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RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

RASHID JOHNSON

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BLOUINARTINFO

Review: Rashid Johnson's "Magic Numbers"

by Daniel Kunitz, Modern Painters
14/08/14 2:00 PM EDT

"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.

A version of this article appears in the October 2014 issue of Modern Painters magazine.

RASHID JOHNSON

IN THE STUDIO WITH CHRISTOPHER STACKHOUSE

RASHID JOHNSON'S ARTWORKS are meditations on the cultural phenomena that shape African-Americans as a social group. Viewers of his videos, photographs, sculptures, paintings and installations are looking at deft presentations of slippery conceptual surfaces. However, abstract form is equally significant to the artist and guides his process. Craftsmanship, autobiography, design, theater, ambience and historical scholarship are always evident.

Johnson began making art as a photographer in 1996. He received a BA in 2000 from Columbia College in Chicago and attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago from 2003 to '05. At SAIC, he was strongly influenced by critical theory through his studies with Gregg Bordowitz, a professor of film, video and new media. Upon leaving the Art Institute, Johnson moved to New York, where he has gained attention in solo and group shows with photographs, text pieces and guitarlike shelving structures, on which he places objects that mark back to the 1970s and carry personal and social weight. Most recently, the objects have included books, record albums, oyster shells, shea butter and radio components.

Johnson had his first solo exhibition in New York only three years after his arrival, at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery. Among the works was the 8-foot-square wall-hung shelf construction The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (The Power of Healing), 2008, the title alluding to a classic sociological study by Harold Cruse, who saw in black intellectual leadership of the first half of the 20th century a failure to understand the depths of American racism. In the same exhibition, the sculpture Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos (2008), a rendering of a rifle's crosshairs at about 4 feet in diameter, introduced a motif that points to the political plight of black male youth in the 1980s and recurs in Johnson's work. The title is borrowed from a 1988 song by Public Enemy, whose logo features an image of crosshairs. The song addresses the dependency of the privatized prison industry on the incarceration of black males.

Johnson's recent exhibition in New York, his first at Hauser & Wirth, was called *Rumble*, a reference to the historic 1974 Ali-Foreman boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman that headlined as "The Rumble in the Jungle." The bout was organized by boxing promoter Don King, who once owned the Upper East Side townhouse where the gallery is located. The exhibition included large abstract paintings that employ unusual supports such as tiled mirrors or wood flooring. Johnson's mark-making is often executed in black soap (traditionally made in West Africa) or by burning a surface with a hot branding iron. The image of the crosshairs turned up subtly and not so subtly. It appeared branded repeatedly on a section of parquet red oak flooring (The Squared Circle, 2011), along with other brandings of palm trees and the insignia of Sigma Pi Phi, the first African-American Greek-letter fraternity. It can also be found drawn in the sand in the 16mm film The New Black Yoga (2011). In the approximately 11-minute film, five black men on an ocean beach perform choreographed moves combining martial arts and yoga, to a score of generic flute music accompanied by a simple, slow, rhythmic world beat. The work seems to offer an absurdist take on the dilemma facing the young black male: be aggressive and protect yourself, but be self-reflective and peaceful.

I visited Johnson on a sunny autumn morning at his studio in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn. The expansive, roughly constructed space looks very much like a wood and metal workshop. It was strewn with power tools and worktables. Avuncular, casually confident in manner, at age 34 Johnson is preternaturally clear about what inspires his creative output—American literature and the ways in which African-Americans are situated in that literature, as well as the influence that African-Americans have on American cultural production of all sorts. These subjects sharpen his focus on enduing physical objects with meaning and narrative. Offering a contemporary black American esthetic, Johnson questions the uniformity of "black experience, openly interrogating the usual monolithic view of the black struggle for affirmation and recognition.

Opening this month at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, is "Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks," the artist's first museum survey. Organized by MCA associate curator Julie Rodrigues Widholm, it encompasses 36 works—paintings, sculptures, installations, photographs and videos—dating from 1998 to 2012, with a focus on pieces from the last five years. Johnson has shown extensively in the U.S. and abroad, including the 2011 Venice Biennale, and is represented by Hauser & Wirth Gallery, New York, and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

CHRISTOPHER STACKHOUSE What was it like growing up in Chicago?

RASHID JOHNSON I was born in Evanston, about three blocks away from the Chicago border. My mother at the time was finishing her PhD in African history at Northwestern University. Soon after my birth, my parents split and my father moved to Wicker Park, which is on the north side of the city.

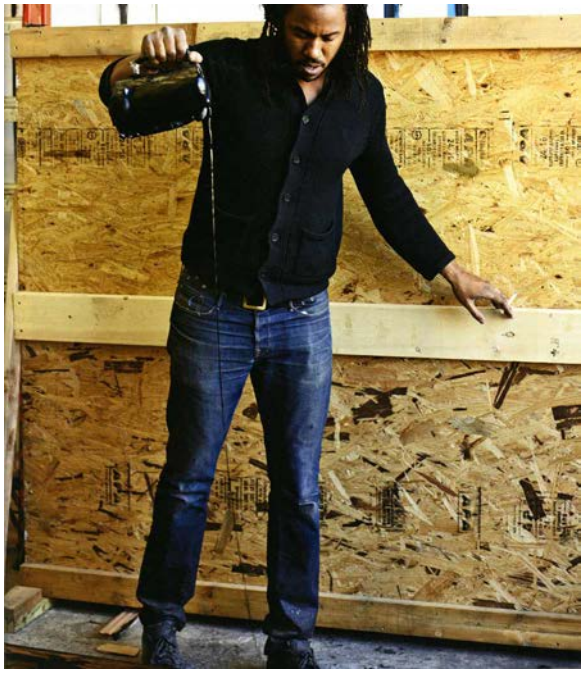
STACKHOUSE How did you divide your time between your parents? Half and half?

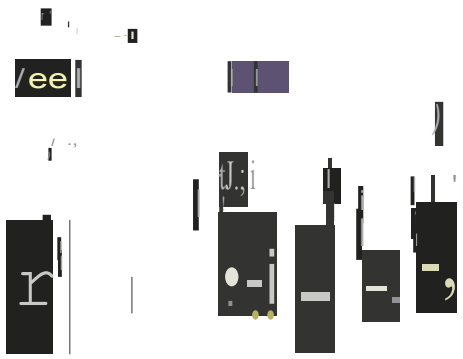
JOHNSON More or less. I was with my mother a lot during the week, and I spent time with my father on the weekend. My father owned a small company, called Gundel Electronics, where he did community band radio and some repair stuff. But mostly his business revolved around ham radio, CB radio, so the house was kind of an electronics

STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADRIAN GAUT

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Apr. 14–Aug. 5, 2012.





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STACKHOUSE . . .laboratory?
JOHNSON Yeah. tons of lollipop microphones. buttons and dials. There was a lot of "calling out Into the world" and people having "handles." My father hadabig brick cellphone. before anyone hada cell phone, becausehe wasreallyjust Into that kind of thing-communication devlc-es. Igrew up between my father's laboratory and my mothe(s library.
STACKHOUSE So your formative years were sandwiched between the tinkering of your dad with his electron-ics business and your mother's dedi-cation to education?
JOHNSON Yes. I would say that. And I also give credit now to my stepfather, although we didn't have the besl relationship when Iwas younger. He had a strong Interest in literature. and Introduced me to a lot olwrlters and thinkers who have been Influential to me
STACK HOUSE Who are some o! those people?
JOHNSON James Baldwin. Henry Miller. James Joyce, Richard Wright. Ralph Ellison. Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker. There is an interesting essay by Hurston where she writes that people imagine her to be a tragic character. but she does not !eel that way. She says, 1 am too busy sharp-ening my ayster knife." Iimagine her sitting out near a bay. shucking aysters and drinking beer.
STACKHOUSE Sounds fabulous ! O me.
JOHNSON Sounds like a great day, right? I thinkit's one olthemore fan-las!lc metaphors !or a beauhlul epe-rience-this idea that she Is fust out sharpening her oyster knife.

