. If there is something museological about this, a nod to the production of power relations through the application of taxonomic logics, there is also something more messily domestic. Looking at Johnson's shelves, we're reminded less of carefully labeled vitrines than of mantelpieces dotted with family mementos or altars to household gods. The artist has said his "goal is for all the materials to miscegenate into a new language, with me as its author. The armatures are the platform for this miscegenation. They exist as unknown space to be colonized."[3] His repurposing of historically charged terms ("miscegenate," "colonize") to describe the opening up of new possibilities is knowingly provocative, and is of a piece with his work's wider alchemical project. Johnson's shelves may be "something to put something on," but that does not imply a fixed

Morton, Tom, “Infinite Blackness,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 122-128

relationship between fixed entities. His is an art of mixing and moving, of complex and productive flux.

On his 1987 single *How Ya Like Me Now*, the New York MC Kool Moe Dee delivers the line “Rap is an art / And I'm a Picasso” over a stuttering, horn-heavy sample from James Brown's seminal 45, *Papa's Got a Brand New Bag* (1965).[4] Drawing on the example of the figures it invokes (Picasso's cut 'n' paste Synthetic Cubism, Brown's own path-beating use of “sampling” on his 1976 single *Hot*) the track might be understood as an attempt to *bricoler* the *bricoleur*, and in the process create something fresh and urgent. HOW YA LIKE ME NOW also serves as the title for a key piece by Johnson, made in 2011. Here, the diamond pattern of an opulent Persian carpet is threaded through with a gold cross hairs motif lifted from the logo of hip-hop pioneers Public Enemy. A recurrent presence in Johnson's work, this design promises either protection or deadly violence, depending on which end of the rifle sight you might find yourself. On the carpet's surface sit a number of globes formed from yellow shea butter, a clear reference to David Hammons' BLIZ-AARD BALL SALE (1983), a legendary performance in which the African American artist sold handmade snowballs from a cheap rug outside the Cooper Union in downtown Manhattan alongside other street vendors peddling junked, near-valueless objects. This work not only revisits Hammons' performance, it transubstantiates it into a sculpture that may presumably be bought and sold like any other. As Johnson's braggadocio title suggests, this is a work that plays—with considerable intelligence and wit—a very high-stakes game indeed.

Like all of the artist's oeuvre, HOW YA LIKE ME NOW turns on fluidity, a perpetual refusal to ossify. Some questions occur. Does the Persian carpet function as a luxury commodity, an emblem of the artistic achievements of an ancient non-Western culture, or as a placeholder for American anxieties about Islam? Do its stitched and gilded crosshair motifs speak of the intertwining of the Muslim faith and African American resistance (several members of the Public Enemy-affiliated militia Security of the First World are also members of the religious movement the Nation of Islam), and how is the meaning of the hip-hop group's original logo altered by Johnson's editing out of the silhouetted figure of a black man, seen through a sniper's scope? What does it mean to transfer BLIZ-AARD BALL SALE from the cold of Cooper Union's ad hoc outdoor marketplace into the altogether different chill of a commercial or public gallery, and remake its icy white snowballs in a material of African origin—especially knowing that the artist has likened applying shea butter to the skin as “coating oneself in African-ness”?[5] How are we to understand Johnson's appropriation of the title *How Ya Like Me Now*, given Kool Moe Dee's track concerns itself with his belief that fellow New York rapper LL Cool J

RASHID JOHNSON, PREFACE TO A TWENTY VOLUME SUICIDE NOTE, 2011, Persian rug, shea butter balls, book, 4 1/8 x 129 1/2 x 88 1/8” / VORWORT ZUR NOTIZ VOR DEM FREITOD IN ZWANZIG BÄNDEN, Perserteppich, Sheabutterkugeln, Buch, 10,5 x 329 x 225 cm.

Morton, Tom, “Infinite Blackness,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 122-128

stole his lyrical style? Perhaps most importantly, to who or what is the titular question (How ya like me now?) addressed—to the (still predominantly white) audience for the work of African American artists, to the gatekeepers of this work's history, or to the broader business of artistic influence, reference, and theft? Johnson's sculpture is about owning and belonging, fulfilling and confounding expectations, the circulation of cultural capital and the point at which it is banked.

