



Johnson in his Brooklyn studio lying across his 2010 work *How Ya Like Me Now* a Persian rug with gold embroidery.

Culture

The Anxiety and Ecstasy of Rashid Johnson

Sargent, Antwaun, "The Anxiety and Ecstasy of Rashid Johnson," *GQ.com*, October 3, 2023

Rashid Johnson was a blue-chip artist whose work offered a radically fresh portrayal of Black cultural identity. Then he got sober, found God, and began to transform the art world from the inside.

By Antwaun Sargent
Photography by Samuel Trotter
October 3, 2023

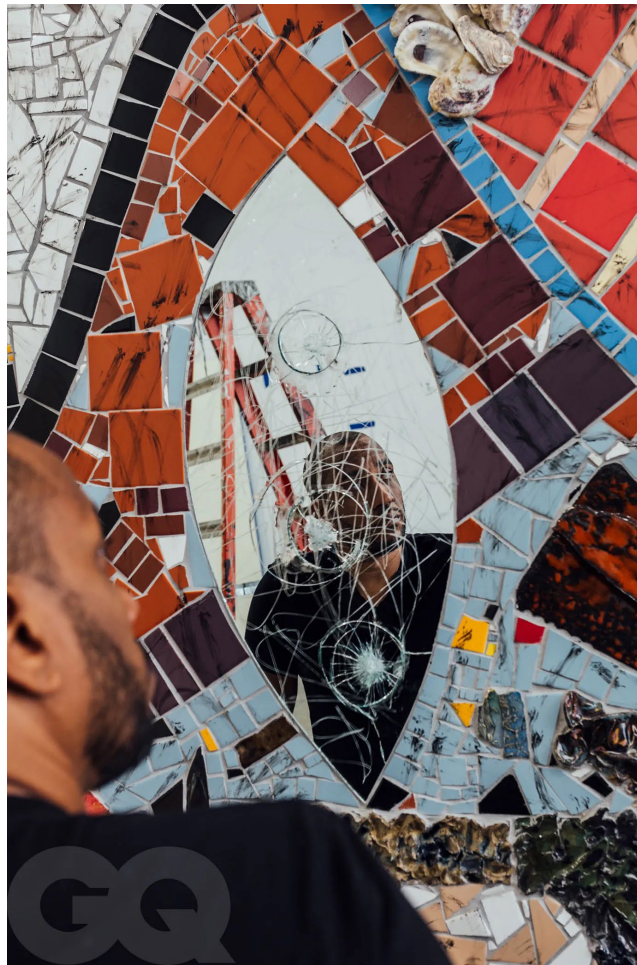
This story was featured in The Must Read, a newsletter in which our editors recommend one can't-miss GQ story every weekday.

One way to measure an artist's success on the island of Manhattan is real estate, and by that metric, among many others, Rashid Johnson has been very successful. On a recent Thursday afternoon, he stood in the sunlit living room of the white 19th-century town house he'd purchased, in 2020, from the late Cars frontman Ric Ocasek and his supermodel wife, Paulina Porizkova, for \$9 million. Directly across the street is the home of the artist couple Rachel Feinstein and John Currin; Oleg Cassini, the Russian Italian fashion designer, once lived a few doors down. Johnson's row house was nestled in the middle of "Block Beautiful," the leafy stretch of East 19th Street, in Gramercy Park, where particularly prosperous writers, musicians, painters, designers, and architects have been flocking for over a century, turning it into a kind of de facto artists colony.

Before moving into the 5,800-square-foot house with his wife, the Iranian-born artist Sheree Hovsepian, and their young son, Julius, Johnson oversaw a gut renovation of the residence, in part to make way for his wide-ranging collection of paintings, sculptures, and photographs. On a wall near the kitchen, I recognized the conceptual artist David Hammons's 2012 *Untitled (Basketball Drawing)*, which he made by repeatedly bouncing a basketball coated in charcoal and dirt on a giant sheet of paper. "Of course," Johnson said when I gestured toward it, as if it would be profane for him not to own work by Hammons, perhaps his most immediate creative forebear.

A casually charismatic presence, Johnson, who turned 46 in September, had recently cut his dreadlocks into a closely cropped fade. He stands six feet three, with a naturally athletic poise—he played soccer and baseball growing up in Chicago, and still works out six days a week, first thing: Pilates, weight lifting, cross-training at Barry's Bootcamp. Recently those sessions have helped him lose 20 pounds. Of his commitment, he said, "I'm deep in the goddamned thing."

