

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY
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ART & DESIGN

Looking Deeply at the Art of Rashid Johnson

By CAMERON SHAW | OCT. 28, 2015

Mr. Johnson's new Manhattan show explores African-American identity while engaging in rich dialogue with other artists and art forms, including work that can be seen elsewhere in the city. Here is a visual tour of "Anxious Men" and its influences.



Jose Ramirez, via The Drawing Center

As John Berger explained in his book “Ways of Seeing,” the meaning of images is changed by what we see alongside them. The Internet exaggerates this potential of looking and thinking about works of art, with galaxies of images – relevant and not – available at your fingertips. But looking broadly in the real world can be just as productive.

“Anxious Men,” an exhibition of work by Rashid Johnson, on display at the Drawing Center in SoHo through Dec. 20, combines scrawled drawings, undulating wallpaper, houseplants and a screeching soundtrack. It’s a departure from the found-object assemblages with sensuous Shea butter that were the highlights of previous Johnson shows like “Message to Our Folks,” a solo exhibition that originated at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2012. This one-room installation is distinctly flat, which is not a slight. Through this visual flattening, Mr. Johnson compresses the history of how black identities are presented and perceived.



Three untitled works in "Anxious Men." Credit Rashid Johnson/Hauser & Wirth

The series of loose portraits in black soap and wax animates what Mr. Johnson has termed the “now space” of being a black man in America: characterized by fear. The portraits have an undeniable urgency. Mr. Johnson’s handling of materials is visceral; the quasi-faces fill their white frames in a way that feels unavoidable, necessary.



Jose Andres Ramirez, via The Drawing Center

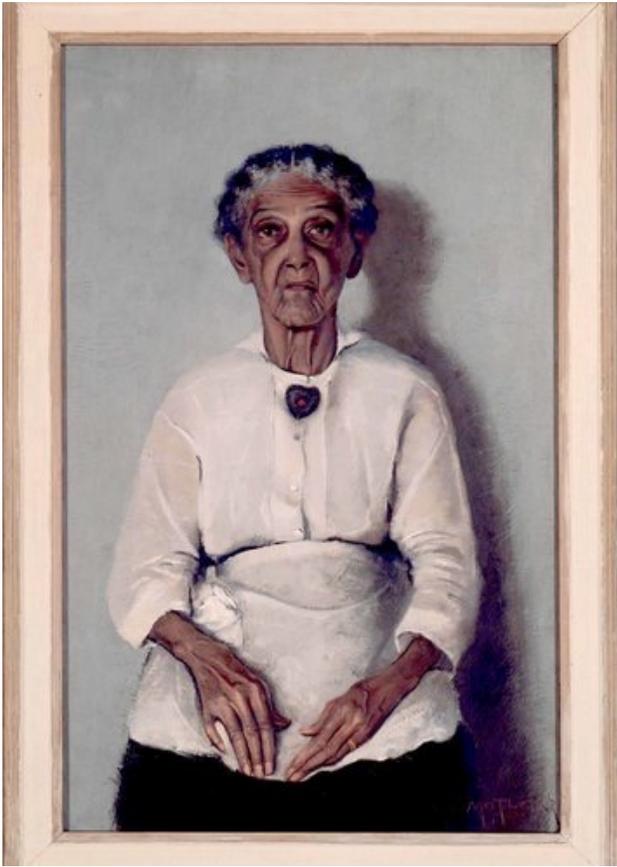
Yet he places these portraits against a backdrop from the 1970s: The wallpaper is made from a repeating photograph of Mr. Johnson’s father, Jimmy Johnson; the soundtrack is Melvin Van Peebles’s song “Love, That’s America” from his film “Watermelon Man,” also on repeat. The effect is deliberately out of time, a common feature of Mr. Johnson’s work, which frequently mines the cultural markers of his upbringing just outside of Chicago.

But Mr. Johnson’s new works are tinged with sadness and despair. If his penchant for retro once felt proud and self-aware, it now reads as a melancholic reminder of the reductive popular understanding of black male identity.

Twelve untitled pieces in “Anxious Men” rely on the same basic motif: a rectangular head atop a spindly neck, round eyes bugging out, a gash mouth indistinguishably frozen between smile and grimace. They are not the polished intellectuals of his “The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club” photographs or the graceful movers of his video “The New Black Yoga”; they are vulnerable men on the verge of a breakdown — messy, cartoonish, stressed out, brutalized.



