



T H E

Rashid Johnson talks
to *Tom Morton* about fiction,
humour and homage

H I S T O R Y

M A N

'I am an American, Chicago born – Chicago, that sombre city – and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way.' So begins Saul Bellow's seminal novel *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), although these words might equally serve to introduce Rashid Johnson, an artist born in 1977 under Chicago skies, whose early work in photography has given way to a practice that now embraces sculpture, wall assemblages, gestural abstractions and (more rarely) films, performances and curating. What weaves these strands together is an abiding interest in the African-American cultural canon, and a treatment of the historical record that renders it as malleable, and as full of possibilities, as the substances (among them shea butter, black wax and black soap) he deploys in his work to alchemical effect.

Johnson has said that the artist 'functions as a time-traveller', and has described his work 'as a means or portal to effectively rewrite history, not as a revision but as a work of fiction. I'm interested in using it as an agency to address time.' Nowhere was this more evident than is his 2013 restaging of Amiri Baraka's play *Dutchman* (1964) – an extraordinary meditation on race, sex, violence and complicity – in the Russian and Turkish Bathhouse in New York's East Village as part of Performa 13, a production that will travel to Chicago's Red Square Bathhouse this September. We met in Athens and London to discuss narrative, spirituality, humour, homage and sharing a steam room with the Reverend Jesse Jackson.

TOM MORTON

Your recent exhibition at *The George Economou Collection, Athens*, was titled *'Magic Numbers'*. In physics, this term is associated with an unusual degree of atomic stability, making it an intriguing title for an artist who often works with unstable materials, and for whom fluidity – of forms, formats and histories – is key.

RASHID JOHNSON

It started with a play on physics. I was making all this work for the show, and these numbers kept popping up: a film with five characters, a triptych of bronzes, seven gestures in a painting. I was listening to De La Soul's album *De La Soul Is Dead* (1991), and I got to thinking about the group's earlier track 'The Magic Number' (1988). Naming it after that came from a poetic space. Every time you talk to somebody about a number, it has some sort of history: 'Oh seven, man, you know what seven is.' Or five, or three: it's the idea of numbers as multiplicity, as multiple conscious spaces.

T M *The Economou show centred on a 16mm film work, The New Black Yoga (2012), in which we see a group of five young African-American men perform a choreographed routine on a sunset-strafed shoreline, resembling both a dance rehearsal and a paramilitary drill. Why build the show around this particular piece?*

R J It was an opportunity to put a focus on a part of my project – film – that's been under-discussed. The human form in

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space, the 'character', hadn't been foregrounded in my work so much recently. It was a great moment to refocus on that, and to refocus on the humour and the narrative of the work, as opposed to the flatness of the painting, or the opportunity with the sculpture for people to leave the narrative at whatever distance they want. This film makes you focus on a narrative structure, makes you try to identify these characters, and then use that as a springboard for understanding the rest of the work in the show. The goofiness of *The New Black Yoga* is really important. It's intended to be 'off'. You don't know what they're doing, what their goal is. The choreography seems totally dismantled. I'd seen Melvin van Peebles's film *Watermelon Man* (1970), which concludes with the protagonist in a room with ten other guys, and they're making this gesture with broomsticks that looks like a militant action. It goes totally unexplained by Van Peebles. The film just ends. I thought to myself: 'Holy shit, I want to finish this.' That's the catalyst for a lot of my projects. I want to expand on a conversation, to help unravel it. It's very much about building.

T M *I'm interested in this idea of 'character' in your work.*

R J One of the things I've often looked to do in my work is to produce a black character with a tremendous amount of agency – capable, proud, dynamic, uninterrupted – who's negotiating problematic circumstances, but who's essentially able to rise above and grow from those circumstances, almost an example of what Harold Cruse in his 1967 book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* called 'Negro Exceptionalism'! I'm also interested in the potential of describing an even more complex character, who's not necessarily risen from his ordeal, and who's negotiating it in a very fearful way, which doesn't produce a redeeming person, but a flawed person. Unlike a lot of the work by black artists I saw growing up, I'm interested in individual responses to experience, what happens to the person, how they respond, the psychological ramifications. It goes beyond race, or specific conditions such as slavery – anybody can go through something that's tragic. Think of the beginning of Albert Camus's *The Outsider* (1942): 'Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure.' He's trying to produce empathy so people don't think he's a fucking piece of shit. That kind of investment in a character's response interests me.

Even when there's no image of a protagonist in the works, as with the shelf pieces, there's a concern with utility,

a feeling that someone is supposed to employ them, to ignite them, to bring them to life. He's always been there – in some ways I see him in my own life – and this leads to the idea of multiple consciousnesses. On any given day, he can be dynamic, gifted and exceptional, or fearful, disgusting and dismantled, terribly tragic and flawed. Then there's the audience's interaction with the works, their consideration of how these objects might be viewed, valued, used, respected or disrespected. There's a relationship to narrative-building, to new society building. This strategy has been one that's given me a lot of space to explore, a lot of flexibility, without the inhibitions of autobiography. Making fictions, without necessarily being all that fictional!

