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THE BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE **DECEMBER 2015 / JANUARY 2016**

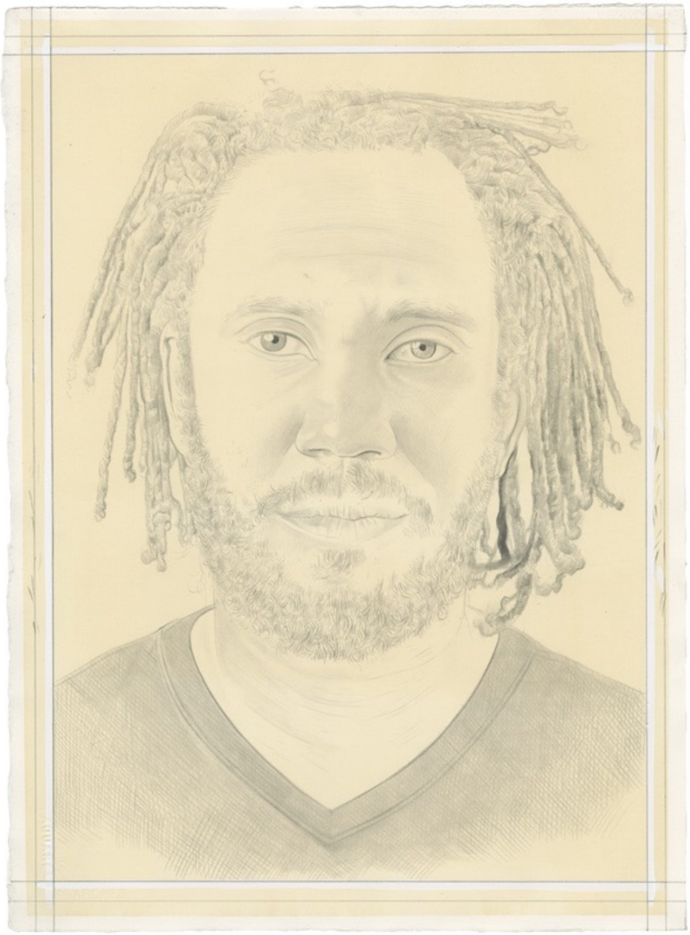
Guest Critic: David Salle / FEATURED INTERVIEWS: Rashid Johnson, José Parlá, Walid Raad, Joseph Nechvatal, and Zeng Fanzhi

ART

INCONVERSATION

RASHID JOHNSON with Allie Biswas

Rashid Johnson has produced a diverse body of work over the last decade, since completing his MFA at the School of the Art Institute, Chicago. He has been particularly recognized for his large-scale sculptures and installations, which are primarily abstract in nature, and which regularly employ a specific series of materials that includes shea butter, black soap, wax, and plants. Johnson's current exhibition at the Drawing Center, Rashid Johnson: Anxious Men (through December 20), presents a new set of black-soap-and-wax-on-tile portraits—arguably the artist's most figurative work to date outside of earlier film and photographic projects.



Portrait of Rashid Johnson by Phong Bui. Pencil on paper. From a photo by Taylor Dafoe.

Allie Biswas (Rail): Your first projects were realized using photography. What drew you to working with that medium, and how did it affect the work you developed later on?

Rashid Johnson: As a young person I was really interested in painting, sculpture, and film. I never really thought much about photography. I'm talking about the very early stages, when I was sixteen and seventeen. I never thought about photography as being much of an art form. But I got an opportunity to work for a photographer, a guy named Larry Stern. He was an interesting guy, a wedding photographer, and I was his assistant. One of the things that was interesting for me was the way that he engaged with people, and the relationships that he had with his sitters. I started thinking about photography, and I realized how liberating it was because you didn't necessarily have to be in any specific place to do it. I was young, and I was interested in traveling and how my body was kind of in space, and I realized that I could move around with this art tool. This was opposed to sitting in a more traditional studio space, and then inviting the world into that space.

Rail: So photography provided you with a level of freedom?

Johnson: Yes, I was able to think about how I could create art and about imagery and ideas, in a more flexible way. And so it led me to this interest in both photography and film, and when I went to undergraduate school I thought studying photography and film would be really good for me. I continued to have a real relationship with painting and other additive media, such as sculpture. But I had a real investment in learning about why people made images, and thinking about what they made images of. I pursued that for several years, until some of my other interests came calling, and then it all became a hybrid. You know, thinking about photo images and image making, as well as painting, material, and sculpture.

Rail: How did your BA and MFA help you with this process of discovery?