That is something that has really fol-lowedme.bothln the ltlleslhaveusad andthematerials.loftenuseayster shells withsheabutterlnthem . It's really a very direct reference to that essay, which my mother introduced me to as a teenager. But Baldwin and Wright were enormouslybrmat1V0 for me. And t would also say Ellison.
STACK HOUSE With Just one book. *Invisible Man*, Emson laid out a road map for the African-American. The accommodating negro• versus, say. "the revolutionary ." It's playing out

Americanhistory right now in an
ld *way*.
HNSON Yes, al"ld there Is a lot or
1erlapping. For me. every autobi-
raphy or a black male written alter
ight's *Black Boy* is basically *Black*
y, or an attempt My mother Intro-
ced me *to* more academic-minded
iters. Comal West and Skip Gates.
her llbrary I came across. whenI
s very young, Harold Cruse's *The*
tsis of the Negro Intellectual. wtlieh
like a bible of Negro intellectuals
m Frederick Douglass to Amiri Bara-
. Even berore f could understand
y1h1ng inside of them. Just seeing the
oks' spines and thinking about them
s important for measachlld.
ACKHOUSE There Is an emotional
argalnthepresence otalibrary.
you think there Is-I don't like the
rd nostalgia. necessarily-a certain
ount of comfort in just looking at
oks or vinyl records?
HNSON I have found that to be
ocase formyself. Ithink that when
u look *at* those things there Is a
nse olpotential reward. The oppor-
nityofiust being in a space with
em.I think.is anattrac11ve thing.
s lass aboot nostalgia or memory.
re about opportunity.
ACKHOUSE The things YoU use
nake your workhaveculturat as
ll as personal, associations built
them. Yet it seams you are most
arastedintheir materiality. their
jec1ness. Can you talk about this
erence?
HNSON The materials I've used
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ninded me of certain aspects or my
erience growing up-for &•ample.
relationship IhadtoAfrocentnsm
ough my parentsinthelate70s
d early ·sos. My mother would
rayshave shea buneraround. and
ewore dashikis.Iwascelebrat-
Kwan.i:aa.hearing th1sunlamitiar
guage. Swahili. and seeing black
ap and chew sticks around the
se, things that ware about apply-
an Africanness to one's self. Then
parents evolvedIntomIdd le-class
ck professionals, and I was kind of
andoned In this Afrocentric space
y had created. Iwas forced to
negotiata what that periodand those objectsmeant lor me.Isaw these things. as 1 got older, in Harlem. in Brooklyn. being sold on the street. I always thought to myself:What Is the goal now with these materials? What are people trying to get from them?

Sol started playing with those Ideas andobjects ona formallevel, fueled by my interest Inabstractionand mark-makIngaswellasmyinterest In the constructed object, in the recent shelving units, lor el(!Imple. How do these things become signifiers? What are 1hese things when !hey no longer Iunctioninthe waythey wara originally intended to function?

STACKHOUSE There was this kind of fissure in the late '70s. On the one hand. people were trying to make ctear that Ihey were full participants in American society, the capital-ist system. On the other hand. they were trying to fully embraca being culturally African.

JOHNSON It makes me think of the idea of black neurosis. It Is unclet-recognlied and has led to generations of black middle·class peopll ghting to understand the1t position and having adifficult tlmelocatingthemselves.

STACKHOUSE There is a particular Insecurityinthablackmiddleclass-anInstabilityIn what delinesIt.

JOHNSON Inherently, there is an enormous insecurily in it.

STACKHOUSE This inherent tension is in yoor work. You address the "stull" oltheblackmIddlaclass. the domes·tlcity. You also address Afrocentricity, and the stuflof the black poor.

JOHNSON For me, it"s always bean about!thesekInds of contradictions. Igrew up in a situation where experi-

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enceshai:lasmochtodow1thclass or gender aswith1ace.lpmJect this story of theblack midi:lleclassintomy work. but alsolwant materialrepre-sentationsolblacknessinother ways. And I hope that thecontradictions are never fully resolved.

STACKHOUSE You're not inte•ested in the narratMI of victimhood.

JOHNSON I"m not. There is an inter-esting line by Aa<On McGrude<. who wrotethecomoc stnpcalled"The Boondocks," which later became an animatedtelevisionshow.Acharac-1er atonepowitsayssomethinglike, we weren't all chased by dogs and sprayedbyhoses."Youknowlhere;s agenera11on thatisreallyupset by1hat kindol)oke.because theyleelth a! theyopenedthe<loor forus.AndIt Is notclearhow topayhomagetothem withoutsacrilicmg thefroodomsand oppOrtunitiesha11heir efortsgaveus.

STACK HOUSE How are wc supposed toculturatyaddressthepast.andstlll movc forward?

Northeast in 1950 or 1960 had a com-pletelydifferent se!olconcernsthan. say.apersonlivinginMobile, Alabama. at that time.Andiam interestedinaet-tingupcontradictions that point to the tacithst therelfemany experiences

STACK HOUSE How does working in New York now dlUer from working in Chicago years ago?

JOHNSON ChlcagoisaV8fYcomple place.It isincrediblysegregated.I meanhyper-segregated.

STACKHOUSE Yes, it is. Whenever J am the<elamalwaysa Ulesurprlsed by tl'lat

JOHNSON Before Imowd to New York a lot or my work spoke delibera tely tosegregationandotherpolarizmg Issues.Imade apiece called/ Wish I Was *White* (20041. The words were on apieceolpaper that foldedou1

STACKHOUSE Was the paper white?

JOHNSON No. the paper was pinkish. Actuellyitwaskindo f pink1shyellow.

STACK HOUSE And was the wofl< a monochrome?

JOHNSON Ilwas a mooochfome. yes [lavghs).

STACKHOUSE I think that is funny

JOHNSON [laughsjAlololmywork in Chicago had humorinit. When I moved to New York. honestly, my concerns were)ust ditferent.But it wasrealty important tomydevelopment asan artist togolthroughthose steps and1o comeout inaverydifferent placefrom wharelbegan

STACK HOUSE What is mdicative of e post-Chicago" woO<?

JOHNSON Now I deal with the more l0<malconcemsof abstractoon. evenin works like the braoded wood pieces. whochelsorelate1ocriticalandcon-ceptualnot10ns. Formiswheretreatly s1ar1adasanart1st.beloremywork becameinvolvedwithother concerns. I"vegonebacktoissuesaroond how yQumekedecisionsasanart1st,eswell as themateriels andtoolsthat youuse to make those decisions

STACK HOUSE You mentioned your interest inthehistoryot blackabstrec-toon.endwhat black artistswereforced tocontendw11hbyexcludingwtlat wooldotherwisebethoughtof asblack conten11rom theorwork.Wewe<e talk-ing aboutN0<manlewis


RIDGID

STACKHOUSE Lewis's work has an urbanblackidtoit

JOHNSON Iwouldsay thatat>out ClarkandLovingaswe ll. But, it gets Interesting with Gilliam because. in hlsearly work, yousee no s1gnor any sort ofoul1u•aldesigna11on

STACKHOUSE It's purely formal

JOHNSON Formal and maybe existential Issues but not specific concernstoblack fraternityo• aculturalgroup.Thoughyoudo see &Offlfl'Of thoserelerences In the later work

STACKHOUSE In what way?

JOHNSON It happens w1th AILov· lngnwell. They start movingInto Issues of patterning. It makesme think of the way people perceive MartInPuryear'swork. Wasn't he makingmost olthat st"ff InSweden o• something?He sllJdiedinSwe- den. He did spend a brief period onto1he work.Andl really wan\ to take someownership olthat.tobe able to shapethe conversation ina way that dealsw1th my experience. In my lime, while still participating with the other decisions and issues youconfront as anartist

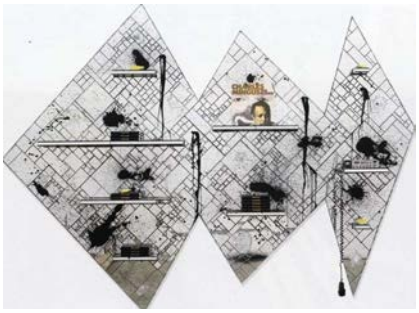
STACKHOUSE Do you leel you fit intoahneofblack Americafi pamt· ersarldart1s1s?Doyoureelpar1 or a contonuum.0<dorl'iyouseeitas aCOfllinuum? Is It more like a crowd thanahne?