Johnson's reputation has grown since he first emerged in New York as a photographer in the early 2000s and proceeded to rapidly evolve into a multidisciplinary artist working across painting, film, sculpture, and now large public installation. "I was talking to Rashid" is a common refrain in the art world, which is to say that



he's also always been in the business of helping others. Such is his influence that at a relatively young age he's already become a kind of elder statesman; watching him move through a party, you can almost glimpse that towering figure from his Chicago childhood: Harold Washington, the city's first Black mayor. As David Breslin, the head curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at The Met, told me of Johnson's rise, he has always "sweated it out in the studio," making his work known in every corner of the art world—galleries, museums, art journals, magazines, private collections. "He's done it in a position of radical awareness of what it means not always to have been an insider," Breslin said. "And now in some ways he is the king."

Johnson led me down the hall. Other influences were present too: He almost blushed as he contemplated a painting of black, white, blue, and green symbols on a flat field of yellow by the Abstract Expressionist Adolph Gottlieb. Known for his pictographs—grid-like paintings containing vaguely Freudian squiggles and shapes—Gottlieb helped Johnson realize what he characterized to me as a kind of epiphany: that through symbols, "a language could be born, and that there was an opportunity to use your artwork as a way to communicate a set of thinking."

Surrounding the Hammons and the Gottlieb, Johnson has placed the works of other artists he admires, both established (Philip Guston, Ellen Gallagher, Isa Genzken) and emerging (photographers Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. and Paul Mpagi

Sepuya). A few of Johnson's own paintings and his wife's artworks were on view as well, along with portraits of the couple by the Los Angeles painter Henry Taylor.

The collection Johnson has assembled was as suggestive as it was impressive. He approached the decorating of his home as if he were a curator intent on contesting the largely white and male story of modern and contemporary art that one would be taught in an art history class. As a result, what you see is a dialogue between some of the leading figures of the last two centuries paired with some forgotten to time and some just starting out. Which is to say, his home reflects the reality of exhibiting art today.

Johnson amassed this collection as he established himself as one of the most multifaceted, influential, and handsomely rewarded artists of his generation. His photographs, paintings, and sculptures are in some of the most august museums in the world—The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the National Gallery of Art. At auction, his works have regularly hammered in the low millions. Recently, one of his Surrender paintings fetched \$3 million at Christie's, making his work among the most expensive by a living Black artist.

"Georg Baselitz over there," Johnson said, moving on with the tour. "A little work on paper. I have a larger Baselitz painting in the house out east," he added offhandedly, reminding me that the collection continued in his newly built home in East Hampton. Then Johnson showed me a small Glenn Ligon work hanging in a nook in his kitchen. Titled *No Room (Gold) #46*, the gold canvas features a single stenciled-in quote lightly paraphrasing a line from Richard Pryor's 1971 concert video, *Live & Smokin'*:

I was a nigger for twenty-three years.

I gave that shit up. No room for

No room for advancement.

I didn't know if I should laugh or cry. The piece was a subtle reminder that Johnson had undeniably *made it*—he had risen through the system to this row house on Block Beautiful and a powerful perch among the art world's most sought-after blue-chip talents. But during the course of his career, he had also never forgotten the unfunny stakes all Black people face in this country—the fact that he, like the rest of us, had been assigned a lower station at birth. Rashid Johnson *gave that shit up*.

Perhaps he has helped other artists in this way because it could have all turned out very differently for him; for most, it does. Not far from Ligon's work was a small painting on paper, *The Beg*, completed in 1963 by one of Johnson's heroes, the mid-century Black figurative painter Bob Thompson. It's a moody scene of great beauty in which a crouching figure reaches out to a nude woman. Spectral

forms lurk in the background—ones that seem to foreshadow Thompson's own death, at the age of 28, from a heroin overdose. As I stood in the kitchen considering the two paintings, I thought of the anxiety coursing through Johnson's work, and was reminded of two of his great themes, ones that speak to the lives of all Black men in America: the need for advancement and a constant desire to outpace one's demons.



Johnson in front of *Untitled God Painting* (2023), a work on display this fall in an exhibition at Stockholm's Moderna Museet.