In his now-classic study of the cultural construction of African intellectual history *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Paul Gilroy presents identity as something rooted not in the solid earth of defined nation-states, but rather formed on the liquid seas. Johnson's work is equally suspicious of borders as brokers of meaning. In his ongoing *Cosmic Slop* series of wall sculptures—named after the landmark 1973 Funkadelic album of the same name—black soap and wax combine in works that appear only temporarily concrete, and may melt any moment into something new. What is suggested in their larval surfaces is endless transformation; an infinite, fluid blackness. In the recent COSMIC SLOP "UNDER WATER" (2011), the familiar crosshairs motif appears above the word "run." Looking at Johnson's wider work, we might take this to mean "to the ends of the universe, and beyond."

1) Speech given at Virginia Union College in Richmond, Virginia, 1 November, 2008.
2) Benjamin Godsill, "The Long Distance Runner," *Mousse*, no. 24 (Summer 2010), p. 184.
3) Ibid.
4) Kool Moe Dee, "*How Ya like Me Now*" (Jive Records, 1987).
5) Quoted in Michael H. Miller, "After Post-Black: Rashid Johnson's Baadasssss Song," *The New York Observer*, 26 July 2011.

RASHID JOHNSON, COSMIC SLOP "UNDER WATER," 2011, black soap, wax, 72 1/2 x 49 1/2 x 1 3/4" / KOSMISCHE BRÜHE »UNTER WASSER«, schwarze Seife, Wachs, 184,2 x 125,7 x 4,4 cm.

Morton, Tom, “Infinite Blackness,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 122-128

RASHID JOHNSON, ART ENSEMBLE, 2010, mirror, wood, wax, vinyl, CB radios, books, shea butter, space rock, 87 3/4 x 87 3/4 x 7 1/8" / KUNST-ENSEMBLE, Spiegel, Holz, Wachs, Schallplatte, CB Funkgeräte, Bücher, Sheabutter, Weltraumgestein, 223 x 223 x 18 cm.

Morton, Tom, “Infinite Blackness,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 122-128

RASHID JOHNSON, COSMIC SLOP "BLACK ORPHEUS," 2011, black soap, wax, 96 1/2 x 120 1/2 x 2" /
KOSMISCHE BRÜHE »SCHWARZER ORPHEUS«, schwarze Seife, Wachs, 245,1 x 306 x 5,1 cm.

Jackson, Matthew Day, in conversation with Rashid Johnson, "I'm Not Sure," *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 134-139

MATTHEW DAY JACKSON & RASHID JOHNSON

I'm Not Sure

MATTHEW DAY JACKSON: When I look at your photographic work it makes me think about this photo of my family at Knott's Berry Farm. The photo is a tongue-in-cheek illusion of times past. This comparison could be viewed as dismissive, but I see it as recognition, on your part, of the importance of humor in your photographic work.

RASHID JOHNSON: When I first became interested in photography every single one of my mother's friends bought me a James Van Der Zee book. At one point I had fifteen copies. Most of his photographs were portraits of black middle – and upper–class men and women during the Harlem Renaissance. At the time, I had no interest in this style of photography. Instead, I was burying myself in the work of Roy DeCarava, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Robert Frank. As a kid in Chicago I was sure that street photography was the answer.

At sixteen, the Van Der Zee photographs represented an approach, time, and place that I didn't know or understand. Several years later the direction of my work changed and Van Der Zee's work became more relevant to me. I was able to consider the work in connection with the pictures I was making, and the idea of participating in a history that wasn't mine became an interesting one. The humor comes out of the absurdity of placing myself in a historical discourse that predates my work by eighty plus years. I was using titles that really point to that absurdity like *The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club* (2008–ongoing). It was about expanding how time and location function in the photos.

What's Knott's Berry Farm? It sounds campy.

MDJ: Knott's Berry Farm is an "old–timey" Western–style amusement park. It has a mining town, a farm, a mercantile, etc., made of theatre backdrops plus roller coasters. Referencing the park is cheeky, but the more I think about it, it's a precise analogy.

