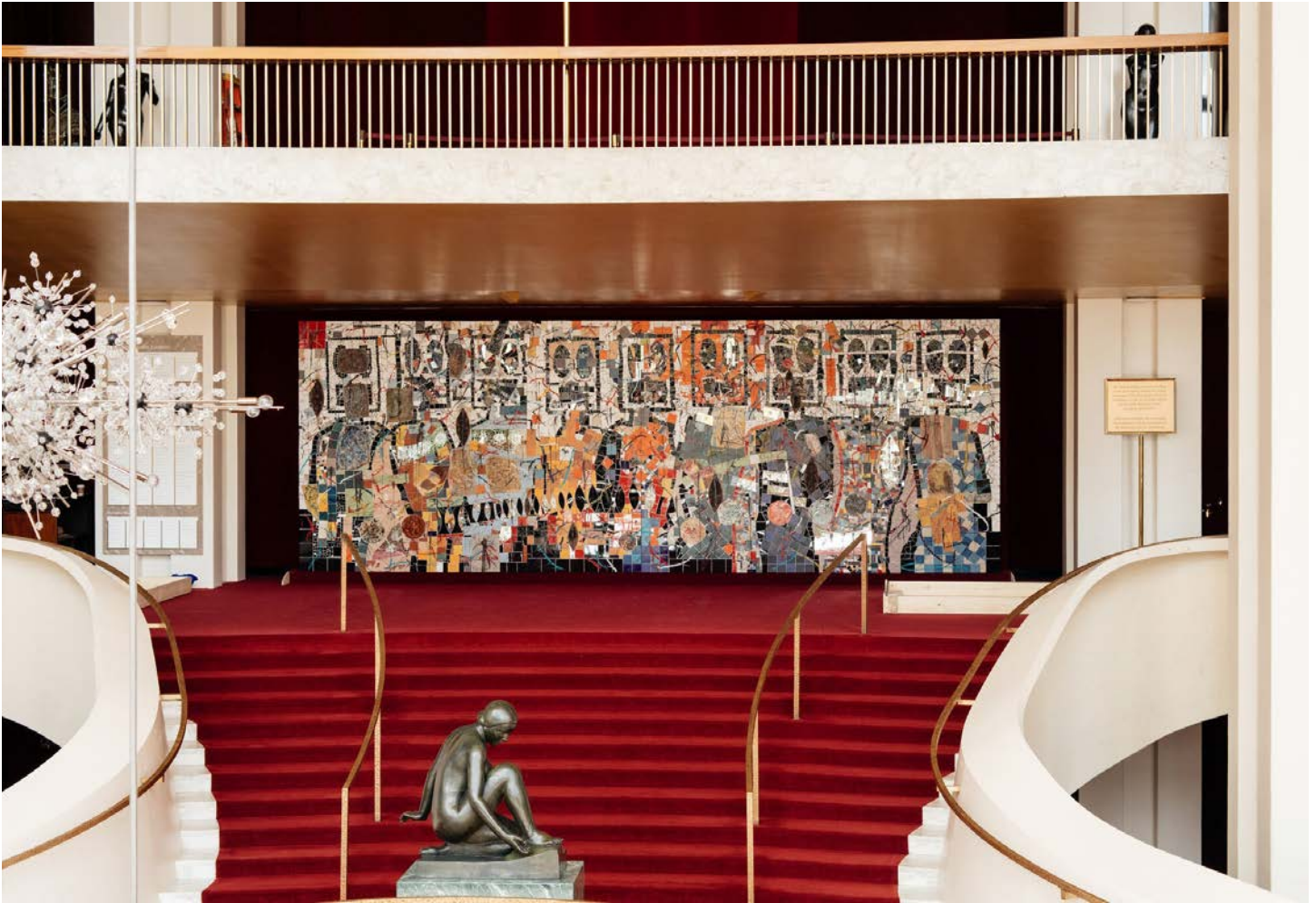


The New York Times

In Rashid Johnson's Mosaics, Broken Lives Pieced Together

In new exhibitions at the Metropolitan Opera and David Kordansky Gallery, the artist offers a story of recovery — personal and collective — after a "blunt force trauma."

By Hilarie M. Sheets | September 23, 2021



One of the two 9-by-25-foot mosaic panels Rashid Johnson created for the luxe interior of the Met Opera. Each is titled "The Broken Nine." Ike Edeani for The New York Times

"The healing process starts with the negotiation of blunt force trauma," the multidisciplinary artist Rashid Johnson said. "It's the story of recovery."

After the bruising of Covid, the end of the Trump administration and recent reckonings with race, gender, sexuality and identity, Johnson was ruminating about his own emotional state and our collective one, as he sees it.

Johnson, who turns 44 on Saturday, is mining a psychologically complicated moment in ways both highly personal and open-ended in new exhibitions at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, on view now, and the Metropolitan Opera in New York, opening Monday.