JOHNSON That's ad1flicUIt Ques· tion.Inalot olways,andmaybe unlalrlyso.Ido see aline that 1111 Into. Imlght look at JacobLawrence and Romare Bearden.afldseehow that leads toNo•mMLewlsandthen Martin Puryear, and see how that gives birth to David Hammons and then Mark Bradford, and then how anarrlist hkemehtsin !he ab1trac1palnters.rm1alking about black lema!ephotographers likeLorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems.as wellas GlennLJgonaller them.1t allstarts 1o twist and turn, tobecome a complex of bo1hhistory andcontemporaryart pracllce.

STACKHOUSE Ilmdit.d1sconeert· lng1hat theadvent of abstract1onin American art is tied to Hans HolmaM. FromaC0<1C111JhJalandma1erlal s1andpoint.thewaysthat1theblack commlJmtyhasestheoclzeditselfin termsolcolof. rlBandshape,allol thecomponen1s,Invotve!heconcern1 oll0<malpa1nt1ng.Therehasalways been this atten1ontoabs1raction. Do you seeth1spersistence?

JOHNSON Yes. asmuchasIreject theIdea of a singularblackexperi· enca. I do

STACKHOUSE Irivention and



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SON Reuse and improvisat1on h•ngs are almost r>ecessarily &nt to the blacke•per;ence gand adjusl1ng. lt happans hout the day. depending on

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<;HOUSE Code switching

SON Yes [laughsl. And lhi S the way 1hal you move in

space. In an art prac!ice. that moe·men1 may inTluence the way you consider marking. consider mapping. nego!iate the terms of e•pefime-nta·tlon and improvisation

STACK HOUSE How do you fool abou1 po1en1ially b8ing exo1icized as a

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CHRISTOPHER STACKHOUSE
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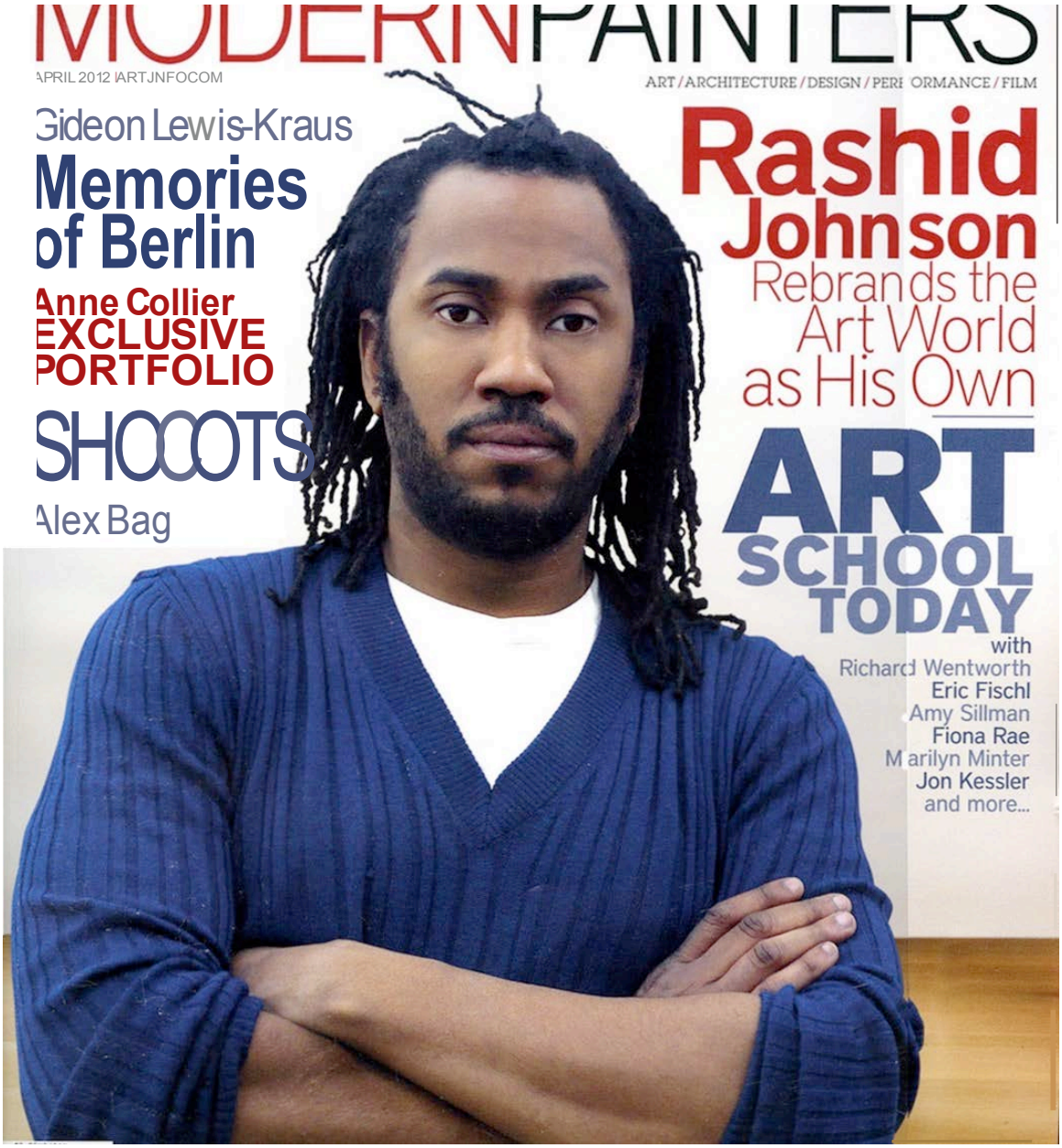
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Rashid Johnson

BY ORJT GAT PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICAH AARON SCHMIDT

"I LIKE WOil KING HERE." says Rashid Johnson of his studio in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn. "Since my process is so industrial, it makes sense to be around people who are doing similar th ings. There's a lot of small industry here, a lot of glass and woodworking companies." He has a second workspace, but this is where most of the heavy lifting is done. The studio itself is quite dusty-the result of the artist work- ing with a forge and materials such as broken glass and floorboards-and he uses a small machine to blow away the dust. The incorporation of rugged materials has become a signature of Johnson's work: shelves made of glass; wax and black soap paintings and those with a wood.flooring base that he marks with tools as diverse as sanding stones and sizzling brands. "These paintings aren't going anywhere. They're stable," says Johnson. "People often ask me, 'Can these be in the sun?' and the answer is clearly yes. 1fthe sun is so hot that it would melt them, then we're all in serious trouble. It would take a lot for them to deteriorate."

Johnson spends about a week or ten days on a single wood-flooring painting: first building the support, and then beginning the slow process of burning and marking the work using brands that he heats in a forge. 'l'he labor-intensive practice calls for a large workspace, and Johnson is looking for an even bigger studio as he prepares for his first major museum show, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, opening April 14, along with an exhibition at South London Gallery, scheduled for September. The Chicago show, "Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks," which will include some of the pieces depicted here, is particularly thrilling to him: "Chicago is my hometown. I was just there, and it was lovely to see how enthusiastic people are about the show. The exhibition might also have the opportunity to travel, so that's really exciting."

HAMMER AND MUG

"The block paintings ore mode out of a mixture of block soap and wax that Iheat up Iuse different tools to paint or pour on this mixture, which dries on the surface. The beer mug is one of my pouring cups. t still hos the texture of soap and wax: malleable but firm. Ido a lot of burning and breaking. The hammer is used to shatter the glass. It's handmade. but sometimes Isimply use o chunk of rock."