MATTHEW DAY JACKSON is an artist who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Jackson, Matthew Day, in conversation with Rashid Johnson, “I’m Not Sure,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 134-139

RASHID JOHNSON, ELECTRIC UNIVERSE, 2009, black soap, wax, vinyl, wood, book, brass, incense, shea butter, space rocks, 49 x 47 1/4 x 7" / ELEKTRISCHES UNIVERSUM, schwarze Seife, Wachs, Schallplatte, Holz, Buch, Messing, Räucherstäbchen, Sheabutter, Weltraumgestein, 124,5 x 121,3 x 17,8 cm.

The mythology of the American West is created by the fantasy that exists around that time and place. So there are traces of history found in the present. In this way do you see the narratives from eighty years ago entirely outside yourself?

RJ: I’ve always had a difficult time recognizing myself in historical narratives although I grew up with them as a backdrop to my childhood because my mother was a historian. But I didn’t relate to those histories nor did I want to reproduce or live them. Now I’ve begun to pick and choose which parts I find useful and in many cases I also create my own. In this way the artist functions as time traveler. Using my work as a means or portal to effectively rewrite history, not as a revision but as a work of fiction. I’m interested in using it as an agency to address time.

MDJ: The Tralfamadorians in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) see history as something that exists in the present, which can be recalled at any moment. This agency you mention

Jackson, Matthew Day, in conversation with Rashid Johnson, "I'm Not Sure," *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 134-139

gives you the ability to make work that is timeless but not without place. Resisting anachronism is central to your formal structure while simultaneously affronting pervasive tendencies that shape our understanding of contemporary art, which is completely dependent on our predecessors. Do you consider time to be a material you employ?

RJ: I'm really interested in the flexibility of time as a medium, especially when you choose to avoid the parameters. It makes me wonder how many albums Sun Ra sold on Tramalfadore. I bet he was huge there.

MDJ: Considering your formal structure, which artist do you feel most closely associated with? One might think of David Hammons, but I think you are more like Joseph Beuys.

RJ: People often reference Hammons when they discuss my work and I'm not completely offended by that. I've always been a fan of his work. I can see parts of conversations that we both share and would consider him an influence, however different our approaches. Having said that, I find most of these comparisons evolve from the inability of people to get beyond race or gender boundaries.

I can see why you would reach for Beuys as an antecedent for my work though. I've become more and more aware of the spirituality in my work, and that is something I share with Beuys—some kind of spirit, fiction, fetish, and material creation.

MDJ: Do you feel this "inability" is uniquely American? How much does this place really matter?

RJ: I wouldn't call the failure uniquely American, but it is often present in American conversation. It's the reason the baseball pitcher Satchel Paige is always compared to Bob Gibson, when he could just as easily be compared to Roger Clemens. I've been on a real baseball kick recently. It's probably just laziness.

MDJ: Let's come back to laziness in a moment. In referencing baseball, I think of the rigidity of the game or, as in the case of our conversation, its relationship to the supposed chaos of society. Are you attracted to the baseball analogy because the rules are so clear?

RJ: I'm attracted to the poetry of the game more than the rules. I'm also a huge nerd for statistics and keeping score in general. When I was very young, the Chicago Cubs were on television every afternoon. My parents used them as babysitters.

MDJ: I think we carry these heroic figures with us in our adult lives—they give us permission. Do you see yourself like Sun Ra or Octavia Butler—where the issues of earth are shifted and discussed within the realm of the future or the otherworldly? If so, what space are you occupying?

RJ: Can I be both? I feel like you're giving away all of my influences. Am I that transparent? Reading Butler, Derrick Bell, and Samuel R. Delany really changed the way I saw the world and our ability to move around in it. This kind of flexible sci-fi unlocked a lot of doors for me and rid me of certain inhibitions. I've always thought there were specific expectations people had for how an artist like me was supposed to work and these people changed that perception. Ra is the most interesting case of that for me. He was a true escapist and the ultimate believer in his created story. I envy his sincerity.

MDJ: I feel that you're working towards total transparency! And this is what we're striving for, no? I think total sincerity is the final frontier of confrontation. Do you think you envy his sincerity or the space he carved out for his sincerity?