Johnson: At Columbia College I studied with some really interesting people. A guy named Tom Marns and a guy named Bob Fall. Dawoud Bey was teaching there at the end of my schooling, so I got an opportunity to spend some time with him, and he taught me quite a bit about portraiture—considering the sitter, and the dynamic between the image-maker and the person having their image made. After that, I was in a space where I was going back and forth between things I was interested in, like sculpture, and using photography as more of a documentary tool. Then I went on to graduate school at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, where I continued to study photography. I think a lot of the other media that I was interested in started to take hold a little bit more then.

Rail: There are objects and materials that are associated with your work that you have continuously evolved. Materials such as black soap, wax, and shea butter, for example. Can you identify a time when you started thinking about these things in detail, and how you were considering bringing them into what you were making?

Johnson: I've always had an interest in certain kinds of signifiers, and the ability of certain materials and objects to locate you in a conversation. And so at a fairly early stage I became interested in how those materials began to color some of the things that I wanted to talk about. It was never necessarily strategic for me. As a younger artist I always assumed that it was almost impossible to build a language that would be identifiably yours. In school they clearly pointed out to us that it was almost not an option. The professors would always essentially say that everything

Installation View: Rashid Johnson: Anxious Men. Drawing Center, October 2, 2015 – December 20, 2015. Photo: Andres Ramirez.

has been done. So my objective as an artist became not necessarily to create my own language but to participate in this greater conversation of how artworks are made, how they relate to historical conversations, and how those historical conversations relate to me on a personal level.

Rail: At what point did you, consciously or not, start to investigate this personal history?

Johnson: I think before graduate school I was already invested in a certain set of materials. I'd always used shea butter. I can't really identify the transition between me employing it as a material to moisturize my skin, and it becoming more of an art material for me. I did make a project at the beginning of graduate school, a short film called Me, Tavis Smiley, and Shea Butter. At the time, Tavis Smiley, who was a kind of thinker, I guess, had this show on national public radio, and I was sitting in my bathroom, putting on shea butter, listening to Tavis Smiley. A friend called and asked me what I was doing. I described what I was doing, I said, "Oh, you know, I'm putting on shea butter and listening to Tavis Smiley," and he said, "Well that's really funny, that kind of sounds just like your work," and I said, "That's actually true, it does sound like my work." So I made a short film in the bathroom, really simple, just with a video camera, using the sound from inside of the space. I think that was the first time I had actually really consciously used it in an artwork, and this is the very beginning of graduate school, so I was twenty-three. That would have been about fifteen years ago. But even at that time I was using soap. All of those things were already around me. I started by melting my soap for the purpose of certain sculptures (most of which were not successful) fairly early, around that same time. And it just became a material that I started using more and more, and started to understand as an art material.

Rail: The core materials that you use originate from a domestic space that is also very personal to you. But they also naturally exist within a wider culture, and have various associations attached to them. Do you feel like viewers are coming to the work thinking about these objects automatically within that wider culture, forgetting that they actually existed first and foremost to you within a private context?

Johnson: There's a danger of that. And I think that it's fairly natural for viewers to take more of a macro perspective when they look at an artwork, thinking about how that artwork—having been released into the world—can affect some larger discourse or some larger kind of cultural question. But that is not exclusively my intention for the material. At that point, we get into how work is interpreted, and I think that's often fairly complex.

Rail: How explicit do you think you have been in terms of trying to steer the way in which the materials are read?

Johnson: I try to make it clear when I can, or when I have the opportunity, that these materials come from a place of ownership, and when I say ownership, I mean that very specifically—as in, I own those materials on my own, and I employ those materials for personal use. I understand the complexity of those materials, but I also understand how those materials can reflect a larger cultural discourse. That's never been something I've necessarily avoided, but I think that there is a dichotomy in my employment of the materials, and I hope that this dichotomy is in some ways understood by the audience. I find that people are very smart, for the most part, and they understand complex things. So I have high expectations of the viewer, because I think that the viewer is incredibly bright, and incredibly capable, and we all have an understanding of art and concept, and how those things come together to make something really interesting. So, when there's a suggestion that my viewer does not get what I do, I often reject that, because I do have a lot of faith in people's ability to look at things and to find the complexity.

Rail: This cultural discourse that you refer to is largely the history of black identity in the United States. You have frequently used books in your sculptures and installations that are very specific references to critical texts by black writers, or texts relating to the history of black Americans over the last century. Are those literary devices to be read in a political way? On your part, is there a level of activism in your actions? This probably relates to what we were discussing about viewer assumptions.