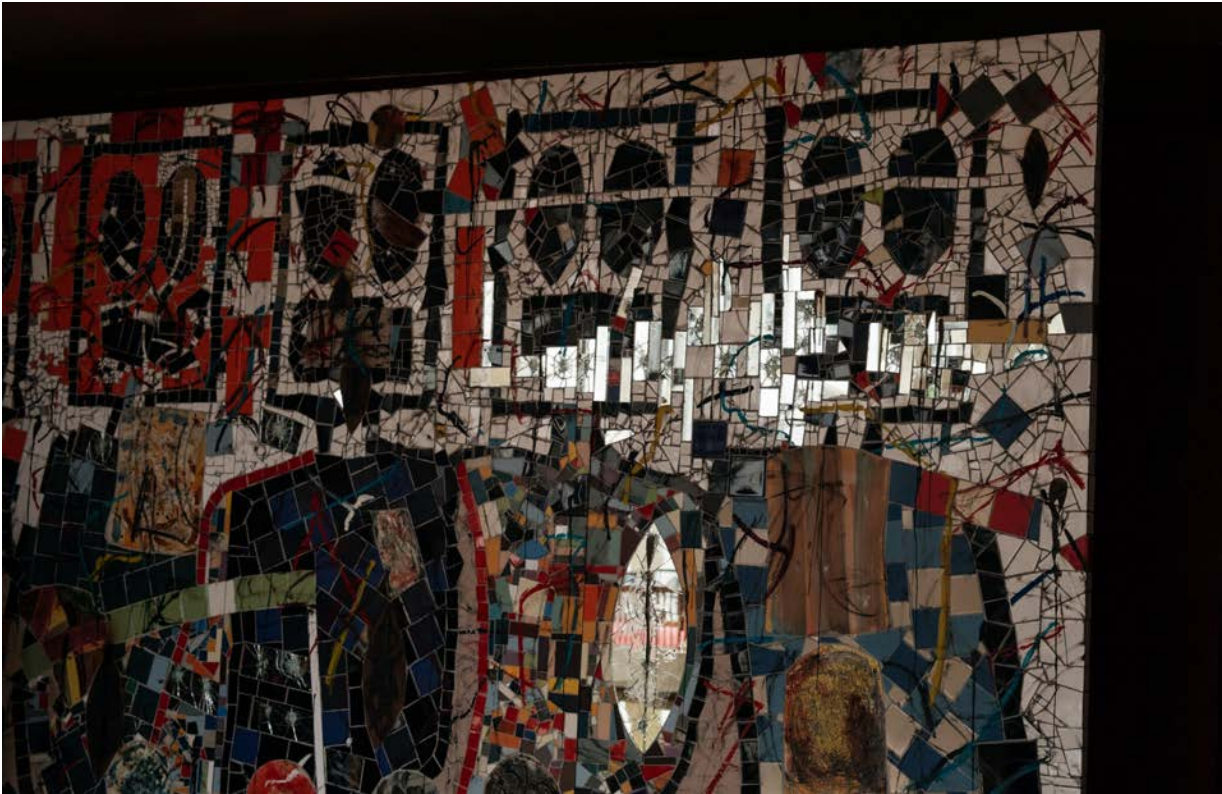


"My work has always had concerns around race, struggle, grief and grievance, but also joy and excitement around the tradition and opportunities of Blackness," Rashid Johnson said. Ike Edeani for The New York Times

Johnson's art practice has been kaleidoscopic, encompassing painting, sculpture, large-scale installation, film and, most recently, mosaic. His works are visual cosmologies, referencing aspects of Johnson's home life growing up in Chicago and African diasporic culture.

"My work has always had concerns around race, struggle, grief and grievance, but also joy and excitement around the tradition and opportunities of Blackness," said Johnson, whose mother has been a university provost and whose father is an artist and ran a small electronics company.

For the luxe interior of the Met Opera, Johnson created two 9-by-25 foot mosaic panels at his studio in Brooklyn, each titled "The Broken Nine." Installed on the grand tier landings, they comprise chorus lines of imposing standing figures pieced together from thousands of fragments of colorful ceramics, mirror and branded wood, across which the artist has painted improvisationally in oil stick, wax and spray enamel.



Ike Edeani for The New York Times



The mosaics reflect the artist's challenges and professional rise over the last decade. "Rashid thinks and works on a scale that is operatic," said Dodie Kazanjian, director of the Met Opera gallery. Ike Edeani for The New York Times

Their wide-eyed expressions could read as frustration, fear, joy, anxiety or disappointment. "I'm trying to illustrate tons of different people and at the same time they're probably all me," Johnson said.

The works at the Met are also a good metaphor for the opera house, Peter Gelb, its general manager, said, as it has had to piece itself back together again after being shuttered for 18 months and during protracted labor disputes. Although the Met commissioned Johnson's works two years ago, independently of Terence Blanchard's opera, "Fire Shut Up in My Bones," which also debuts Monday, Gelb sees parallels. The first opera mounted at the Met by a Black composer and a Black librettist (Kasi Lemmons), it is based on the memoir of the New York Times columnist Charles Blow. "It's a coming-of-age story about a life that's damaged and then repaired," Gelb said.

"Rashid thinks and works on a scale that is operatic," said Dodie Kazanjian, director of the Met Opera gallery, who invited Johnson to make a site-specific work, as she had done before with Cecily Brown and George Condo.