T M *You're currently preparing to take your production of Baraka's Dutchman to the Red Square Baths in Chicago.*

R J I grew up having LeRoi Jones's collection of poems, *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), read to me by my mother when I was about four years old; that was my bedtime story. In the late 1960s, Jones changed his name to Amiri Baraka. I've always been fascinated by this transition: the fact that there would never be a gravestone for LeRoi Jones, for instance, so he would effectively live forever. I've always been a fan of Jones's poetry and interested in his activism. I saw a revival of *Dutchman* in 2007 and, a couple of years later, I brought a copy of *Dutchman* to read in the Russian and Turkish Bathhouse in New York. It was an impulsive pick. Baraka's play talks about the heat of the subway, and I started to think about heat and the history of interesting New York black narratives, such as Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing* (1989), where the heat of the summer is the protagonist. Sitting in the bathhouse, I thought: 'This is exactly the space, exactly the opportunity for me to collaborate with Baraka.' It's so much

Previous page
Cosmic Slop 'Dutchman', 2013, black soap
and wax, 245 × 130 × 7 cm

1
Dutchman, 2013,
performance documentation at Performa,
New York

2
New Black Yoga, 2011,
film still

Courtesy
Previous page: the artist, George Economou
Collection and Hauser & Wirth, London; photograph:
Fanis Vlastaras and Rebecca Constantopoulou •
1 the artist and Performa,
New York; photograph: Paula Court •
2 the artist and Hauser and Wirth, London

about homage, so much about finding a way to intervene, to place yourself in that historical discourse [laughs]. It's always been something I've done, piggy-backing off stories, people I'm fascinated with, like in my early photographs *Self-Portrait with My Hair Parted Like Frederick Douglass* (2003) or *Self-Portrait Laying on Jack Johnson's Grave* (2006). My mother's a historian, and history always seemed like the most important thing. How do I put myself in it, how do I become a character in it? This leads us back again to narrative literature. An interest in the canon. Being inside the canon. I actually think of the canon like a cannon. Everyone has their own vision of this thing. This expansive, not-incredibly-welcoming finishing space.

TM *Does bringing Dutchman to Chicago, the city in which you were raised, have a particular resonance for you?*

RJ I started going to the Red Square Bathhouse at the beginning of graduate school. I had no money, all this anxiety, and it sort of led me to this dungeon, where I could sit and think, and read and sweat. Where else can you go all day for 15 bucks? I fell in love with the place. I'd be there with Armenian businessmen, Mexican businessmen, communists, judges, politicians, Jesse Jackson. These guys all had known each other for 30 years from the bathhouse. Outside, they had different goals, different expectations, different communities. Everyone being disrobed made it very democratic. I felt so privileged to witness it. I was like: 'This is theatre, this place is theatre!' Returning to the Chicago bathhouse to stage *Dutchman* is one of the first times I've had to use my own nostalgia, and place something inside that. I'm excited to see how the play functions there.

TM *A number of your works suggest spiritual, or at least ritualistic, practices, from the altar-like appearance of some of the wall works, to your Beuysian quasi-shamanic use of 'charged' materials such as shea butter, to what appear to be runic devices. Do you have a spiritual practice of your own?*

RJ My family was Catholic but we weren't really Catholics – I was just baptized because my mother promised my great-grandmother she'd do it. In some ways, I was always searching. I had the requisite Buddhist moment as an 18-year-old kid, but I didn't find any comfort in trying to invade something that didn't feel sincerely mine. What I've realized is that my practice – and I use that word specifically because I don't like the idea of an artist having a practice; if you're always practicing, then when does the game start? – became my format, my ritual. I don't want to say my religion or my denomination, but it was the most consistent thing in my life. I felt my soul needed it, that I couldn't necessarily live without it. So, it became important to me to keep some forms, some materials and some signifiers very much as part of the ritual act,



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participating with them, allowing them to grow and take on different attributes, became important to me. I'm not that dissimilar from the person who needs to be in church on Sunday for spiritual fulfillment. I need consistency in different parts of my life – whether that's working out or doing yoga or being in the studio. If I don't have that, I experience a loss of self. I can't necessarily understand what my purpose is. In some ways, when I started to work with ritual tools which had that kind of religiosity, I was playing with the humour of the situation, making it up; but, like all interesting things, it became the story. The humour wasn't lost, but it became the most honest thing I could do.