RJ: I'm more interested in the delusional space Ra created to be sincere and the contradiction that embodies. I consider sincerity the final lap around the track for artists. It's the place where you admit that you are not perfect, or that there is no god. Sun Ra has decided

Jackson, Matthew Day, in conversation with Rashid Johnson, "I'm Not Sure," *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 134-139

RASHID JOHNSON, "Other Aspects," 2009, exhibition view, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles / Ausstellungsansicht.

to produce his own world. He obviously felt that the one he lived in was too flawed to even discuss or participate in. Sometimes I feel the same way.

MDJ: The mythology of the artist is that of the mentally ill, and making complex, multifaceted works is within the purview of this delusion. In this cumulative project of art making, aren't you beginning to construct a world of your own as well? Doing the same thing that Sun Ra did? It's not as if he was selling his records on Saturn.

RJ: I'm pretty confident that delusion is one of the best vehicles you can ride into this art-making thing. When you first get ready to leave your house for the day most of us check the mirror before we walk out the door, and we are stuck thinking that the last time we saw ourselves is exactly what we look like. This either makes a case for carrying a pocket mirror or for believing that delusion actually allows you to better perform in society. Anyway, why do

Jackson, Matthew Day, in conversation with Rashid Johnson, “I’m Not Sure,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 134-139

RASHID JOHNSON, CRISIS OF THE NEGRO INTELLECTUAL (POWER OF HEALING), 2008, shelves, wax, black soap, shea butter, candles, mixed media, 96 x 96 x 12" / KRISE DES INTELLEKTUELLEN NEGERS (KRAFT DES HEILENS), Regale, Wachs, schwarze Seife, Sheabutter, Kerzen, verschiedene Materialien, 243,8 x 243,8 x 30,5 cm.

you assume that Ra didn't sell records on Saturn? How do you think he could afford those great clothes?

MDJ: Is there any facet of your work that is more important than another?

RJ: If I thought one aspect was any more important it would be hard to justify using other materials.

MDJ: I am interested in your use of floor plans as the format of a painting. Do you think of these as a sort of "golden rectangle"—a perfect parameter, particularly in reference to William Faulkner or Bertrand Russell? Are these places you "come from"?

Jackson, Matthew Day, in conversation with Rashid Johnson, "I'm Not Sure," *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 134-139

RJ: When I read Russell's "Why I Am Not a Christian," I remember being blown away by his blunt pragmatism. I use the floor plans as a deliberate reference point and then do anything in my power to produce contradictions. These contradictions are the lifeblood of my work. I'm not interested in blanket legibility because I don't find that to be a real person's experience. In most of our experiences, socially or politically, we are completely malleable. I've wholeheartedly embraced an idea in a conversation with one person, only to turn around and vehemently reject that same idea in another conversation on the same day. In neither of these conversations did I ever feel I was pandering. I absolutely believed both of my arguments. I feel comfortable knowing I'm not sure.

MDJ: Being absolutely sure about oneself is moronic. I feel it is absolutely necessary to not be sure—to not believe in the work—as it would create a sort of stagnancy—which would lead to an end of learning. So, I feel what you are saying, but I don't believe you are "comfortable."

RJ: Of all the lies that I've told you over the years, you call me out when I describe myself as comfortable and I think you are absolutely right. Comfort shouldn't be in an artist's vocabulary other than to describe something we don't like and will probably never experience. Saying that aloud makes me kind of sad.

MDJ: Comfort is proof that the devil exists. What role does "fluency" play in your work? The way that you deal with domestic space creates a tension that I would describe as an anxiety mannered by a perfect pitch: "fuck you." I'm working on an opera called *Fuck You* and I would love for you to do it with me.

RJ: I would love nothing more than to do the *Fuck You* opera. That sounds interesting. I think part of what you're describing is what Rosalind Krauss named the "post-medium condition." Our not being married to any particular medium or activity leads to an artist bachelor experience. The fluency of not being definable functions as the "fuck you" to easy interpretation.

MDJ: I want to take voice lessons so that it's entirely believable. Do you think that hunger for the easily interpreted is a product of laziness or fear?