Eighteen years after Johnson left Chicago for New York, his hometown continues to exert a strong pull on his imagination. When the Cubs won the World Series in 2016, he went to all seven games. "Chicago really has so much of my heart," he told me. "I learned lessons that were incredibly rewarding there, and I learned things that I wish I hadn't fucking learned." He was raised between the city's working-class Wicker Park neighborhood, near where his father, a Vietnam veteran, ran an electronics business, and the suburb of Evanston, where his mother was a history professor at Northwestern. It was from his parents that he inherited his interest in art and literature: His mother is a poet, his father an artist. "My mother would tell me, 'It's not only what a poem reads like, it's what it looks like,'" Johnson recalled. "So I've always thought a lot about the idea of how things looked. How is it composed? What is it made up of? And how is it received visually?"

As a teenager he was more interested in graffiti than in school. It was through his father's work that he developed a serious interest in photography. "We didn't live in a huge house," said Johnson. "My father stored his photographs from Vietnam in my bedroom in the top of my closet. I remember coming and taking them out, and I would go through them and just look at them. It wasn't the tragedy of the experience. It was more the camaraderie, the landscape, where he was; it was really a kind of storytelling. I'd see a lot of palm trees."

As he told me this, Johnson pointed at the walnut table we were sitting at in his home's great room. He'd built it himself, and there was a palm tree motif impressed into the wood. "I've used them all throughout my project," he told me. He employs the motif in painting and installations as a way to consider notions of home, escape, and foreignness.

His parents' devotion to the arts led him to study a range of visual arts at Columbia College Chicago—film, photography, painting, and sculpture. "I came to art with a real investment in it as a tool for the amplification of one's thinking, voice, vision," Johnson recalled. Early in his time there, he met one of the school's most revered professors, McArthur Binion, an abstract painter, who regaled the young student with stories about the New York art world, in particular his encounters with Jean-Michel Basquiat and Brice Marden. "I was just totally blown away by it," Johnson said.

Even while still in college, Johnson was eager to establish himself in the Chicago art scene, and once showed up unannounced at a nearby gallery he heard was having a group show, with a portfolio of images he had made. "I had gotten so many positive responses in school," Johnson said. "I was 19." As he recalled, the gallery owner, Martha Schneider, "looks at the portfolio and she's like, 'These are really good.' And I'm like, 'Thank you.' And she's like, 'Can you get these framed and we'll do a show in three weeks?'"

Schneider helped him find a local art framer, and before he turned 20, he had his first solo show. On display was a passel of photographs from his *Seeing in the Dark* series (1998–1999), richly layered portraits of homeless Black men who lived near his downtown Chicago studio made with 19th-century techniques, including gelatin silver and the Van Dyke Brown printing process. The series also included photo-grams—images made by placing objects on light-sensitive paper—that incorporated symbolic elements like black-eyed peas and chicken bones. It was his way of exploring ideas about Black identity, heritage, and displacement.

"I remember being on my bed when I got the phone call from Martha Schneider, and she was like, 'The Art Institute of Chicago bought two photographs!' And I remember I stood up on the bed and I thought to myself, *This is it! This is it! This is the thing that I wanted,*" the artist recalled. "The Art Institute had been my museum," added Johnson, who visited as a kid on class field trips and would later earn an MFA from the museum's art school in 2005.