Johnson signs the back of one of the panels during the installation. "I'm trying to illustrate tons of different people and at the same time they're probably all me," he said. Edeani for The New York Times

Johnson ascribes a "Humpty Dumpty" quality to his series of "Broken Men" mosaics, which he began in 2018. But unlike in the childhood nursery rhyme, the artist has put his shattered figures back together again. They reflect the artist's challenges and professional rise over the last decade — during which time Johnson has become a parent, with his wife, Sheree Hovsepian, whom he met in graduate school at the Art Institute of Chicago. He also stopped drinking and using drugs on his journey to sobriety in 2014.

Seeing things with newly clear vision, he began his series, "Anxious Men," in 2015, rectangular faces with spiraling eyes and chattering teeth scrawled in black soap and wax on white ceramic tile. They were repeated across large-scale grids like crowds at Hauser & Wirth during the 2016 election as a personal and collective response to the searing tumult of polarized politics and racial dynamics.

Johnson has become a leading voice of his generation, taking on board positions at the Guggenheim Museum, Performa and Ballroom Marfa, and helping raise the awareness of contributions by other Black artists, introducing the photographer Deana Lawson to Kordansky and curating a show of Sam Gilliam's hard-edge 1960s paintings at that gallery in 2013. This year Johnson's work was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, and his "Anxious Red Painting December 18th" set a new auction record at Christie's for the artist, over \$1.9 million.



Johnson's new series, called "Bruise Paintings," includes, from left, "Body and Soul," "All of Me" and "Honeysuckle Rose" at the David Kordansky Gallery. David Kordansky Gallery; Jeff McLane

The characters in his mosaics may appear to have been roughed up but they are built into an armature that's solid, something the artist likes about the medium. "They've definitely been through something, but those experiences they've had to negotiate are maybe the ones that have left good scars," said Johnson. "The Broken Nine" for the Met were inspired in part by Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein," which he read during quarantine with his family in Bridgehampton, N.Y., and also by the religious figures in Peruvian paintings. "There's a real autonomy in each character. They don't have to be tragic," he said.

Ian Alteveer, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art who led its acquisition of "The Broken Five," a 2019 work on view there, finds the figures wonderfully ambiguous. "They could be stand-ins for the artist himself or witnesses facing the world and the horror of it all," Alteveer said. "They also could be more magical than that — strange new beings on the brink of a brand-new world."

For Johnson's show at Kordansky, titled "Black and Blue," he used Louis Armstrong's song of the same name as a departure point. In a new series called "Bruise Paintings," his motif of the anxious face is now almost completely abstracted, rendered in a frenetic freehand with a palette of blues and repeated across linen in vast grids.



In another room of the gallery, Johnson's weathered cubes cast in bronze are stacked like totems, with blue succulents sprouting from them absurdly like hair. David Kordansky Gallery; Jeff McLane

"It's incredibly musical the way he works," said Kordansky, "like bebop, growing off a template."

In another room of the show, the face returns in three dimensions, now as weathered cubes cast in bronze and stacked like totems, with blue succulents sprouting from them absurdly like hair. Johnson jammed in vinyl copies of Armstrong's "Black and Blue" — a record that the protagonist in Ralph Ellison's novel "Invisible Man" listened to constantly. The artist mottled the surfaces with oyster shells, which he has also used in earlier works as a reference to Zora Neale Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," in which she wrote: "I do not weep at the world — I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife."

"I always found that to be so beautiful, this idea of being liberated to a place of nontragedy, but to expand even beyond that and imagine you have so much agency that you're enjoying this leisure action," Johnson said, referring to oysters' connotations of luxury and sensuality.

These references resurface in a short film on gallery view shot at Johnson's home in Bridgehampton that captures some of the monotonous, surreal, fearful, mundane qualities of quarantine life. The artist plays the main character — waking up, brushing his teeth, watching the talking heads drone on TV, going for a run. His 9-year-old son,



A short film on view at the gallery was shot at Johnson's home in Bridgehampton. It captures some of the monotonous, surreal, fearful and mundane qualities of quarantine life. David Kordansky Gallery; Jeff McLane

Julius, practices "Black and Blue" on the piano and does homework as Johnson reads Toni Morrison's "Song of Solomon." At one point he shucks oysters at the table.

"It's quite rare to see a Black character unencumbered and centralized," said Johnson. "Yet you have to ask yourself, Why does it still feel anxious? This guy's in a house in the Hamptons. Why does it still feel like something is about to happen?" (He directed a film adaptation of Richard Wright's novel "Native Son" in 2019 that ends with the death of his young Black protagonist.)

Katherine Brinson, a curator at the Guggenheim Museum, remembers Johnson once telling her that he enjoyed wondering what Patrice Lumumba, the 20th-century Congolese independence leader, did when he got home and stopped living in the space of public activism.

"Rashid's new work also deals with this foundational idea of how life is lived in the private quotidian sphere, away from the public gaze and the obligations to perform certain expected roles," Brinson said. "It's still a space that's fraught and complex."