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AROUND THE GALLERIES

Building off of 'Rainbow Sign'

The "Rainbow Sign" has been an important meme in African American life for decades. Now, New York-based artist Rashid Johnson brings it to bear in a new body of work.

At David Kordansky Gallery, Johnson's "The Rainbow Sign" takes the form of 16 monumental collages and mixed-media works. A particular politics of reconciliation with history began with a slave song, the black spiritual "Mary Don't You Weep." The narrative continued through writer James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time" ("God gave Noah the rainbow sign / No more water, the fire next time"), then Noah Purifoy's sculptures and reliefs forged from the charred rubble of the Watts Rebellion and on to concert promoter Mary Ann Pollar's black cultural center and social club of that name, which flourished in Berkeley in the 1970s.

Johnson extends the theme into assertive wall reliefs composed from materials favored in his earlier work — ceramic tile, tar-black spray enamel, shea butter, black soap, broken glass, etc. A group of kaleidoscopic "Escape Collages" incorporates vinyl photographs of natural landscapes (the deserts

could be Saharan, the tropical forests sub-Saharan) cut into repeated shapes of pyramids and shields.

Power and protection are conjured in equal measure, along with image-fragments of African masks and scrawled, graffiti-like heads reminiscent of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Rashid's wall-works are descendants of Robert Rauschenberg's Combine paintings, ornamental puzzles made from everyday materials. Elsewhere, panels of bronze mesh evoke the diffusion filter on a condenser microphone, dispersing the visual resonance.

Perhaps the most moving work is the simplest — an awkwardly affecting group of 30 joyfully glazed, kiln-fired ceramic "Ugly Pots," set out as if for sidewalk sale atop a threadbare Persian rug. Vessels are analogous to human bodies, so the display of imminent commercial transactions generates an unexpected jolt of recognition.

David Kordansky Gallery,
5130 W. Edgewood Place, L.A.
Through May 19; closed Sunday and Monday. (323) 935-3030, www.davidkordanskygallery.com

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