SHEA BUTTER

This is who! sheo butter looks like when it's really dusty. Iput it on the shelves Ibuild in my work-there ore none around here righl now because Ijust hod a tig show and not much was left in the studio. But I keep this here because Iuse it on my skin. too.·

CREST

1 use industrial materials and also tools that are kindof crude. Ihove a number of these brands invarious shapes and sizes. Idesigned this one-it comes from the crest of a block secret society called the Boule.#

FORGE

"The forges one of the most important things in this studio. Ihod it custom-mode by a guy in Chicago. Iuse ii o heat up the brands:

E) RADIOS. BOOKS. AND RECORDS

"My dad hod a CB-radb electronics company. Ihold on to a lot of these radios and use them in works. And Iusually keep several copies of the same book. This, for example, is Jeon Genet's The *Blocks*. Ihove five of these here and might use them for something later. Ikeep my vinyls mainly in my other studio. but there is a record player here that we ploy norder to relax al work:

KNUCKLES

"These ore my pointing tools. Icon them knuckles. They'reall homemade from dried wax-Iuse them to mark the paintings. I keep a whde range of sizes, shapes, and lengths of these. from bng and thick ones for large gestures b short ones that Iuse to scratch the wax.#

Chicago Tribune

COOL NOW? Being Rashid Johnson

Artist opens first major retrospective at Museum of Contemporary Art

By Christopher Borrelli | Tribune reporter

There may be a person less likely than Rashid Johnson to throw out a first pitch at Wrigley Field this year. There may even be another acclaimed African-American artist known for wrestling with issues of identity, class and black intellectualism who is less likely to throw out a first pitch at Wrigley this year. But Spike Lee would never betray the New York Yankees, and James Baldwin is dead. Nevertheless, last week, in the midst of an early season series between the Cubs and Brewers, Johnson, a tall, young, dread-locked visual artist who grew up in Evans-ton and, as Chicago gallery director Paul Gray put it, "you can't travel far in the art world these days without running into someone either collecting or talking about him," was warming up behind home plate, playing bare-handed catch with a friend and waiting to be called to the pitcher's mound.

"You're throwing from the actual mound?" his friend shouted. "The actual mound," Johnson shouted back. "I have a burner. I'll probably get signed." "How are you going to get signed by the Cubs if all you have is a burner?" "They'll look the other way about the location of the pitch when they see the velocity."

A day earlier, John Grisham had thrown out the first pitch; people asked for his autograph. Rashid Johnson, outside of an art gallery, nobody recognized. Still, Johnson, at 34, found himself here because: No. 1, the Museum of Contemporary Art, which just opened his first major retrospective, "Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks," pulled a few strings; No. 2, one of those strings was Beth Heller, vice president of marketing for Harry Caray's and a collector of Johnson's work; and No. 3, Johnson is a devoted, lifelong Cubs believer.

His wife, Sheree Housepian, stood to the side, cradling their 7-month-old son, watching her husband: "This has been his dream since he was young," she said. "Actually, back then it was just to be on the field."

History, particularly childhood dreams, youthful influences and Chicago memories, is not taken lightly by Johnson, who left for Brooklyn eight years ago. His MCA show, a survey of his videos, paintings, installations and sculptures, often resembles something of a 1970s rumpus room: The face of Miles Davis gazes down from a sculpture that could double as an entertainment center; shelves are lined with Al Green and Richard Pryor records, long-leafed houseplants and books from black intellectuals that his mother read; a TV on a Persian rug plays a video of Johnson doing yoga so badly he seems to be imitating a late-night kung fu movie. Two recurring materials in the show are Ghanaian black soap and an African-derived skin moisturizer called shea butter, both of which were always around the house when Johnson was younger; the soap, in particular, he melts now, smooths out and uses as the backdrop for his larger, abstract paintings.

Then there's his less-nostalgic work.

In 2004, for a group show at the Renaissance Society museum at the University of Chicago, Johnson's contribution was a copy of Jesse Jackson's dashiki, Al Sharpton's track suit and then-Sen. Barack Obama's business suit, hung side by side. He called the piece "Evolution of the Negro Political Costume."

Said Hamza Walker, Renaissance Society assistant curator, "Rashid actually wrote to Obama and he asked for Obama to donate a suit for the show, but he never heard back. Rashid's gestures can get kind of strong. He can be feisty. If you have an ability to envision yourself as the subject of a piece on black male-dom, that is probably necessary. I mean, have you seen the photo he did of himself as Frederick Douglass?"

Indeed, for the past decade, Johnson's been assembling an unusual, wry and approachable discourse on contemporary black identity and the urge to shake off dreary, dated expectations — or as the writer Toure says of John-son's work in the show's catalog, "It's about the freedom to be Black however you want to be." One self-portrait in the MCA show, for instance, shows John-son lying across the tomb of boxing legend Jack Johnson in Graceland Cemetery. The message, like the message in much of Johnson's art, is vague, and vaguely provocative. Take this however you like, he seems to be saying — funny, caustic, reverential .

"I guess I connect with his work because I like its meaningfulness," Heller said, "I just like that there is meaning. He's not randomly placing stuff on shelves. He's connecting it to his life in such a way that I want to understand what the pieces mean. You don't always get that from young artists — or care enough to."

Anyway, that's who threw a first pitch at Wrigley last week, Johnson, a former Columbia College and School of the Art Institute student who once sent a manifesto to critics that read: "Young artist seeks audience ... Must enjoy race mongering, disparate disconnected thoughts and sunsets ... Ability to hold conversation using only rap lyrics, and a sense of humor, a must." Before the game, Todd Ricketts, one of the Cubs owners, stood alongside the Cubs dugout and with a scrunched-up face said that Heller had shown him John-son's work. Ricketts flipped through the catalog, he's not a political-art fan, but, sure, the guy is interesting.

"I, uh, also saw that picture of him naked," Ricketts mumbled, cracking up, "the full-frontal."

And?

"What a showoff."

A few days before the MCA opening, Johnson stood in the center of a gallery and cast a seriously-don't-talk-to-me-now look on his face. Museum workers swirled around him and artwork sat on the floor, covered in blankets; bubble wrap lay strewn about. Johnson was quiet, moving from room to room. He bundled his dreadlocks together, tied them in a bun, then a moment later, he released them. Then repeated the process.

He stopped before his elephant in the room, an 800-pound, steel sculpture of gun cross hairs that takes its title from a Public Enemy song, "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos." The top half was missing. The bottom, and base of the sculpture, was being centered. "Can we call Julie in to OK the final placement?" he asked no one particular, and a moment later, curator Julie Rodrigues Widholm appeared, her arms crossed.

"I don't want it closer to the wall," she said. "Has to be wheelchair accessible, but I don't want it out more."

Johnson's shoulders physically dropped, casting off tension, and he wandered away to other pieces.

He's comfortable here. When chief curator Michael Darling started in 2010, he asked the MCA staff for a wish list of new shows. Johnson, who had shown at the museum's "12X12" series a decade earlier, topped their list. Indeed, even before he had left Columbia, where he studied photography, Johnson was showing work. His first serious pieces were photographs of the homeless men he met around Columbia, a startling experience for him, he said, having grown up middle class with "black militant hippie parents," a mother who lived in Evanston and taught history at Northwestern University, a father in Wicker Park who sold CB radio parts.

"When we met Rashid, he was about 20 and frankly, he was an anomaly," said Paul Gray, director of the Richard Gray Gallery. "Photography hadn't yet developed the broad, deep collecting public that

exists for it now, and he wasn't even using the usual prepared chemicals. He was using direct sunlight. He was using antique processes. He was interested in the black experience but it didn't overwhelm his work — it didn't scream he was an African-American artist and leave it at that. He was thoughtful, and the work had integrity and a conceptual, emotional power that spoke of him long-term. He was young yet fully formed, weirdly so."