“The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club (Thurgood)” (2008). Credit Rashid Johnson/Hauser & Wirth



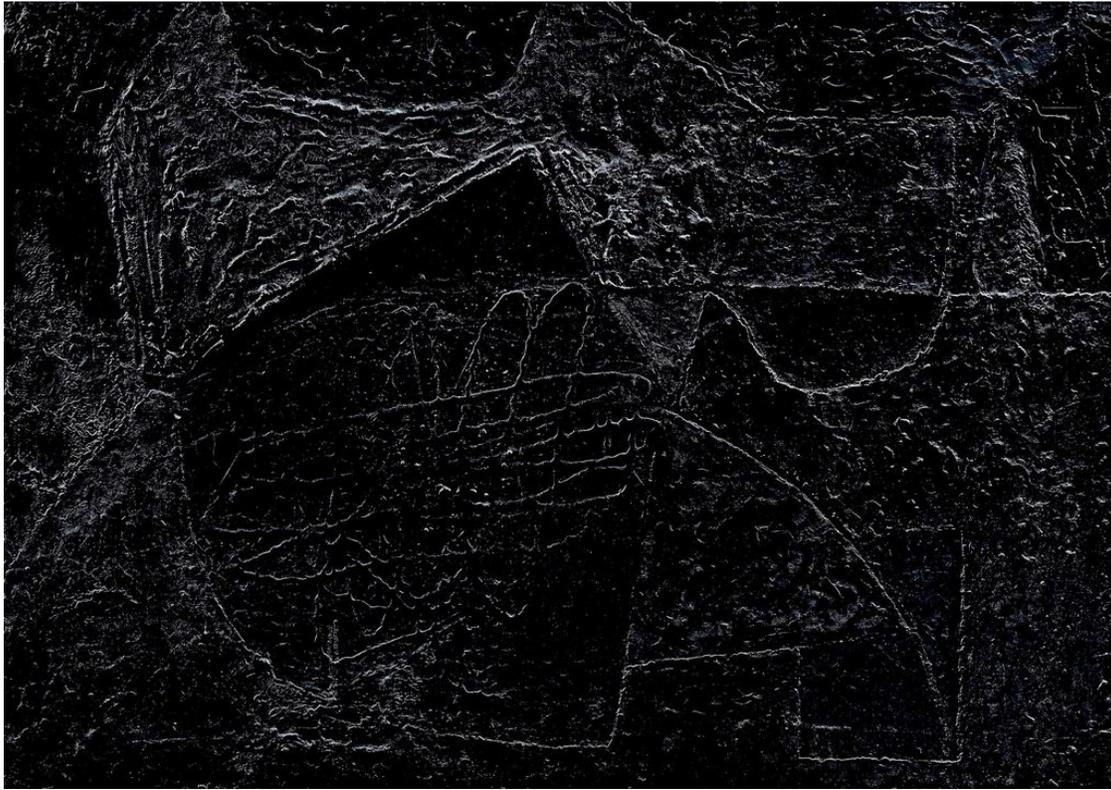
“Portrait of My Grandmother” by Archibald Motley.
Credit Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois, via
Whitney Museum

The exhibition “Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist” at the Whitney Museum of American Art offers one lens through which we might view “Anxious Men.” Motley’s early career portraits — like that of his paternal grandmother, from 1922 — sought to reflect the interiority of his subjects as a challenge to stereotypic depictions of black life. Motley wrote, “I sincerely hope that with the progress the Negro has made, he is deserving to be represented in his true perspective, with dignity, honesty, integrity, intelligence and understanding.” This earnest stance was contradicted later in Motley’s own work, but Mr. Johnson’s anxiety can be read, at its essence, as a failure of this time to ever arrive in popular American culture.

Mr. Johnson smears and scratches his mixture of black soap and wax, allowing it to cake, clump and splatter. Against the backdrop of sterile, white tiles, it is sometimes hard to look at, like something has been exposed and not meant to be seen.



Detail of one of Mr. Johnson’s untitled pieces from “Anxious Men.” Credit Rashid Johnson/Hauser & Wirth



“Nero Catrame” by Alberto Burri. Credit Alfredo Cacciani, Rome

At the same time, his treatment of these materials is deeply engaged with the history of painting, particularly the black monochrome, which is even more explicitly referenced in his earlier “Cosmic Slop” series, also made of black soap and wax. “Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting,” on view at the Guggenheim, contains several examples of that Italian artist’s tar paintings, like “Nero Contrame” (1950), in which an underpainting lies below the visible surface. The color black becomes a study in nuance: what could appear flat is rich, textural and layered, not simply an act of negation or an absence.



