

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.