Johnson: One of the reasons that I've so consciously chosen these materials, whether it be speaking to a specific literary history or a specific canon of black intellectual characters, is that I was always conscious of the fact that my black words would, in so many different ways, inform the approach that people would take towards my work. I grew up knowing the work of many black abstract painters. I didn't have these people's voices in my ear, but I had their work to look at. Sam Gilliam, Marvin Edwards, William T. Williams, William Wiley, and Ed Clark—they are just a number of artists. They didn't necessarily employ the black body in their work, but I noticed that there was an attempt to color these artists. When people spoke about that work, they would bring certain expectations related to the intentions of those artists. And I kept realizing that was inevitable. Having understood that inevitability—that my work would be read through a certain lens, to some degree—I wanted to be clear in defining how that should be perceived. It continues to be an interesting dance for me in that, although my work doesn't exclusively concern itself with the experience in a macro sense, of the Negro, in some ways I'm unavoidably attached to that conversation.

Rail: Regardless of your intentions, then, you will automatically be attached to a certain culture.

Johnson: If I am to be attached to a cultural discourse, regardless of my intentions, I would like to be capable of framing that conversation in a way that, at least specifically, and hopefully in some ways generally, has my perspective. So, these are the black characters that I'm looking at, these are the conversations that I'm specifically engaged with—whether it be music, literature, sociology—and these are the concerns that I have specifically as a black artist. I always thought that if I could define that space, then I would have the opportunity to deal with other concerns aesthetically and creatively. There is this inherent dichotomy in my work in that it doesn't intend to be an activist project. Yet, I also hope that in some ways it clearly states my perspective through the black characters with whom I align myself, and whom I think about when I am in that particular space. Then, I hope to also have the freedom after connecting my work to that discourse, for example, to talk about some of my other concerns, whether they be formal or existential, in a larger context. I think the challenge that is often faced by artists of color, and often female artists and gay artists, is that we do very easily find ourselves having to negotiate fairly complex subjects regardless of whether it is our goal to negotiate those things.

Rail: Do you find yourself getting frustrated by this?

Johnson: I stopped being frustrated quite a while ago. It's just something that I have to navigate. There are often times when I do want to have one particular conversation, and also another conversation simultaneously. I never wanted to be an artist who said, "Oh I don't deal with this concept or this concern, and my blackness is not something that I want to discuss in the work." I do! You know? It's a big part of me. I mean, my mother is an African History professor, so that postcolonial structure is something that I've always been interested in. I'm also interested in material and in signifiers, for what they can say about both the world we live in and the people we become. I'm interested in philosophy and I'm interested in the human condition. I have a romantic approach to these things, and I want the right, as an artist, to engage with them however the fuck I want. The tiny hiccup of people coming to my work and having certain expectations is really a small bump to me in the bigger picture.

Rail: What do you make of the term "post-black" art? This was first applied to your work when you were shown in the Freestyle exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2001. This exhibition gets brought up a lot, as you were the youngest artist in that show.

Johnson: Right. I guess the first thing that I would say is that I never used that term to describe my work. I consider myself to be currently black. I think that it was an interesting moment, and an interesting term, because it allowed people to think about the complexity of the black experience. Now, efforts to define it, I think, have been difficult, and more often than not, not exactly what people would want it to be. To be completely honest, I haven't really, in many years, thought much about what it was. I can say, though, that one interesting thing that potentially comes from the term is that it helps to separate any sort of monolithic thinking. If for any reason someone was thinking that the black experience was a singular, monolithic experience, even hearing the words "post-black" allows them to think about its hybridity. And so if it does anything successful, I think it does that. As far as any other kind of opportunity to really clarify what it is, I don't really have much to contribute to that necessarily, but I do welcome the idea that the black experience can be viewed from multiple perspectives. And if that term in any way helps people understand that it is malleable and complicated and complex, then I think it's interesting.

Rail: An earlier work of yours, a set of photographic prints titled The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club, was a strong indication of your own take on history and how it could look. You were presenting a way of changing certain perspectives.

Johnson: Right. I've always been interested in this idea of renewal, right? There has always been this kind of constant effort historically in the black experience to redefine what the black character is, and what his collective goal should or could be. Alain Locke wrote a text called the The New Negro that I just always really gravitated toward because I didn't know that you could collectively reinvent. This idea of collective reinvention is so interesting to me, especially attached to the idea of escapism, and the history of the black character escaping, whether it be from slavery, reconstruction, or oppression. I paired my thoughts on Locke's text and escapists to this funny, and kind of ridiculous, social and athletic club, which I guess almost speaks to that kind of Renaissance moment with the creation of the black bourgeoisie. I just thought that it created an interesting fairy tail. I never really thought much of it as historical kind of reinvention—it was more a type of absurdity, and an investigation of the history of the black character's consciousness around movement and mobility and escape.