TM *Does your work require long periods of research?*

RJ I've described myself to friends as a Plumber's Union artist. I get up in the

morning, do some physical exercise, play with my kid – I like his energy, the way he leads me into the day. I start work when other people are starting work. It's the idea of the artist as worker, not someone with a special freedom. I've got a couch at the studio, and lots of resource materials. I often begin the working day by reading, looking. I'll call my mother and speak to her about a book she's introduced me to, or call a friend from grad school. Some days are just for research. I tend to get into the labour of my project by the afternoon and finish around five, then maybe have a drink with a friend, then dinner with my family. I also have a therapist I've seen for years. It's just part of my schedule. I talk to my therapist about my work quite a bit, and I'm sure they find it to be one of the more challenging aspects of our meetings!

T M *Over the years, you've made several works that explicitly reference leading African-American artists of older generations, among them your photograph Self Portrait in Homage to Barkley Hendricks (2005) and How Ya Like Me Now (2010), your 'remix' of David Hammons's Blizard Ball Sale (1983). In 2013, you curated the exhibition 'Sam Gilliam: Hard-Edge Paintings 1963–66' at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, presenting early canvases by this still art-historically undervalued African-American artist, predating his breakthrough abandonment of the stretcher, and the 'drape' works for which he's best known.*

R J That show was very much about hero worship. With a lot of artists's works that I deploy or hybridize in my own, I haven't had a working relationship with them, but I was able to go to Sam's studio, he said: 'Do what you want to do.' I saw a small hard-edged painting, and I asked him when and where he started making them, and he said around 1962 in Washington D.C. At that time, there were constant marches on the city; the world was changing around him: John F. Kennedy is assassinated; Martin Luther King is assassinated. Sam was right there, and he's painting a straight line in baby blue! I'm fascinated by the fact that he was able to think outside of the box, at a time when it was probably very difficult to step outside of an understanding of your position – whether that was embracing Negro Radicalism or Negro Conservatism or any number of stances he could have adopted. He placed himself in

a conversation that was very much about art. Art became this oasis, this island. He was in dialogue, say, with Kenneth Noland, at a time when the world was falling down around him. I thought he was amazing for that.

T M *Your sculptures are overwhelmingly made for – and often allude to – interior spaces. One exception is Shea Butter Irrigation System (2013), created for the courtyard of the Ballroom, Marfa, in which an agricultural irrigation rig was adapted to anoint the Texas desert with melting gobbets of shea butter, black soap and wax. Does the idea of making further open-air sculptures interest you?*

R J I'd love to get outside again. That piece was a huge learning experience for me. So much of my material is intended to live inside. Maybe I'm agoraphobic, so it would make sense that my art is too! I love small interior spaces, where you can lay down with a book and nerd out. Being in a big open space is intimidating to me, in art and in life. Maybe it's an obstacle I can overcome.

T M *What's next?*

R J I'm working on a show for David Kordansky Gallery in September, which explores some of the concerns of Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* (1940), and on a project for the Museum of Modern Art, New York, opening in December; it takes on a single body of my work, the 'Cosmic Slops' (2007–ongoing), which really puts me in a painting conversation. I've never looked at myself as any sort of medium-specific artist. I'm really from that post-medium generation. We're just like: 'Why would



I be handicapped? What kind of fool would do that?' But to see a specific body of work that exists within the discourse of painting – which is something I've a real investment in, whether that's through performance, mark-making or the mobility of flat space – I'm excited to see how that's going to live. ♦♦

Tom Morton is a contributing editor of frieze, a writer and a curator, based in Rochester, UK. His exhibition 'Panda Sex' opens at State of Concept, Athens, Greece, in November.

Rashid Johnson lives in New York, USA. His exhibition 'Magic Numbers' was held earlier this year at The George Economou Collection, Athens, Greece. His production of Amiri Baraka's 1964 play Dutchman, commissioned by Performa 13, and restaged with support from Monique Meloche Gallery and MCA Chicago, will be held at Red Square Bathhouse, Chicago, USA, from 16–21 September. His solo show 'Islands' will inaugurate David Kordansky's new space in Los Angeles, USA, from 13 September to 29 October.



1
Shea Butter Irrigation System, 2013,
the Ballroom, Marfa
central pivot irrigation unit, shea butter,
black soap, wax, 4.2 × 2.7 × 3.4 m

2
Self-Portrait with My Hair
Parted like Frederick Douglass, 2003,
Lambda print, 1.4 × 1.9 m

3
Souls of Black Folk, 2010,
black soap, wax, books, vinyl, brass, shea butter,
plants, space rocks, mirrors, gold paint,
stained wood, 289 × 316 × 61 cm

Courtesy
1 the artist and Hauser & Wirth, London;
photograph: Fredrik Nilsen • 2 the artist and
Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago •
3 the artist and David Kordansky Gallery,
New York photograph: Farzad Owrang

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