He was also, in his early 20s, adamant about not being labeled a black artist. Nevertheless, his breakthrough came in 2001 when he was included in "Freestyle," a landmark exhibit of black artists at Harlem's Studio Museum. The show, which popularized the term "post-black art," centered on an irony, described by curator Thelma Golden as black artists who insisted on not being labeled black artists despite creating work "steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness."

Johnson became a leading example of post-black art. In the decade since, MCA curator Rodrigues Widholm said, "every time Rashid has called, it seems he's signed to a major gallery, been invited into the Venice Biennale, was named finalist for the hugely important Hugo Boss Prize (the winner will be announced in the fall). And every time, his work gets more personal and metaphysical, less filled with one-liners."

The morning before the MCA opening, the stress of putting together his first museum show already gone, Johnson, in a sweater and Harry Caray's T-shirt, said " 'Freestyle' changed my perspective on what could be done in terms of the freedom of the conversation these artists were having and some practical stuff — the other artists were way more savvy. I was the only one in the show from the Midwest. I didn't know anything."

He thought for a moment.

"Then there was a period when I had a negative reaction to (the 'post-black' label). For years I think I perceived blackness in arts as this ghettoized space and a limitation, but I don't anymore. I don't feel my conversation is limited by being lumped in with other artists who have similar things to say. I am conscious of racism and I don't want to ignore the typical black subjects in art — urbanity, poverty. But that's not my exclusive concern, either. I think a lot of young black people grow up viewing being black as a monolithic experience, that you are supposed to behave a certain way. When I lived in Chicago, living up to certain black standards and expectations was my battle — how do I and who I am fit into that conversation? Certainly a lot of my autobiographical pieces are about that, more about addressing a black audience and inner-community concerns than teaching a white audience that black people have different hair or whatever."

He rolled his eyes.

"Anyway," he continued, "I came to terms with the fact my conversation will get hijacked! No matter what I do, I know I would be obligated to comment on the black experience and if I don't offer that, it would be offered for me. So, I could let that conversation be hijacked or I could make peace with that hijacking and do it on my terms. For me, at this moment, that means my work is about opportunity and class. But at least it's what I want to talk about. (Artist) Kara Walker has a great line about being black and making art that I never forget. She said if a black artist paints smiley faces and flowers, someone always asks 'Why is she so angry?' "

When the time came for John-son to throw out the first pitch, he climbed the mound at Wrigley and waved and with a big smile and a suddenly stiff windup that betrayed a touch of nerves, he threw the ball a little high and more than a little outside. Catcher Kerry Wood lurched to the right and snagged it, then trotted out to Johnson, slapped the artist on the back and laughed: "You put a little movement on that thing," he said.

"Just a little," Johnson replied, then turned to his friends and family said, "Well, that was a ball."

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ZBIGNIEW BZDAK/TRIBUNE PHOTO Rashid Johnson's "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos" (2008) is on display at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

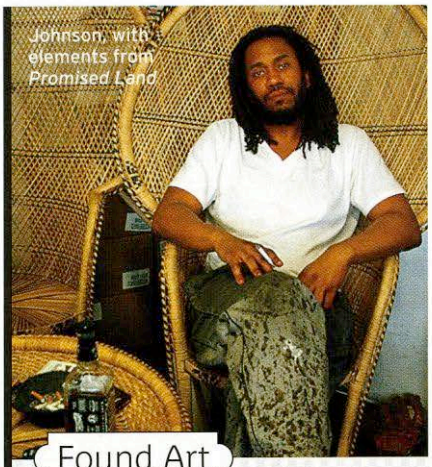
Chicago®

SEPTEMBER 2008

CHICAGO GUIDE

(continued from page 134)

MUSEUMS



Johnson, with elements from *Promised Land*

Found Art

JESSE JACKSON'S GAFFE this summer, involving a live mic and some less-than-collegial comments about Barack Obama, cast a glaringly bright light on the changing definitions of black identity in American politics. Indeed, the persistent buzz about whether Obama is "black enough" indicates a significant shift in American attitudes toward race. Artists can generally be relied upon to grapple with such shifts a bit sooner than the mainstream and have, for several years, been raising the question of whether we're living in a "post-black" (and "post-white") society. Among the best of the young conceptual artists making art about racial identity—work that is smart, savvy, sometimes tinged with wry humor, and always unapologetic—is a former Chicagoan, **Rashid Johnson,** who received high praise for his New York solo debut last spring. With his September show in Chicago, *The New Escapist Promised Land Garden and Recreation Center,* Johnson continues his recent theme of Afro-futurism in a site-specific multi-media exhibition. Johnson calls it an "orgy between Sun Ra, Paul Gauguin, Kazmir Malevich, Debra Dickerson, and Eldridge Cleaver"—in short, decidedly ahead of the mainstream.
–ANN WIENS

Sep 5–Oct 11. Moniquemeloche, 118 N Peoria. 312-455-0299. Johnson is also slated for a September show at the Richard Gray Gallery, 875 N Michigan, Ste 2503. Call for dates: 312-642-8877.

flavorpill

Issue 208 September 9, 2008

Art

Rashid Johnson: *The New Escapist Promised Land Garden and Recreation Center* and *Cosmic Slops*

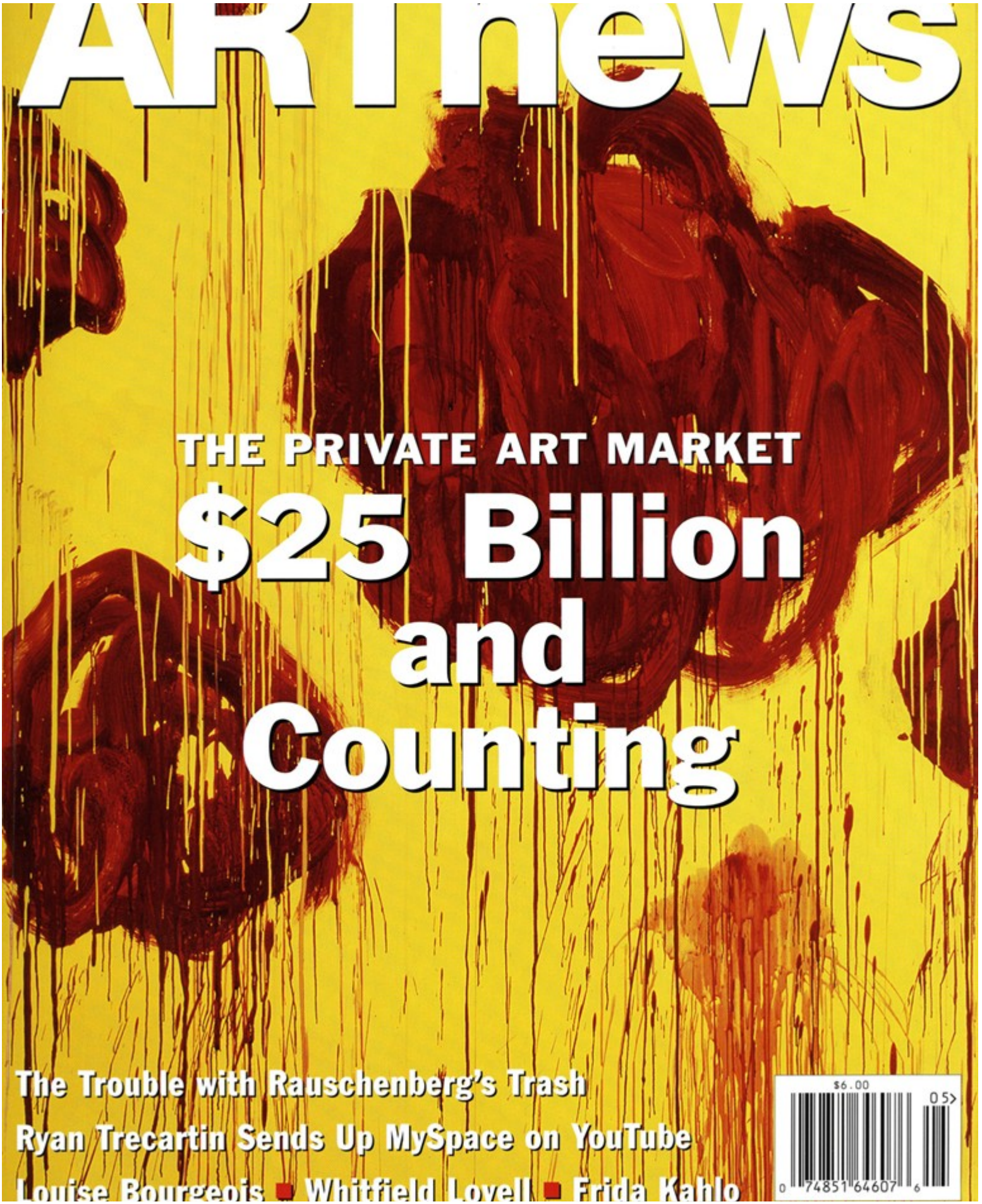
Rashid Johnson is one of the more promising young artists to emerge from Chicago in recent years, with photographs and sculptures in exhibitions across the country. This fall, two galleries stage a large-scale homecoming for the artist.