A year later, he was showing with the Black-owned Chicago gallery G.R. N'Nam-

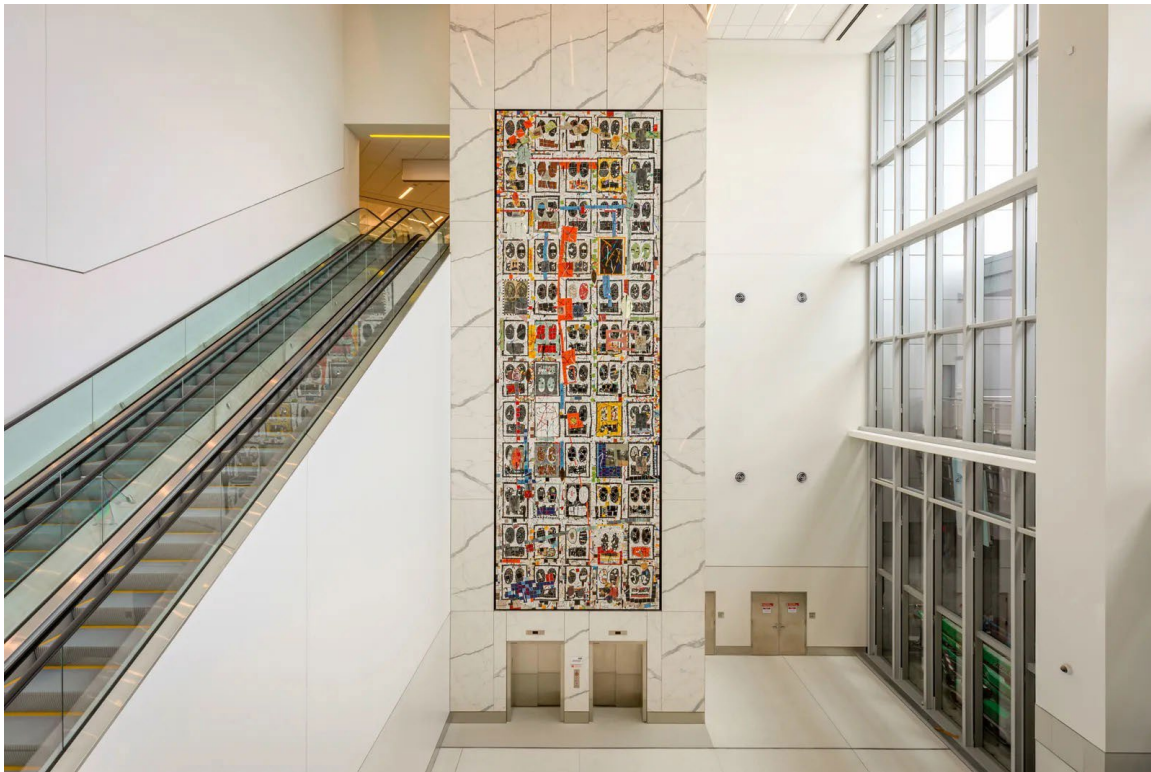


Johnson's large-scale mosaic installation for the Metropolitan Opera, in Manhattan. Tom Powel Imaging/Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth © Rashid Johnson.

di when the series caught the attention of Thelma Golden, the director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, and her then curatorial assistant Christine Y. Kim. They put three of Johnson's Van Dyke photo-emulsion prints of a homeless Black man in the museum's landmark 2001 group exhibition "Free-style." The show proved to be a seminal moment. Like so many other American cultural realms, the art world had largely practiced a wholesale refusal to develop, promote, and value the careers of Black artists, writers, curators, and gallerists. Now the long march to reset the possibilities of Black art—first set in motion during the Harlem Renaissance in the '20s and the Black Arts Movement of the late '60s—was finally beginning to accelerate.

Johnson, who at 22 was the youngest artist in the show, recalled, "I was like a bumpkin. I was like the only person who wasn't living either in LA or New York. All these folks had been to graduate school." He felt a world away from their sophistication, later adding, "I was a kid!" At the opening of the exhibition, Nancy Lane, the late patron of the arts who served on the museum's board, asked if she could buy a couple of photographs—and offered to pay in cash. "I go into this room with Nancy, and I come out and everyone's like, 'Why is he going in the room with Nancy?' I come out and I've got six or seven thousand in my pocket. And I'm like, This is crazy."

Johnson was part of a new generation of Black artists who vaulted from obscurity to stardom after the show, including Julie Mehretu, Sanford Biggers, and Mark Bradford. As Golden wrote in the exhibition's catalog, artists such as Kara Walker, Glenn Ligon, Kerry James Marshall, and Carrie Mae Weems had "reinvented the debate on culture and identity in contemporary art" in the '90s. Now emerging figures like Johnson represented a "new optimism" for the new millennium. Less burdened by the identity politics of the prior decade, they were, she wrote, "post-Basquiat and post-Biggie." They were also, according to Golden and Ligon, "post-Black," a shorthand for Black artists who were done having their identities stereotyped and sold back to them. These artists operated with a new level of improvisation and were committed to defining—and constantly redefining—Blackness on their own terms.



Johnson's large-scale mosaic installation for the new Delta terminal at LaGuardia Airport. Vu Tran/Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, Commissioned by Delta Air Lines © Rashid Johnson.

On the walnut built-in shelves of Johnson's Gramercy living room is nearly every issue of *October*, the art journal, and a smattering of fiction, including the novels of Colson Whitehead, who's become a friend. "His wife reached out when he won his second Pulitzer, saying that Colson was a fan of my work, and she wanted to buy him a print of mine as a gift," Johnson told me. "And so from that exchange Colson and I met and became friendly." It's a reminder of the ideal tier of fame Johnson embodies: He can move with relative anonymity through the streets of Manhattan, yet is also courted by some of its most powerful cultural figures.