RJ: No amount of voice lessons is going to save us from what I'm going to do to this opera. I think laziness and fear often go hand in hand, but I think fear is more the culprit, in this case. People for the most part just don't want to be accused of racism. Keeping things in race probably seems like the safer bet. No one wants to be considered a bigot. I think we were better off when people were a little less scared of being racist. Those seem like more honest times. I know that sounds pretty strange but I really believe that.

MDJ: There is an absolute brutality in the nudity of honesty. Sincerity in art is an illusory space in which the viewer is granted a position from which to consider the most horrible or beautiful. I think your work is perfectly made in this sense, the viewer is embraced warmly either in a reflection (mirror work) or the scarified flesh (flooring pieces or wax pieces) of what I see as a cosmos, or a boundary to said cosmos. Could sincerity be the precision in how the works are made, and in your choice of materials?

RJ: Without question sincerity plays an important role in how I choose materials and then approach those materials. The bigger role it plays in my work is to keep the disease of irony from infecting what I'm trying to do. As my uncle Scotty used to say, "I'm serious as a heart attack," and sincerity is my defense mechanism.

Sirmans, Franklin, “Fly,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 146-152

Rashid Johnson

FRANKLIN SIRMANS

Fly

If all the world's a stage,
I want to operate the trap door.[1]
—Paul Beatty

Rather than deny the box drawn around his practice, Johnson daringly invites it. He cuts it off at the pass, so to speak, knowing he'll have to fight for the work to be accepted on its own terms. He casts the first stone, chucks the first spear: "I am a Negro artist demagogue producing work that allows me to embrace and reject any cultural signifiers that I choose to confront," reads the press release for Johnson's first solo exhibition at the Monique Meloche Gallery in the artist's hometown of Chicago in 2003. Here, I might paraphrase: though I am a Black African American, don't try to read me as more than an individual with a range of diverse materials and subjects. But of course, it is important to consider w h o I a m .[2] Johnson's statement continues:

The ideas addressed, hair to language to violence and social uprising, all work as tools in my devious plan to spelunk the bottomless agenda of cultural identity politics, word.[3]

Have we arrived in the Post-Post-Black present? If so, how did we arrive at a point where an artist can "spelunk" the agenda? In 2001 Johnson debuted in New York at the Studio Museum in Harlem, as part of the celebrated group exhibition "Freestyle." He embodied, to the fullest extent, the sentiment espoused by the curator Thelma Golden when she coined the term "Post-Black" to describe Johnson and other artists adamant about not being l a b e l e d "black" while deeply invested in redefining notions of blackness. "Freestyle" recognized the emergence of a group of

FRANKLIN SIRMANS is the Terri and Michael Smooke Curator and Department Head of Contemporary Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Sirmans, Franklin, “Fly,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 146-152

RASHID JOHNSON, SELF PORTRAIT WITH MY HAIR PARTED LIKE FREDERICK DOUGLASS, 2003, Lambda print, 56 x 44" / SELBSTPORTRÄT MIT EINEM SCHEITEL WIE FREDERICK DOUGLASS, Lambda-Print, 142,2 x 111,8 cm.

artists in the late nineties whose relationship to identity politics was considerably less visually apparent (and conceptually loaded) than work made in the early nineties. The title, “Freestyle,” alludes to a sense of aesthetic freedom associated with hip-hop culture, emphasizing individual innovation born of intuition.

In “Freestyle,” Johnson exhibited large-format photographs from his series *Seeing in the Dark* (1998–2002). These were portraits of men—seemingly down on their luck and living on the streets—staring straight into the camera. The images were hand-brushed with a mineral pigment that gave the images a nineteenth-century patina (a reference to the printing process called Van Dyke Brown). This process would never have been used to depict a black man at the time of its invention because it would have cast him in a flattering, radiant hue.

While works from *Seeing in the Dark* can be seen as conventional photographic portraiture, Johnson’s pivotal SELF-PORTRAIT WITH MY HAIR PARTED LIKE FREDERICK DOUGLAS (2003), was made shortly after, and is far more radical. It evokes the past through an iconic historical figure, Frederick Douglas, a fierce abolitionist, whose place, in some ways, Johnson has come to fill. The work also alludes to a kind of afro-futuristic shapeshifting; Johnson has also portrayed himself as the painter Barkley L. Hendricks, and

Sirmans, Franklin, “Fly,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 146-152

RASHID JOHNSON, PINK LOTION BOX, 2003, Luster's Pink Lotion, plexiglass, 72 x 20 x 2 1/2" / PINK-LOTION-BEHÄLTER, Luster's Pink Lotion, Plexiglas, 182,9 x 50,8 x 6,4 cm.

one portrait shows Johnson resting on boxer Jack Johnson's tombstone.

