

Review: Rashid Johnson's "Magic Numbers"

by Daniel Kunitz, Modern Painters

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"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, 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.

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