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Rashid Johnson Trades Knowledge for Fresh Perspective

Artist hosts a group from Free Arts Teen Program at his Brooklyn studio



Rashid Johnson hosts a group of young artists for a class at his studio in Brooklyn.

PHOTO: JOHN TAGGART FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



By MARSHALL HEYMAN

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At the end of next month, the artist Rashid Johnson will be celebrated at the annual Free Arts NYC Auction, where work by the likes of Alex Katz and Cindy Sherman will be sold to benefit the charity, which provides arts education to underserved children.

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In anticipation of the April 29 event, Mr. Johnson invited a handful of students who participate in the Free Arts Teen Program to his studio in Brooklyn for a workshop this weekend.

“When I was young, I remember feeling a real thirst for opportunities around the arts, for learning about how artists function and how institutions work,” said Mr. Johnson, who grew up in Chicago.

In addition to sharing some of that information during the workshop, Mr. Johnson said he also hoped “I could steal some ideas.”



“You can really learn a lot from young people and the way they view the world,” said Mr. Johnson, who got involved with Free Arts NYC through friends and because of his interest in working with students. “I knew they would have some interesting perspective on what I was doing. I wanted to pick their brains.”

Above, Mr. Johnson is seen here working on a piece of art during the workshop. Below, Michael Velazquez at work. PHOTOS: JOHN TAGGART FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Johnson spoke with the students over lunch on Saturday about his trajectory as an artist and “how I realized the arts was a direction I wanted to go.”

From there, he went on to the activity portion of the afternoon, using some of the materials he has employed in his work over the last few years.

First, the group made a branded woodwork together which will be sold at auction at the benefit. Every participant choose where, how and what to brand on the log. Mr. Johnson wanted to show the group how much of art is about decision making and choices.

Next the 16 students, as well as Mr. Johnson’s 3-year-old son, made sketches in black wax and drawings with pastels.

“I have an investment in the signifying aspects of the material as well as an understanding of antecedent bodies of work. That informs the way I make marks and make decisions,” said Mr. Johnson. “But the students, they had less inhibition than I do. I really liked the freedom of their approach.”

Afterwards, they had a descriptive critique of the work they'd just done. The kids were particularly interested in how Mr. Johnson's hobbies—what he reads, the music he listens to and the basketball hoop at his studio—played a role in informing his artwork.

Mr. Johnson said he hadn't quite figured out what he could steal from the students, "but I'm thinking about it."

At the end of the day, each kid was given a Beats Pill personal speaker (Mr. Johnson has a relationship with Beats by Dre, one of the Free Arts auction sponsors this year).

There were screams when this took place on Saturday.

"You'd think I was Oprah," said Mr. Johnson.