Johnson's work has come to speak on multiple levels and has become a recognizable pastiche of styles and subjects. The language employed by galleries and museums, along with the artist, usually goes something like this: "Concerned equally with twentieth-century art history, popular culture, and African American intellectual history, Johnson cites Sun Ra, Joseph Beuys, Rosalind Krauss, Richard Pryor, Hans Haacke, and Carl Andre among his influences."[4] In other words, Johnson's work embraces everything from musicianship, shamanism, modes of criticism, and comedy to conceptual and minimal aesthetics, all of which provide evidence of this richly textured, multivalent pastiche.

The paintings in *Cosmic Slop* (2008–ongoing) are predominantly black monochromes with scraped and scratched surfaces.[5] In places the buttery pigment (actually massive amounts of shea butter and black soap) is literally gouged and scumbled. Paintings in *Cosmic Slop* attract and repel: draw us near with their sensuality, while disrupting our ability to read them and place them historically. The worked surfaces recall the opacity of Rauschenberg's earlier black paintings but also reference Glenn Ligon's coal dust-inflected black paintings. We might even think of Cy Twombly's gestural abstractions that invoke language, or the grit and muscularity of Jean Dubuffet.

When Johnson boldly transitioned to making his first sculptural objects, he turned to materials known historically for their healing and medicinal effect. Materials that are often described as "culturally specific" begin to seem like formal, store-bought "art" materials in Johnson's hands. An early work from this period is PINK LOTION BOX (2003), a John McCracken-like plank of Plexiglas. A few inches thick and leaning against the wall, it is filled with the popular black hair care product called Luster's Pink Lotion. As in the early work of Janine Antoni, minimalist aesthetics are employed to abruptly signify cultural and social standing.[6] "The first work is always some sort of radical departure,"[7] Johnson says. PINK LOTION BOX is that kind of piece; decisively it is one of several works that pointed early on to Johnson's future.

Johnson's series *The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club* (2008–ongoing), exhibited at Nicole Klagsbrun in 2008, revisits his earlier interest in portraiture within the setting of a fictional organization (The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club) modeled, ever so smartly, after an African American secret society, the Boulé.[8] Photos in this series capture a similar sentiment to the work of James Van Der

Sirmans, Franklin, “Fly,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 146-152

Zee, who documented real sports teams, churches, schools, and clubs during the Harlem Renaissance. One group of photographs in Johnson's series predominantly pictures white women in what could be the club's garden or smoke-filled interior, holding houseplants or shea butter in their hands, as if they are making offerings. The images conjure jungle fever dreams. Here, Johnson reminds us, again, of a diversity of interests and histories, lest we forget and call him a Post-Black artist:

There is such a long history of movement and escapism for black Americans. You have the movement from the North to the South after the Civil War, and again during the Industrial Revolution. Soon after, you have Marcus Garvey creating the Black Star Line and the back-to-Africa movement. Sun Ra, and the movement to Saturn follows that. More recently, you have the writer Paul Beatty suggesting, in his brilliant work of fiction The White Boy Shuffle *(1996), that all black Americans should commit suicide to escape oppression. I am intrigued by a group [the Boulé], surrounded by all this movement, which would decide that staying put is the best strategy. It speaks to the strength and privilege they must have felt.*[9]

Johnson's work rests peacefully in this ambiguous region, comfortable in this space of contradiction and paradox, where nothing is as it appears to be, and nothing is black and white, or post black and white—a good place to be.

RASHID JOHNSON, SARAH WITH SPACE ROCK, 2009, archival pigment print, 40 $^{3}/_{8}$ x 32 $^{3}/_{8}$" / SARAH MIT WELTRAUMGESTEIN, alterungsbeständiger Pigmentdruck, 103,8 x 82,9 cm.