At Monique Meloche, Johnson constructs a site-specific installation, transforming the gallery into a "mystical recreation space that remixes black history with references to alchemy, divination, and astronomy."

– Karsten Lund

Note:
Johnson's *Cosmic Slops* exhibition goes up simultaneously at Richard Gray Gallery (875 N Michigan Ave).

ARTnews



THE PRIVATE ART MARKET

$25 Billion and Counting

The Trouble with Rauschenberg's Trash

Ryan Trecartin Sends Up MySpace on YouTube

Louise Bourgeois ■ Whitfield Lovell ■ Frida Kahlo

$6.00

05>

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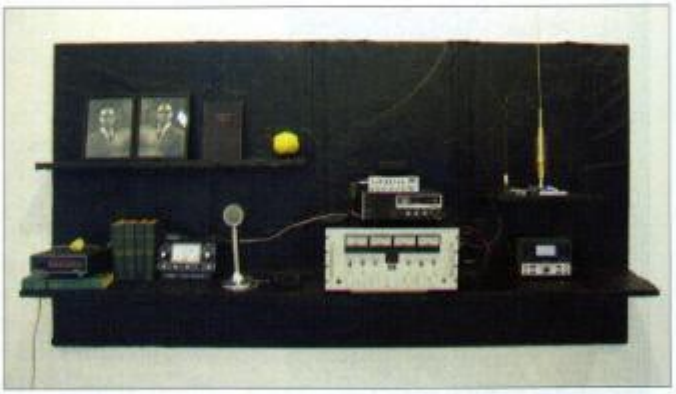
Rashid Johnson

Nicole Klagsbrun

In this ambitious show of photographs, abstract drawings, and mixed-media constructions, Rashid Johnson documented an imaginary secret society composed of African American intellectuals from various periods. There were photographic portraits, such as the diptych *Prince of Mathematicians* (2008), showing slightly different versions of the same stern-looking gentleman, and others depicting members of the New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club, who include "Emmett," "Samuel," and "Thurgood." Their postures are regal, their expressions noble and inscrutable. A faint cloud of smoke envelops them, as if they'd been summoned from the past.

In Johnson's world, math, science, and African heritage are cosmically but uncomfortably linked. *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (The Power of Healing)*, 2008, for example, is a wall of bookshelves coated in wax and black soap. It appears heavy and thick with tar. Objects are arranged on the shelves as if on an altar: Harold Cruse's book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, a large vase, and shea butter in black waxed bowls and chalices. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, shea butter is massaged into wounds, applied to skin and hair, and used in rituals. Here the healing substance is something to be contemplated by a black intellectual.



Rashid Johnson, *Citizen Band (Explorations in Topology)*, 2008, shelves, wax, black soap, shea butter, mixed media, *Prince of Mathematicians* photograph, installation view. Nicole Klagsbrun.

The Grand Galactic Cloak (2008), a piece of silver fabric layered with clay, glass shards, and black paint, transforms the intellectual crisis into an existential one. The fabric hangs in a shape that is reminiscent of a Klan hood or a picture from Abu Ghraib. But up close the lamé sparkles through its dark, tacky covering and resembles a starry sky; in this light the weighed-down fabric could almost be seen as a sign of hope.

—Amy Karafin

The New York Times
nytimes.com

March 30, 2008
Art

The Topic Is Race; the Art Is Fearless

By HOLLAND COTTER

IN the 1970s the African-American artist Adrian Piper donned an Afro wig and a fake mustache and prowled the streets of various cities in the scowling, muttering guise of the Mythic Being, a performance-art version of a prevailing stereotype, the black male as a mugger, hustler, gangsta.

In the photographs that resulted you can see what she was up to. In an era when some politicians and much of the popular press seemed to be stoking racial fear, she was turning fear into farce — but serious, and disturbing, farce, intended to punch a hole in pervasive fictions while acknowledging their power.

Recently a new kind of Mythic Being arrived on the scene, the very opposite of the one Ms. Piper introduced some 30 years ago. He doesn□t mutter; he wears business suits; he smiles. He is by descent half black African, half white American. His name is Barack Obama.

On the rancorous subject of the country□s racial history he isn□t antagonistic; he speaks of reconciliation, of laying down arms, of moving on, of closure. He is presenting himself as a 21st-century postracial leader, with a vision of a color-blind, or color-embracing, world to come.

Campaigning politicians talk solutions; artists talk problems. Politics deals in goals and initiatives; art, or at least interesting art, in a language of doubt and nuance. This has always been true when the subject is race. And when it is, art is often ahead of the political news curve, and heading in a contrary direction.

In a recent solo debut at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery in Chelsea a young artist named Rashid Johnson created a fictional secret society of African-American intellectuals, a cross between Mensa and the Masons. At first uplift seemed to be the theme. The installation was framed by a sculpture resembling giant cross hairs. Or was it a microscope lens, or a telescope□s? The interpretive choice was yours. So was the decision to stay or run. Here was art beyond old hot-button statements, steering clear of easy condemnations and endorsements. But are artists like Mr. Johnson making “black” art? Political art? Identity art? There are no answers, or at least no unambiguous ones.

Since Ms. Piper□s Mythical Being went stalking in the 1970s — a time when black militants and blaxploitation movies reveled in racial difference — artists have steadily challenged prevailing constructs about race.

As multiculturalism entered mainstream institutions in the 1980s, the black conceptualist David Hammons stayed outdoors, selling snowballs on a downtown Manhattan sidewalk. And when, in the 1990s, Robert Colescott was selected as the first African-American to represent the United

States at the Venice Biennale, he brought paintings of figures with mismatched racial features and skin tones, political parables hard to parse.

At the turn of the present millennium, with the art market bubbling up and the vogue for identity politics on the wane, William Pope.L — the self-described "friendliest black artist in America" — belly-crawled his way up Broadway, the Great White Way, in a Superman outfit, and ate copies of The Wall Street Journal.

Today, as Mr. Obama pitches the hugely attractive prospect of a postracial society, artists have, as usual, already been there, surveyed the terrain and sent back skeptical, though hope-tinged, reports. And you can read those reports in art all around New York this spring, in retrospective surveys like "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution" currently at the P.S 1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens, in the up-to-the-minute sampler that is the 2008 Whitney Biennial, in gallery shows in Chelsea and beyond, and in the plethora of art fairs clinging like barnacles to the Armory Show on Pier 94 this weekend.

"Wack!" is a good place to trace a postracial impulse in art going back decades. Ms. Piper is one of the few African-American artists in the show, along with Howardena Pindell and Lorraine O□Grady. All three began their careers with abstract work, at one time the form of black art most acceptable to white institutions, but went on to address race aggressively.