Rail: You have said before that the black artists you were encountering when you were growing up were often trying to depict some kind of problem they were facing, and that you were quite determined to move away from this type of focus.

Johnson: I was. I was thinking about the world that had been given to me, and thinking about how I could make it look different. This is often the expectation that artists have for themselves—they are thinking about what came before, and then trying to find a place to contribute their own words in order to give life to another perspective. The way that I was raised impacted on my thinking. My stepfather is from an immigrant family, a Nigerian family, and the way that they thought about the world was considerably different than the perspective I often got from black Americans. The way that they saw America and American history was very different. A big part of how I was raised changed some of the ways that I saw American history. I thought so much had been done already around specific oppression of the black character. My life was not necessarily a monumental tragedy. I saw the opportunity to maybe examine some more optimistic spaces without in any way being naïve to the other concerns.

Rail: Your current show at the Drawing Center, Anxious Men, is the first time that you have made figurative work in a long while. Would you say that this series of drawings is some of the most unambiguous work you've exhibited? The information about the show frames it within the very contemporary context of what is happening in America right now, relating to how black male identity is represented and treated.

Johnson: I think that there is some room for ambiguity there, but, yes, I do think that it is a tad more pointed, and it definitely lives in more of a "now" space than most of the previous work that I've made. I think it came from having a little time off. I had some time to kind of just sit and think, and I found myself watching CNN, watching the news, listening to radio more, and getting out of my own head. And when I started to examine that "now" space, I think one of the things that brought me to it is being a father of a young boy, and having to be present. What I was seeing was just really alarming. I felt it was okay for me to explore. The way that I frame it is, again, from a very personal space. The drawings speak to an anxiety and fear that you experience when you find yourself in a world that you don't trust, and that you have trouble understanding. I wanted to allow myself to be exposed, in a raw sense. A little less conjured and a little more honest in how I was feeling in a certain moment. When I first started this body of work there were other things that I thought were producing anxiety and stress in my life, and at first I thought it was these things that I was investigating. Then I came to realize that it was, in some ways, bigger than where I was. Or, at least, I was being heavily affected by what was happening in the world. And, yes, specifically what was happening with black people in America.

Rail: What made you want to return to drawing?

Johnson: It really came from the urgency to get something out of me quickly. The high-paced mark-making that is in each drawing was my way of doing that. Drawing became the vehicle that I thought most clearly showed the pace at which my body and my brain was moving.

Rail: Is it the most visceral medium for you?

Johnson: I think so. It's something that is so immediate. It can happen so quickly, and it's not thought through. It's not static or deliberate. The context for it is the way that you move, and the way that your body reacts to the materials.

Rail: It's more about a process of discovery, in that way.

Johnson: I'm always interested to think about how much of what is in your mind is about knowing what you want it to look like, and how much is purely this process of discovery. But I'm an aesthete, you know? I really do like beautiful things. I have these ideas that I would like to illustrate, and then my natural instinct for illustration takes on a certain kind of aesthetic understanding, a material understanding, and that's the complexity of being an artist, I think. Bringing your ideas to life in a visual format calls on you to ask several different questions of yourself: How do I want this to live? How do I want this to be seen? Do I want this to be enjoyed? And often I do feel like I want my things to be, in some ways, visually embraced. Things that you'd want to avert your eyes from—will you continue to ask questions about those things? I don't know. Sometimes that actually is a reward, you know—why do I want to avert my eyes? Why do I not want to see this?

Rail: How do you analyze the formal aspects of your work?

Johnson: I think I stopped being as concerned with myself, and my interests in the canon, when my son was born. When I was a younger artist I think I had real investment. You know, my mother is a historian, so I think one of my goals early on as a young person was, if I could get into a history book I'd feel, psychologically, like my mother would give me more attention. I would have the attention of the person that as a child you love the most. I think that was really important to me. Now I realize the flaw in that, to some degree. You can't plot your place in history. Trying doesn't allow you to live in a present space, and doesn't allow you to create and be reactive to what is happening to you, because you're just planning for a time in which you won't be present.

I see my project as start to finish, not as single bodies of work. I tend to think of my work as a bigger kind of collective story. That's the story of my life to some degree. And not exclusively my life, but what I've witnessed. Everything is inherently somewhat narcissistic, but I like the idea that my work can in some ways say, "This is what I witnessed and this is how I interpreted that." That is what keeps me making work, and it will always keep me making work. I would like to continue to be conscious enough, and energized enough, to interpret the things that I'm seeing in the world.