Jimmy Johnson, via Rashid Johnson/Hauser & Wirth

Mr. Johnson has used this 1977 image of his father in previous installations. Taken the year the artist was born, the photograph shows his father wearing a taekwondo uniform, looking self-possessed and open. He is seated before a collection of books and electronic equipment that have factored into other of Mr. Johnson’s sculptural works, offering a way of understanding his father as a man of wide-ranging personal tastes, a man seemingly resistant to the flattening that the “Anxious Men” fear most, the flattening that puts them in mortal danger.



Credit Gordon Parks, via Gordon Parks Foundation

Gordon Parks's photograph of Black Panthers, which was recently on display as part of the Whitney's inaugural exhibition, represents a turning point for black masculinity in the media. The formidable collective identity of the Panthers in Parks's image counters the eclectic individualism of Mr. Johnson's father. And Parks's photograph was taken the same year as the release of "Watermelon Man," a satire in which a white man wakes up to find that he's black (the role was played by Godfrey Cambridge, partly in whiteface). The specter of these two references, which suggest that to be black can be seen as both a grave threat and a laughing matter, is the heart of the contradiction that plagues Mr. Johnson's "Anxious Men."

The wallpaper as aggregate, in its repetition and patterning, gives way to a host of associations of its own, evoking empowerment and agitation. The strong horizontal rhythm and Pan-African color scheme recalls David Hammons's "African-American Flag" (1990), currently flying in front of MoMA P.S.1 as part of "Greater New York."

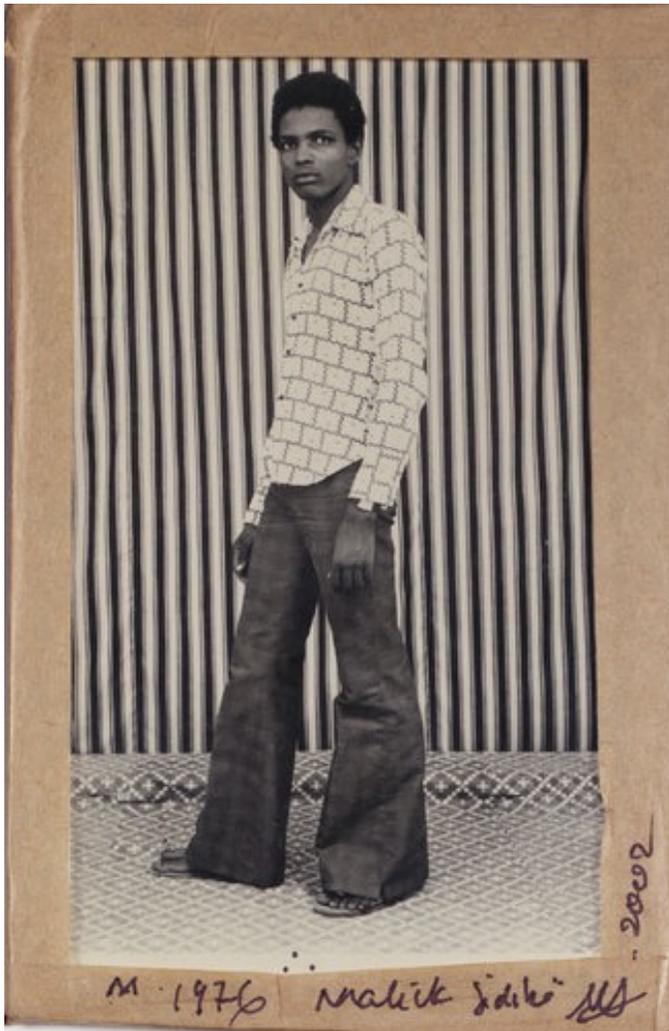


Jose Andres Ramirez, via The Drawing Center



Pablo Enriquez, via Museum of Modern Art

In Mr. Hammons's design, elements of the black-liberation flag are combined with the flag of the United States, but neither completely subsumes the other. Instead the two coexist – suggesting that being black and American contains a persistent, perhaps irreconcilable, tension.



Malick Sidibé/Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

And yet there's a buoyancy to the wallpaper's excessive quality, mirrored by a Malick Sidibé photo of a young man, now on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the exhibition "In and Out of the Studio: Photographic Portraits From West Africa." Mr. Sidibé's photographs of Mali youth were largely discovered by European and American audiences in the 1990s and have defined an image of a cool and confident West Africa, compatible with the positive sense of Pan-Africanism at the root of Mr. Johnson's use of Afro-centric cultural materials. Mr. Sidibé has used the same striped curtain in his studio since 1960, the surfeit of pattern becoming shorthand for the exuberant, textile traditions of the diaspora.