In a 1980 performance video, "Free, White and 21," Ms. Pindell wore whiteface to deliver a scathing rebuke of art-world racism. In the same year Ms. O□Grady introduced an alter ego named "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire" who, dressed in a beauty-queen gown sewn from white formal gloves, crashed museum openings to protest all-white shows. A few years later Ms. Piper, who is light skinned, began to selectively distribute a printed calling card at similar social events. It read:

Dear Friend,

I am black. I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark. In the past I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative or socially inappropriate. Therefore, my policy is to assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when they believe there are not black people present, and to distribute this card when they do.

I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me.

Sincerely yours,

Adrian Margaret Smith Piper

Although these artists□ careers took dissimilar directions, in at least some of their work from the □70s and □80s they all approached race, whiteness as well as blackness, as a creative medium. Race is treated as a form of performance; an identity that could, within limits, be worn or put aside; and as a diagnostic tool to investigate social values and pathologies.

Ms. Piper□s take on race as a form of creative nonfiction has had a powerful influence on two generations of African-Americans who, like Mr. Obama, didn□t experience the civil rights movement firsthand, and who share a cosmopolitan attitude toward race. In 2001 that attitude found corner-turning expression in "Freestyle," an exhibition organized at the Studio Museum in Harlem by its director, Thelma Golden.

When Ms. Golden and her friend the artist Glenn Ligon called the 28 young American artists "postblack," it made news. It was a big moment. If she wasn□t the first to use the term, she was the first to apply it to a group of artists who, she wrote, were "adamant about not being labeled „black□ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness."

The work ranged from mural-size images of police helicopters painted with hair pomade by Kori Newkirk, who lives in Los Angeles, to computer-assisted geometric abstract painting by the New York artist Louis Cameron. Mr, Newkirk□s work came with specific if indirect ethnic references; Mr. Cameron□s did not. Although "black" in the Studio Museum context, they would lose their racial associations in an ethnically neutral institution like the Museum of Modern Art.

Ethnically neutral? That□s just a code-term for white, the no-color, the everything-color. For whiteness is as much — or as little — a racial category as blackness, though it is rarely acknowledged as such wherever it is the dominant, default ethnicity. Whiteness is yet another part of the postracial story. Like blackness, it has become a complicated subject for art. And few have explored it more forcefully and intimately than Nayland Blake.

Mr. Blake, 48, is the child of a black father and a white mother. In various performance pieces since the 1990s he has dressed up as a giant rabbit, partly as a reference to Br□er Rabbit of Joel Chandler Harris□s Uncle Remus stories, a wily animal who speaks in Southern black dialect and who survives capture by moving fast and against expectations.

In 2001 Mr. Blake appeared in a video with another artist, AA Bronson. Each had his face slathered with cake frosting, chocolate in Mr. Blake□s case, vanilla in Mr. Bronson□s. When then two men exchanged a long kiss, the colors, and presumably the flavors, began to blend. Shared love, the implication was, dissolves distinctions between "black" and "white," which, as racial categories, are cosmetic, superficial.

As categories they are also explosive. In 1984, when Mr. Hammons painted a poster of the Rev. Jesse Jackson as a blond, blue-eyed Caucasian and exhibited it outdoors in Washington, the piece was trashed by a group of African-American men. Mr, Hammons intended the portrait, "How Ya Like Me Now," as a comment on the paltry white support for Mr. Jackson□s presidential bid that year. Those who attacked it assumed the image was intended as an insult to Mr. Jackson.

More recently, when Kara Walker cut out paper silhouettes of fantasy slave narratives, with characters — black and white alike — inflicting mutual violence, she attracted censure from some black artists. At least some of those objecting had personal roots in the civil rights years and an investment in art as a vehicle for racial pride, social protest and spiritual solace.

Ms. Walker, whose work skirts any such overt commitments, was accused of pandering to a white art market with an appetite for images of black abjection. She was called, in effect, a sellout to her race.

In a television interview a few weeks ago, before he formed plans to deliver his speech on race, Mr. Obama defended his practice of backing off from discussion of race in his campaign. He said it was no longer a useful subject in the national dialogue; we□re over it, or should be.

But in fact it can be extremely useful. There is no question that his public profile has been enhanced by his Philadelphia address, even if the political fallout in terms of votes has yet to be gauged.

Race can certainly be used to sell art too, and the results can be also be unpredictable. As with politics, timing is crucial.

In 1992 the white artist team Pruitt-Early (Rob Pruitt and Walter Early) presented a gallery exhibition called “The Red Black Green Red White and Blue Project.” Its theme was the marketing of African-American pop culture, with an installation of black-power posters, dashiki cloth and tapes of soul music bought in Harlem.

What might, at a later time or with different content, have been seen as a somewhat dated consumerist critique proved to be a public relations disaster. The artists were widely condemned as racist and all but disappeared from the art world.

Eight years later, with the cooling of identity politics, a show called “Hip-Hop Nation: Roots, Rhymes and Rage” arrived, with no apparent critical component, at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. An array of fashion images, videos and artifacts associated with stars like the Notorious B.I.G., Missy Elliott and Tupac Shakur, it was assumed to be a welcoming (if patronizing) gesture to the museum□s local African-American audience. Yet its appearance coincided with the general massive marketing of hip-hop culture to middle-class whites, a phenomenon that Mr. Pruitt and Mr. Early had been pointing to.

Were Pruitt-Early postblack artists ahead of their time, offering a new take on race, as a movable feast that collided with older, essentialist attitudes? If so, they would probably find plenty of company now in artists who stake out terrain both black and postblack, white and postwhite.

Mr. Pope.L (he who crawled up Broadway) does so with a posture of radical outsiderness that cancels bogus notions of racial or cultural essence. Basically he short-circuits the very concept of what an artist, black or white, “should” be. He smiles as he inches up the street on all fours; he uncomplainingly devours news of money he□ll never have. He paints murals with peanut butter and makes sculpture from Pop-Tarts, the stuff of welfare meals. In many ways his main subject would seem to be class, not race. Yet race is everywhere in his art.

He works with mostly white materials — mayonnaise, milk, flour — but he also runs the Black Factory, a mobile workshop-van equipped to transform any object, no matter what color, into a “black” object. How? By covering it with cheap black paint.

For a retrospective at the Maine College of Art in Portland in 2003, Mr. Pope.L presented a performance piece with the optimistic title “eRacism,” but that was entirely about race-based conflict. In a photograph in the show□s catalog, he has the word written in white on his bare black chest. Were he pale-skinned, it might have been all but invisible.

Whereas Mr. Pope.L has shaped himself into a distinctive racial presence, certain other artists of color are literally built from scratch. A Miami artists collective called BLCK, in the current

Whitney Biennial, doesn□t really exist. The archival materials attributed to it documenting African American life in the 1960s is actually the creation of single artist: Adler Guerrier, who was born in Haiti in 1975.

Projects by Edgar Arceneaux, who is also in the biennial, have included imaginary visual jam sessions with the jazz visionary Sun Ra and the late Conceptual artist Sol Lewitt. Earlier in this art season, a white artist, Joe Scanlan, had a solo gallery show using the fictional persona of a black artist, Donelle Woolford. Ms. Woolford was awarded at least one appreciative review, suggesting that, in art at least, race can be independent of DNA.

The topic of race and blood has always been an inflammatory one in this country. Ms. Piper broached it in a 1988 video installation and delivered some bad news. Facing us through the camera, speaking with the soothing composure of a social worker or grief counselor, she said that, according to statistics, if we were white Americans, chances were very high that we carried at least some black blood. That was the legacy of slavery. She knew we would be upset. She was sorry. But was the truth. The piece was titled “Cornered.”

And are we upset? I□ll speak for myself; it□s not a question. Of course not. Which is a good thing, because the concept of race in America — the fraught fictions of whiteness and blackness— is not going away soon. It is still deep in our system. Whether it is or isn□t in our blood, it□s in our laws, our behavior, our institutions, our sensibilities, our dreams.

It□s also in our art, which, at its contrarian and ambiguous best, is always on the job, probing, resisting, questioning and traveling miles ahead down the road.

