At Home in Abstraction: Interview with Rashid Johnson

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Dan Weiskopf

Rashid Johnson, *The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club (Emmett)* , 2008, Lambda print, 48 1/2 x 73 inches, Collection of Elliot and Kimberly Perry, Memphis, image courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

Rashid Johnson has developed a fluid, polymorphic artistic practice over the past decade that includes sculpture, painting, installation, photography, and video. His work is often autobiographical, drawing together objects, materials, and cultural signifiers from his upbringing into formal arrangements that can feel intimate and almost reverential, but also playful. His sculptures comprise shelves carefully arrayed with towers of books, CB radios, mounds of shea butter, oyster shells, vinyl jazz records, and potted plants. He touches on themes of escapism, identity, and self-construction with deft humor, and transforms materials layered with gouges, scratches, splashes, and branded iconic forms into towering abstractions.

Johnson was one of the young artists included in the landmark 2001 *Freestyle* exhibition, curated by Thelma Golden at the Studio Museum in Harlem [NYC], and since he has enjoyed an unbroken string of solo and group shows. In 2012, he was awarded the High Museum of Art's David C. Driskell Prize, and was one of six finalists for the Guggenheim Foundation's Hugo Boss Prize. *Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks*, his first retrospective exhibition, is curated by Julie Rodrigues Widholm and initially opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago [now on view at the High Museum June 8-September 8, 2013]. The following conversation took place in the High's exhibition space the day before its opening.

Dan Weiskopf: One of the key phrases that you use to describe your work is this expression "hijacking the domestic," which suggests that you're taking the domestic somewhere it doesn't really want to go or it wouldn't ordinarily go. So I was wondering if you could say a little about what the phrase means to you.

Rashid Johnson: The materials that I've been interested in employing in my work throughout the last 14 or 15 years have mostly not been found in an art supply store. The vast majority of them are materials you could potentially find at either a Home Depot, a hardware store, a rug store—mostly stores that would supply materials for

a domestic space, whether that would be wood flooring, glass, Persian rugs, or television sets. So I started thinking about this kind of domestic material and taking it into a place where it would not necessarily expect to find itself. I've always considered the artist as almost a magician-like character who grants agency to materials to allow them to be elevated into objects that we admire.

Rashid Johnson, *The Shuttle*, 2011, mirrored tile, black soap, wax, books, shea butter, plant, and CB radio, 100 1/2 x 125 1/2 x 11 3/4 inches, Rubell Family Collection, Miami, photo: Adam Reich, courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

DW: One thing that sits side-by-side with domesticity in a lot of this work is the idea of escapism or utopianism, and that often [carries] negative connotations: Escapist thinking is unrealistic, and you want to avoid that. But I think in your work, it comes across in a much more positive light. How do you think the concept of escapism plays out in your work and how does it go back and forth with the idea of the domestic?

RJ: Escapism is something that was an underlying condition of what was happening in my work that I became more familiar with and started considering how I wanted to use it in my project. Often times with the work of African American artists there's [an] expectation that the artist will speak to the historical problem of the black experience. I was less interested in that as a vehicle for my language, and I really wanted to create a body of work that spoke to the agency of the black character. In order to do that, I started to produce more of an escapist strategy in the way that the work was coming to life. At the time I was reading Derrida's *The Gift of Death* and also interested in Freud, both talking about escapism as this kind of opportunity, and less of a reaction; something that you would essentially try to search out. The domestic space can often suggest an escapist space because you can produce it and make it into whatever you'd like it to be. There's often a negative connotation to the word "escapism," as if you're not dealing with the realities of our times. But I see it as very optimistic. And I think that kind of optimism becomes infectious.

DW: Has anyone actually responded negatively to the escapist connotations?

RJ: There have been people, I think. Some people have this expectation that black artists have an obligation to speak to more of the negative aspects of our history. I don't want to live someone else's history, necessarily; I can only live and suggest my own experiences, and a lot of what my work deals with are my own experiences.

DW: You've noted that the objects and the materials in the works are almost always potentially usable things. You could apply the shea butter. You could cut off a piece of *Cosmic Slop* (2008—) and wash yourself. It would be a very expensive bath, but you could do it. And you've actually given a piece to your mother that she used.

RJ: Yeah, she very much uses a sculpture that I made for her. And it was actually really enlightening when I called her and [asked], "What are you doing?" She was really utilizing this sculpture and I was kind of blown away, and I [thought] "This is very much how these things are supposed to live." And when they're in my studio I'm basically using them the entire time.

DW: They arrive slightly used.

RJ: Yeah, they definitely arrive slightly used.

Rashid Johnson, *Antibiotic*, 2011, black soap and wax on board, 108 5/8 x 144 3/4 x 4 inches, collection of the artist and Evan Boris, photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago

DW: This ties in with another idea that you've suggested in connection with the idea of usefulness, which is that some of the materials traditionally have healing connotations or are soothing, which is [a notion] that draws on certain stereotypes of the domestic, too. I was wondering if you think that these notions of healing and usefulness play out in a broader way in the rest of your works?