1) Mary Crisp, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Morgue* (Bloomington: Cross, 2010), p. 4.

2) Unlike many artists born and raised in the Midwest, Rashid Johnson stayed in his hometown, where he was taught and groomed by the artist McArthur Binion, incidentally the first black graduate of the Cranbrook Academy of Art, an abstract and, in some ways, minimalist painter, who bumped around New York City's Lower East Side in the early eighties. I first met Rashid when he was an undergraduate at Columbia College around 2000. I was invited there to lecture about a show I was working on at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, "One Planet Under A Groove: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art" (2001). Like Rashid, I've been a sucker for the remix since early childhood. He and I share a sense of the artistic possibilities (past, present, and future) for art inflected by late-seventies funk and soul music—with afrofuturistic lyrics conjuring places never before seen, but worth envisioning in writing and art.

3) Rashid Johnson, press release for "The Rise and Fall of a Proper Negro," at the Monique Meloche Gallery, Oct. 24 – Dec. 6, 2003, http://moniquemeloche.com.

4) Press release for "Rashid Johnson: Smoke and Mirrors," at SculptureCenter, May 10 – Aug. 3, 2009, http://www.sculpturecenter.org.

5) *Cosmic Slop* is titled after Parliament Funkadelic's 1973 album of the same name.

6) I cried when I first saw Janine Antoni's cubes of chocolate and lard, which humorously and critically re-imagine the cold minimalist cubes that predate Antoni's work by thirty-some years.

7) The artist in conversation with the author, 27 December 2011.

8) The Boulé was an anti-escapist African American group formed in 1904 by Dr. Henry McKee Minton in opposition to Marcus Garvey's back-to-Africa movement. It's now known as the fraternity Sigma Pi Phi.

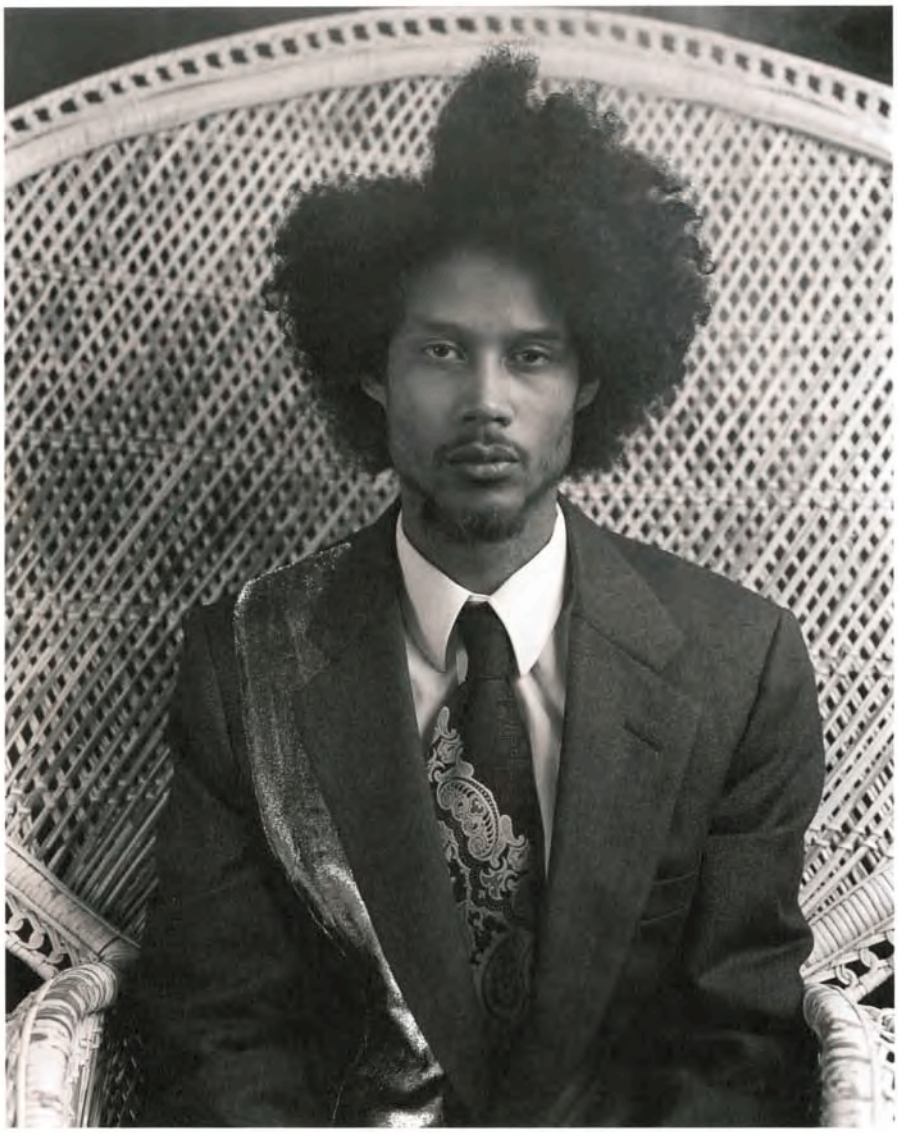
9) Benjamin Godsill, "The Long Distance Runner," *Mousse*, no. 24 (Summer 2010), p. 183.

