



A fresh light on blackness

Rashid Johnson takes us deep into African-American identity

By Sophie Hastings

Rashid Johnson explores what is meant by “the black experience” through photography, video, painting, music and sculpture, and his work is riddled with references to hip hop, boxing, movies and African-American literature. Using objects from his Chicago childhood, he brings a fresh and nuanced eye to the complexities of race, class and gender, leaving stereotypes deflated in his wake.

Now in his thirties, Johnson grabbed the art world’s attention aged 24, when he moved to New York and exhibited in Thelma Golden’s acclaimed 2001 group show of black artists, *Freestyle*. He began with black-and-white pictures of homeless men and large-scale photographs of feet and followed with his exhibition *Chickenbones And Watermelon Seeds: The African American Experience As Abstract Art*, creating images by placing black-eyed peas and cotton seeds on photographic paper, then exposing them to light in an iron-reactive process. His practice expanded: he now uses liquid black soap and shea butter to create black relief paintings, builds sculptures out of shelving units and brands surfaces with rifle

cross hairs. “It’s very American, my work,” he says, “but it plays well with European audiences. It’s not just bad-boy American painting; it deals with issues of race, gender, power dynamics, spirituality. It’s unfamiliar enough to European audiences that they’re interested in unpacking it.”

The “tension of identity” is a key theme of the exhibition Johnson has installed at the George Economou Collection in Athens, called *Magic Numbers*. “The writer WEB Du Bois talks about how people are conscious of themselves in different ways and at different times – we are poly-conscious, with multiple identities. There are times when I identify exclusively as very male, very hetero. But when I try to count my identities, there are too many to deal with.”

The central piece in the show, a 16mm film called *The New Black Yoga*, was inspired by Johnson’s failure to master the discipline. Made in 2011, it shows five men on a beach performing choreographed moves that mimic yoga and the martial arts. It is at once absurd and serious, with Johnson making fun of his own ineptness as a yoga student while examining the dualities facing the contemporary male. Should he be

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spruemaggers.com

Bartholomew Beal: A Heap of Broken Images
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Until 29 August.
faslondon.com

Making Colour (below)
National Gallery, London.
Until 7 September.
nationalgallery.org.uk



Virginia Woolf: Art, Life And Vision
National Portrait Gallery, London.
Until 26 October.
npg.org.uk

Neil Beloufa
ICA, London.
17 September – 16 November.
ica.org.uk


Glenn Ligon
Camden Arts Centre, London.
19 September – 23 November.
camdenartscentre.org

Constructing Worlds
Barbican Art Gallery, London.
25 September – 11 January.
barbican.org.uk

Reflecting reality: Black soap and shea butter on a mirrored tile in Rashid Johnson’s *Good King* (2013)

physical or spiritual, defender or peacekeeper, impenetrable or accessible? We know the humiliation of learning new skills but there’s also a less comfortable laugh to be had in the distinctly middle-class context: beautiful people on a perfect beach throwing shapes on Persian rugs – not the way young black men are usually portrayed. For the show, Johnson has placed Persian rugs on the floor for viewers to sit on. “They function as plinths, so you are in the installation, like the performers.”

Johnson calls the insecurity of a black American middle class that embraces western capitalism “black neurosis”. After his parents divorced when he was a baby, Johnson grew up between his mother’s bookish house – she was studying for a PhD in African history – and his father’s home, which was full of the CB radios he installed. It was a time in the US when “our blackness had become a nationality. My mother wore dashikis, had an Afro – but our relationship to Africa is often fictional, because our ethnic heritage has been so cut [due to slavery]; we’ve made up a pan-Africanism. The black soap and shea butter express an identity that doesn’t exist in a useful way. It’s about covering yourself in Africanness but that’s not a genuine cultural identity.” As they became more successful his parents shed their Afrocentric identities. This transition informs much of his work.

Magic Numbers also features a large mirrored-shelf sculpture. “Shelves are a reference to my mother’s library and my father’s workshop. I used to play with his CB radios as a kid and really appreciated the feeling of anonymity. You chose your handle and called out into the world. You couldn’t be identified. It was an astonishing experience for a boy at the age you become aware that you have a certain identity. It was somewhere you could not be the sum total of who you think people think you are. And that’s what counts, your idea of what others think of you.”  *Magic Numbers* is showing at the George Economou Collection Space, Athens, until 28 August. thegeorgeeconomoucollection.com. London’s Hauser & Wirth will exhibit Johnson’s work in January 2015. hauserwirth.com