

Rashid Johnson *Magic Numbers*

George Economou Collection, Athens 23 June – 28 August

There are private museums that look like public museums and then there are private museums that look like private museums. Greek collector George Economou has one of the latter, tucked away behind (or perhaps part of) an office building in Athens. In some ways it feels like a bit of an incongruous setting for an exhibition by Chicago-born Rashid Johnson. But perhaps this is fitting. Even the exhibition title is suggestive of, severally, a De La Soul track, the winning post in various season-long sporting events and the number of molecules it takes to form the perfect atomic structure.

The exhibition itself is constructed around a short film, *The New Black Yoga* (2011), installed on the second floor and featuring a group of five African Americans performing a fusion of yoga, various martial arts, gymnastic moves and a music-promo dance routine on a beach decorated with five carpets that have been subsequently imported into the exhibition space (although the ones on which you sit or tread while watching the film may simply be similar to those in it). The film begins and ends with a crosshairs (also branded on the carpets in the installation and which has become something of a signature in Johnson's work) carved into the sand, suggestive both of the logo of 1980s rappers Public Enemy and the guidance system

that makes a projectile weapon more focused and precise, and perhaps we're tickled into following the latter interpretation as the five protagonists begin their routine with a variety of meditative poses. In short, we're encouraged to make sense of this movie and their moves. Perhaps we think of various scenes from *Enter the Dragon* (1973) or combat sequences from blaxploitation films of the 1970s or films of capoeira performances, or perhaps we think of racial stereotypes equating skin colour with athleticism and violence. If we've overdosed on Jacques Lacan and social studies courses, perhaps we're playing with implications of otherness and sameness (depending on your point of view), and then perhaps we counter all that with the passivity (or even impotence) associated with yogic practice. I could go on. The fact is, however, that as much as this film invites these kinds of readings, there are points at which making any real sense of them becomes impossible amid the cacophony of potential references and interpretations, rendering it simply footage of five good-looking guys showing off in front of a picturesque ocean sunset. Speaking as someone of mixed race, it's this very duality (one that's not without a certain comedy) that emphasises the precarity of any identity formation in a multicultural world.

In Johnson's own mythology, he was inspired to make the work having attended and failed to follow a yoga class in Berlin.

There's more of that mythology downstairs, where *Good King* (2013), a typically altarlike collection of mirror-tiled shelves set against a black-splattered mirror-tiled background, filled with found objects (twinned George Benson album covers – 1975's *Good King Bad* – arranged to create a potentially significant swastikalike S-pattern out of Benson's heads, forearms and fists, a couple of potted plants and some shea butter). Next to it is *Shea Butter Landscape* (2014), a mahogany table-cum-trough of the fat extracted from the nut of the African shea tree (used as both a skin moisturiser and in food preparation), into which the artist has carved more runic symbols. There's a sense in both these works of Johnson carving out an identity in art as much as in life, with the references to Marcel Broodthaers (the potted plants) and Joseph Beuys (the fat) pushed to the fore and then infiltrated or embraced by materials that resonate with Johnson's personal associations. On the third floor, that sense of focus is inescapable – a huge black powder-coated steel crosshairs (*Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos*, 2012) presides over a room of Johnson's black soap and wax paintings. *Mark Rappolt*



The New Black Yoga (video still), 2011,
video, 16mm film transferred to DVD, sound, 10 min 57 sec.
Photo: Martin Parsekian. © the artist.

Courtesy the artist and Hausen & Wirth, London, New York and Zürich