The New York Times
nytimes.com

March 28, 2008

Art in Review

By HOLLAND COTTER

RASHID JOHNSON

The Dead Lecturer

Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery

526 West 26th Street, Chelsea

Through Saturday

Rashid Johnson took the title of his auspicious New York solo debut from a 1964 book of poems by LeRoi Jones, now Amiri Baraka, that he produced during a transitional phase in his career, between his associations with the Beat movement and black nationalism. Mr. Johnson's show, which generates its own poetry, suggests a transitional phase in art right now, a time when art can be about racial themes, but also be removed from them, free to play with contradictions.

At Klagsbrun, Mr. Johnson has created a fictional hall of fame for a secret society of African-American intellectuals, touched by "Brother From Another Planet" zaniness. Photographic portraits of unidentified African-American men, their faces wrapped in mist or smoke, hang in the gallery. On a shelf a broadband radio setup is accompanied by a portrait titled "Prince of Mathematicians." On another wall is an altar equipped with black soap, shea butter, candles and a mystical picture of a light-giving hand.

Coded references to contemporary art abound: to Joseph Beuys (a sled); Sam Gilliam (a swag painting called "The Grand Galactic Cape"); David Hammons (an oblique take on race); and, I would guess, to Mr. Johnson's slightly older contemporary Edgar Arceneaux, who has a similarly funky, visionary way with pop culture and art.

The show's mostly black objects look particularly striking — mysterious and light-absorbent — in Klagsbrun's dead-white cube of a space. And we are invited to view them through a large open circle of a sculpture called "Black Steel in Hour of Chaos" — it suggests both cross hairs and a compass, apt symbols for an important transitional moment in "black" art and its politics.

the village VOICE

By R.C. Baker
Tuesday, March 18th 2008

Rashid Johnson: 'The Dead Lecturer'

Johnson's personal ad—"Young artist seeks audience . . . Must enjoy race mongering, disparate disconnected thoughts and sunsets (really) . . . Ability to hold conversation using only rap lyrics . . . a must"—is the funniest thing I've read in a press release in ages. OK, so that bar isn't set particularly high, but still, Johnson flags conflicting emotions in his huge 2008 sniper-scope sculpture, *Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos*, fabricated from blackened gun-metal steel and a Public Enemy song. A five-foot-wide mirror spray-painted with the word "RUN" perhaps asks who's running from whom among art's predominately white audience. A massive shelf unit slathered with black wax supports vessels filled with yellow blobs of shea butter, an urn splattered with gold paint, and such tomes as *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* and *Powers of Healing*, evoking a sense of enervated alchemy. And a golden rectangle, thickly spray-painted onto one of the gallery's rusty windows, is strangely moving, bling as ghostly grace note. *Nicole Klagsbrun, 526 W 26th, 212-243-3335. Through March 29.*

Art

Time Out New York / Issue 650 : Mar 12–18, 2008

Art review

Rashid Johnson, “The Dead Lecturer”

Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, through Mar 29

The term *post-black* has elicited an ongoing flurry of discussion. Artists whose work can be labeled as such are defined as much by what they don’t represent as by what they do. Rashid Johnson’s first solo show in New York is fully enmeshed in this theater of identity, and seems like a paradigm of post-blackness, if that is possible.

Johnson carves a unique and visionary path by remixing black history with references to alchemy, divination, astronomy and other sciences that freely combine the natural and spiritual worlds. The work relies on materials and visual sources that stand alone formally, but also have strong ties to African-American history.

For instance, several photographic portraits of black men preside over the show, which also includes sculpture. The subjects, bearing abolitionist-era coifs and dressed formally in suit jackets and ties are enshrouded by a thin veil of smoke that lends a strong magical aura.

These mystical allusions are repeated in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (The Power of Healing),* a large shrine-like mantel coated entirely in black beeswax. Besides the book by Harold Cruse from which the piece takes the first half of its title, the mantel holds a cluster of bowls filled with lumps of a golden-colored substance and an edition from Time-Life’s “Mysteries of the Unknown” series. In this piece and others, Johnson opts out of the standard historical revisionism or critique, relying instead on the struggle to understand the unknown as a context for his work.

—T.J. Carlin

NEWCITY

ART

The Five-Year Plan

Breakout Artists 2004-2007: Where are they now?

Rachel Furnari and David Mark Wise

Rashid Johnson
Rashid Johnson just finished his first solo exhibition in New York at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, leading New York Times critic Holland Cotter to crown him the new prince of post-black. Although he was trained in photography, Johnson has moved into installation, sculpture and painting to create an otherworldly social club for a fictionalized group of black intellectuals. His collaboration with tag-team painters Rob Davis and Michael Langlois will be featured with Steven Turner Gallery at the NEXT Fair and he is currently working on a solo exhibition that will open at Kunstmuseum Magdeburg in June.

(2008-04-22)

Time Out Chicago

Art & Design

Time Out Chicago / Issue 32 : Oct 6–12, 2005

Rashid Johnson: Stay Black and Die moniquemeloche Gallery, through Sat 8.

Rashid Johnson, *White People Love Me*, 2005.

Rashid Johnson is a microphone fiend, hip-hop head and artistic mix master who—in the fashion of the '80s and '90s rap duo Eric B. and Rakim—uses music, pop culture, and political and social commentary to weave bold narratives about what it means to be young, black, urban, male and skilled.

But Johnson doesn't stop there. While his work is a startling indictment of intrinsic racism and the systematic obstacles stacked against black men, he is also concerned with the implications of social, cultural and ethnic constructions of manhood and masculinity. He asks: What does it mean to be a man? The video *100 Men* features 100 famous men who have helped shaped our world in great and not-so-great ways. From Mumia to Shakespeare, Ronald Reagan to Mos Def, these are men from radically different backgrounds and eras who nonetheless share a brotherhood and are a part of a league of extra-ordinary men.

In *Things I Need To Do*, Johnson sprays "Stay Black and Die" in enamel on felt. Here Johnson resurrects Thurgood Marshall's famous quote as a graffiti tagline.

White People Love Me, featuring a red, white and blue basketball jersey embroidered with the title's sentiment; and *Self Portrait*, a full-length nude photograph of the artist, are the most telling pieces of the show. With these works, Johnson explores the image of the successful black athlete, the "chocolate fantasy" and the historical preoccupation with the black male body.—*Patricia Williams Lessane*

ART

Breakout Artists

Chicago's next generation of image makers

Michael Workman

Rashid Johnson

Racial detective

"I've been trying to take off the handcuffs," Rashid Johnson says of his latest work. Race has always been the American hot-button issue, with our history of lynchings and ambiguity about our agrarian capitalist motives for slave ownership clouding the issue of race identity.

A Columbia College grad, Johnson started working as a response to photographer and installation-maker Pat Ward Williams. The artist's use of social and personal history led to him to look at artists thinking about race issues who were able to break out of working in a didactic mode or, as he puts it "who had rejected the idea that there's an individual behind racism making decisions that problematize social interaction." He prefers instead to look at the issue as a systemic problem. Can a distinction in subject histories be made that doesn't suffer interference from hideous master-race narratives? Johnson's work uniquely separates complexity from complication, if only his audiences are willing to confront the psychodynamic struggle he situates at its core. Trained as a photographer, the medium through which he communicates was simply always easiest for him to use. However, the medium offered him the opportunity to investigate two parallel histories: that of photography itself and the appropriation of black imagery. Both coalesce into a complex imagery filled with all the woof and warp of a struggle to identify himself in the effort.

Still, he worries that the counterintuitive standing of his subject will turn out as the trees of personal black experience that won't be seen for the forest of historical contentions about racism. The idea of black community he's exploring are less about racism and more concerned with the difficult space of community where opportunities to acquire blackness open up minds to a racially problematic personal struggle. His participation in "Freestyle," a show curated by Thelme Golden, opened up his thoughts on the matter. In the show, he saw how artists were dealing with issues surrounding self and gender and began thinking about the sophisticated space that black contemporary artists occupy. "I need to allow myself space to participate in that dialogue," says Rashid. "My work now is an attempt to occupy an expansion into things outside the realm of social responsibility."

(2004-05-05)