Art in America

INTERVIEWS

The Accumulation of Self: How Rashid Johnson's Art Adds Up

By MAXWELL WILLIAMS OCT. 8, 2014

Installation view of Rashid Johnson's *Islands*, at David Kordansky, Los Angeles. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen.

As you walk into David Kordansky's recently relocated gallery in Los Angeles, a creamy, nutty smell wallops you—the unmistakable scent of raw shea butter.

It shows up throughout Rashid Johnson's show "Islands" (through Oct. 29)—each of the show's 11 works contain the pungent yellow stuff, made from the African shea tree and known for its near-sacred status in Afrocentric communities. It fills gaps of a towering, skeletal steel pyramid also decked with plants, books and CB radios; it adorns geometric tables made of mahogany; and it's packed into tins hung from

massive lacquered-oak wall shelving units, which also display soul and jazz records and more CB radios. There are also many copies of *Native Son*, Richard Wright's 1940 novel about an uneducated black man, Bigger Thomas, who kills a white woman, such that the book becomes a central aspect of the show.

Shelves, CBs, records, plants, books and shea butter are all motifs that have become familiar to those who follow the 37-year-old artist's career. By accumulating and reassembling these objects, all of which are related to his upbringing and day-to-day life, the Chicago-born, New York-based artist illustrates African-American identity from an anecdotal, autobiographical perspective. The resulting pieces are aesthetically dazzling—the pyramid is especially breathtaking—and confrontational in their large-scale ambition, their often politically charged symbols and, of course, their smell.

The work led to critical laurels and institutional recognition—Johnson has held exhibitions at venues like New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago.

Johnson talked to *A.i.A.* recently while standing next to the pyramid, titled *Plateaus*, about why a book features so prominently in the show, the alchemical nature of shea butter and how he classifies his sculptural tables and shelves.

MAXWELL WILLIAMS Wright's book *Native Son* is a central element in the show. When did you become interested in it, and what is its significance for you?

RASHID JOHNSON My mother introduced me to the book when I was 15. She specifically said that she really did not like it. One of her concerns with *Native Son* was why, through the portrayal of an uneducated black man, Wright makes us look like animals? I had come across so many capable black role models in my life that I was not disappointed to see a flawed, misanthropic character. At the same time that I picked the book up again, about a year ago, I also stumbled back on to Jimmy Cliff's *The Harder They Come* [a 1972 crime drama about a Jamaican outlaw]. I was thinking about O.J. Simpson and D.C. snipers John Muhammad and Lee Malvo. Muhammad and Malvo were really interesting—the black serial killer is almost as rare as the black guy on the moon. So I was dealing with the problematic character, whom Wright justifies with context and circumstances like poverty, et cetera.

Rashid Johnson: *The Long Dream*, 2014, burned red oak flooring, black soap, wax, spray enamel, vinyl, steel, bamboo, shea butter, books, plants, mirrored planter, 134 by 140 1/4 by 12 inches, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo by Martin Parsek.

WILLIAMS Bigger Thomas is flawed, but he's ultimately vilified in the accidental death because he's black. We were already reminded of the way the black American is seen by society as angry and uneducated when Trayvon Martin was depicted in the media as a thug in order to justify his shooting at the hands of George Zimmerman. And then, all of a sudden, *Native Son* became even more relevant when Michael Brown, the unarmed black 18-year-old who was killed by a white police officer in Ferguson in August, was portrayed as a robber.

JOHNSON Totally. I was swimming around in that stuff. It started to come out more in the way I was interacting with the works. Some of the works are the most aggressively treated pieces that I've ever made, and part of that is the evolution of understanding yourself as a mark-maker—as an artist, as a person interested in making aesthetic objects that have critical opportunities or agency—but part of it is also releasing frustration and disappointment, but also joy.

WILLIAMS Where did you get the plants in the pyramid sculpture?

JOHNSON Those were all found here in L.A., though most do not naturally grow here. But there are not a tremendous amount of indigenous succulents in Los Angeles. It's an interesting story of how this place exists—people brought all this stuff here, and now we feel like it's naturally "of the place," but it actually has no real indigenous gravity. When I bring my materials and signifiers to a place, it's kind of similar, like, "I'm here, and I brought all this shit with me."

Rashid Johnson: Plateaus, 2014, steel spray enamel, plants, ceramic, concrete, plastic, brass, burned wood, grow lamps, CB radios, shea butter, rugs, and book; 228 by 180 by 180 inches, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen.

WILLIAMS There's CB radios everywhere in the show. Why are these significant?

JOHNSON My father ran a CB radio business. I grew up in a cluttered space that was filled with radios and antennas. It felt alien. But the thing that turned out to be interesting about CB radios was the ability to call out in the world with anonymity. You choose your handle. Race and class become non-signifiers.

WILLIAMS Can you tell me about the consistent use of shea butter in your work?

JOHNSON My mother was an African history professor and my stepfather was Nigerian. It wasn't so much [an upbringing of] "Africanism," but a consciousness of the separation that you have from an African identity. When I was younger, I would see shea butter being sold on the street, and I was interested how people were still coating themselves in the theater of Africanism. You see that in dashikis and hairstyles and music. It's an interpretation of Africa without a tremendous knowledge of the complexity of the cultural identity of the continent. [The use of shea butter] consistently returns through the waves of Afrocentrist movements. It was reborn with Kwanzaa and again with a generation of neo-black beat poets. I think of it as humorous and also complex in its negotiation of how I began to form an identity. I went to West Africa and found all these shea trees, and was talking to people about how they used shea butter. It isn't as spiritually [revered as it is by African-Americans], but they talked a lot about its healing qualities.

Detail view of Rashid Johnson's Plateaus, 2014, steel spray enamel, plants, ceramic, concrete, plastic, brass, burned wood, grow lamps, CB radios, shea butter, rugs, and book; 228 by 180 by 180 inches, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen.

WILLIAMS Can you tell me about the Sol LeWitt cube understructure within the pyramid?

JOHNSON It's not dissimilar to the way we learn to write cursive—we need lined paper. That's the first time we learn to make organized marks. A grid, to me, is a very natural starting place, and I wind through it.

WILLIAMS In addition to the pyramid, you have all these—what are they—shelves? Shrines?

JOHNSON I call them shelves. There was a time when I was, like, "Stop calling them shrines." But I'm not going to bully everyone from seeing what so many people seem to be seeing in the work.

WILLIAMS But you think of it as a shelf with objects on it, because that's what you do with shelves?

JOHNSON I'd begun to collect things that were lying in piles on the floor of my studio. I had run out of space, and I started to build shelves. I turned around one day and realized that that was the vehicle for carrying so many of the things that I was looking at and talking about, so they went from the walls to the works. So I genuinely thought of them as what Lawrence Weiner calls "something to put something on."

WILLIAMS And you think of the tables in the same way?

JOHNSON I do. I'm really interested in their pliability. They can become occupied by whatever, whether it's a line of cocaine or a bunch of books or some sort of sex act. David Kordansky and I have been having a lot of conversations where he needs to call them sculptures. And I'm comfortable with that. Sometimes I call them sculptures. But a lot of the time I say "table." It comes down to semiotics: what's a table? Is it a table if we don't put shit on it? Is it a sculpture at that point?