RJ: Some of the concerns that I've had with the idea of healing get back into the black character's scarred history. But rather than replaying the source of the scars, I provide a formula for healing the scars rather than a discussion around how the scars were formed. So when I think about shea butter and the healing qualities that shea butter has, it doesn't suggest the problem, it suggests in some ways a potential solution.

DW: Drawing on the past to heal the future. This idea of healing artists and therapeutic materials is very reminiscent of Joseph Beuys. The idea of healing was always one of his main themes in his artistic practice, and ideas about shamanistic or mystical characteristics of art-making. Could you talk a little about the sort of connections you perceive between your practice and Beuys's work?

RJ: I've always been really interested in his work and some of the concerns with shamanism and the artist as this magician-like character, as well as some of the things he deals with around fiction and escape. I think it's still never been proven or disproven—and it may have been disproven—whether he did, you know, get shot down.

DW: He backed off a little on that story later. [Laughs]

RJ: I think it's interesting, the opportunity to produce a history, whether that history is true or not. The healing materials—which [rely] on the story of him being shot down in the plane—being stuffed with fat and felt and kind of being saved [by them]. I think that a lot of those issues relate to some of the things that I've made, and a lot of the materials and the kind of iconography in some of the materials that I use. But there are other reference points, I think, that are as strong in the work when we talk about abstraction, whether it be Kline or Twombly, or maybe Hammons for these kind of cultural signifying materials that are employed through abstraction quite a bit, and Marcel Broodthaers and the concerns with poetry and the domestic and the use of plants.

DW: The Cosmic Slops read as very Clyfford Still to me.

RJ: I am a big Clyfford Still fan.

DW: Carrie Mae Weems, especially the way she explores domesticity and intimacy, I think, has a really strong affinity thematically with your work, though you're not similar photographers.

RJ: [Her] *Kitchen Table Series* (1990), to me, was such an important body of work. I learned quite a bit from that, and she was really telling a story that had almost never been told in contemporary art. You see her daughter learning at the table, you see her relationship to her husband, you know the concerns with nourishing your family and this being the space where all of this takes place and you getting to be a fly on the wall and a witness to that is just so amazing. She's definitely had a real impact on my thinking. Aesthetically we've gone in very different directions, but conceptually I have a lot of interest in her work.

DW: You also curated this exhibition of Sam Gilliam's work [*Hard Edge Paintings, 1963-1966,* David Kordansky Gallery, March 28-May 11, 2013], and you've noted that he was doing a lot of these abstract pieces in 1965. And at the time it was, if not exactly radical, at least kind of puzzling, maybe, why a black artist would be so invested in this kind of abstract work so separated from other concerns that were obviously pretty pressing. Do you think there are affinities between his attitude and practice and yours?

RJ: I think there are. I came across the work of that generation of artists when I was still a very young artist, and I was showing at a gallery where quite a few of them show, and so it was a really important art historical lesson for me to know that there were all these really amazing black abstract painters, a lot of whom were still working: Ed Clark, Norman Lewis had passed, but even more recent artists whether it be Jack Whitten or Stanley Whitney. Then coming across the work of Gilliam, the concerns that he had as an artist were concerns that I shared around gesture and formal [decisions], an interest in palette, and the gravity of how an abstract work lives in a space. Having seen how that generation of artists were dealt with by critics and collectors and institutions was, for me, important to witness, because I realized regardless of what my approach would be as an artist and what my concerns were, I was going to be brought into a conversation regardless. So I decided that it was important for me to be able to frame that conversation rather than allow it to be projected onto me. And having established some kind of story around how I wanted to be framed as a black character, has given me the opportunity to start to deal with some of the other things I'm concerned with.

DW: This actually leads into what I was hoping to get to with this—where you think your relationship with abstraction is taking you? You've been very clear in rejecting the idea that there's a unitary black experience, and you don't pretend to speak for anything like that. The fact that you call a work *Triple Consciousness* (2009) is to say it's not double, it's more than that—

RJ: —it's poly-consciousness.

Rashid Johnson, Triple Consciousness, 2009, black soap, wax, vinyl in album cover, shea butter, plant, and brass, 48 3/4 x 97 1/2 x 6 1/4 inches, collection of Dr. Daniel S. Berger, Chicago, photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago

DW: There's this enormous plurality of experiences that are out there, and you can speak for your perspective on it, but not for others. I wonder if you think that abstraction or formalism offer a vehicle for moving the work explicitly out of the space of those conversations that center around identity and race and history, and into something else.

RJ: I think that's one of my goals. I feel very much at home in abstraction and mark-making and gesture. As the work has evolved, I've found myself in a very challenged but comfortable place. Which means I'm moving in my space the way I've always wanted to move in my space—and I mean that literally as far as the mark-making is concerned in my studio, the physical relationship that I have with the objects that I'm producing right now, and being able to use my body as a tool. All those things are very, very interesting for me right now. Whether it thrusts the work into a larger historical conversation with other artists whose work I am a fan of and who I'm looking at and speaking to… these are the kind of things I'm interested in right now, looking at how gesture and action play out in an abstract object.

DW: Your history survives in the kind of materials that you're using.

RJ: Right. And I think they're buoyed by the work that I made prior.

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