Sirmans, Franklin, “Fly,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 146-152

RASHID JOHNSON, PYRAMID, 2009, black soap, wax, vinyl, CB radio, brass, books, glass, spray paint, plants, wood, shea butter, space rocks, 133 x 194 x 10" / PYRAMIDE, schwarze Seife, Wachs, Schallplatte, CB-Funkradio, Messing, Bücher, Glas, Sprühfarbe, Pflanzen, Holz, Sheabutter, Weltraumgestein, 337,8 x 492,8 x 25,4 cm.

Sirmans, Franklin, “Fly,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 146-152

Sirmans, Franklin, “Fly,” *Parkett No. 90*, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 2012, pp. 146-152



RASHID JOHNSON, THE NEW NEGRO ESCAPIST SOCIAL AND ATHLETIC CLUB "THE PART," 2011, silver gelatin print, 40 x 30" / DER NEUE GESELLSCHAFTS- UND SPORTCLUB FÜR SCHWARZE ESKAPISTEN -DER TEIL-, Silbergelatine-Print, 101,6 x 76,2 cm.

Rinebold, Mary, “Critics’ Picks: London: Rashid Johnson,” *Artforum.com*, October 20, 2012

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

London

Rashid Johnson

SOUTH LONDON GALLERY
65 - 67 Peckham Road
September 28–November 25

View of “Shelter,” 2012.

Like elaborate stage sets, Rashid Johnson’s installations are typically encompassing, drawing viewers into dioramas populated by artifacts that stand in for cultural icons (for instance, Don King and Sun Ra have made appearances in previous exhibitions). At the South London Gallery, Johnson has shifted the protagonist role from such figures to the topic of psychoanalytic therapy—a form of treatment defined by intensive and carefully regulated work with individuals.

This exhibition, “Shelter,” is based on a fictional society in which psychotherapy is free and available to all as a drop-in service, as evidenced by a series of bulky, chaise longues with zebra-print upholstery in the series “Untitled (daybed 1-4)” (all works cited, 2012). Most of these pieces are in a state of disarray—turned on their sides—and are placed atop large Persian rugs, which are intermittently marked with thickly smeared black paint that suggests a frenzied retracing of memories and dreams.

Similarly dense applications of black soap and wax, characteristic materials in Johnson’s work, are found among the more traditional paintings on the surrounding four walls. *Cosmic Slop “Independence”*, for example, bears multiple coats of ink-black soap and wax with blunt indentations and sharp grooves throughout. Alongside, furniture is again repurposed within the exhibition context in *House Arrest*, made from large parquet oak floor slabs hung on the gallery wall, over which drippings and smudges of soap and wax overlie a branded pattern of circles with crossed lines in the middle, resembling brushstrokes and symbols conceivably produced during an intensive therapeutic drawing session. Overall, Johnson’s vision of a “universal” mental heath service is a well-intentioned and inviting proposition, but the members of the hypothetical community united by this treatment also run the risk of confusion, or worse, when a necessarily singular practice is converted to a collective experience.

— Mary Rinebold