He moved to New York in 2005, on the heels of the successful Studio Museum

show, and rented a tiny one-bedroom apartment on the Lower East Side. Soon he embraced painting, sculpture, and assemblage as his primary modes of art making, and began to investigate his own identity through portraits of himself and others cosplaying as Black icons, from the abolitionist Frederick Douglass to the Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall. He made text paintings with direct warnings like *Run* (2008) and a digital print that announces in a lurid pink substance: "I Talk White." He created pyramid-like shrines in installations such as 2010's *A Place for Black Moses*, presenting a chantry with various offerings: plants, books, black soap, vinyl records, and a gold-leaf-covered space rock.

In 2007, Johnson began making his Cosmic Slops series, using an amalgam of black soap and microcrystalline wax reliefs, and would continue to use black soap in his work for years: in his altar *Triple Consciousness* (2009), the mirror *The Moment of Creation* (2011), and *Untitled Microphone Sculpture* (2018), which together established him as a kind of virtuoso of Black beauty products. (Shea butter is also commonly found in his work.) The soap's aroma is a way to evoke Black collective memory; take it in and you can almost see Harlem's 125th Street, its various vendors selling wares of the African diaspora from card tables as a kind of race pride.

In 2011, Johnson reached a new level of stature when he signed with the mega-gallery Hauser & Wirth, making him one of the few Black artists with major gallery support. (I work as a director at Gagosian, a role in which I have sought Johnson's advice and received his unsolicited pitches for artists he thinks might work for the gallery's program.) "We had been following his work for some time," Iwan Wirth, one of the owners, told me. "We immediately recognized an incredibly erudite practice and a highly original thinker. Rashid is a perpetual innovator—the work is constantly evolving."

In 2016, Johnson and I walked through Hauser & Wirth's old Manhattan location, in Chelsea, where he presented the monumental *Antoine's Organ* (2016), a 20-foot-tall gridded installation overflowing with lush flora, books, shea butter sculptures, small televisions looping the artist's older video works, and hand-crafted pottery from which succulents and palms bloomed. At the core of the social sculpture was an upright piano played sporadically by the pianist Antoine Baldwin. It was a remarkable synthesizing of the personal and art historical with wider cultural references encompassing voices from literature, music, and critical theory.

More recently Johnson has become a chronicler of the angst that accompanies being a Black man in America. In the fall of 2015, at the Drawing Center, in Manhattan, he debuted his Anxious Men paintings, works of abstract, distressed faces that grew out of the anxiety he felt that summer as he watched CNN's coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement. More recently, at the Metropolitan Opera, in 2021, Johnson presented *The Chorus*, an exhibition of two giant mosaics made of broken tile, mirrors, and oyster shells, each featuring nine haunted figures that were inspired, he said, by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. And if you travel through Delta's new terminal at the renovated LaGuardia Airport, the artist's 45-foot-tall



Johnson uses black soap in his works to evoke certain standards of Black beauty.



One of his *Anxious Men* paintings, hanging in his Brooklyn studio.

wall of 60 ceramic faces, *The Travelers*, is there to greet you. These are works of angst and joy, alienation and unity; they remind us, as we pass through these iconic public spaces, that we are at least alone together.

Johnson's creative ambitions have also gone beyond the art world. In 2018, he directed his debut feature film, an adaptation of Richard Wright's 1940 novel, *Native Son*, that recasts 20-year-old Bigger Thomas as a young Black punk living in utter poverty on Chicago's North Side. For the screenplay he enlisted his friend Suzan-Lori Parks, the Pulitzer-winning playwright. "We didn't want to reinvent the wheel, but roll the wheel forward," she told me. "This is where my intellectual curiosity comes to pique, in these spaces," Johnson said. "I'm giving myself an opportunity to have a voice with these historical notes. I mean, it's like inviting myself to a party in some respect."

Beyond Johnson's own creations lies another project that he's constantly shaping—the art world itself. As his stature has grown, he's begun to wield his influence in magnanimous ways that are transforming the careers of artists, long forgotten and emerging, and reorienting the principles and priorities of some of the art world's most powerful institutions. In 2016, he became the first artist to serve on the board of the Guggenheim Museum; he also serves on the board of Performa, the downtown Manhattan performance-art organization known for its biennial. The Guggenheim's deputy director and chief curator, Naomi Beckwith, thinks he may have taken on these institutional leadership roles because

he comes from a tradition in Chicago of "Black assembly," a world that emphasizes the need to do good work for an entire group, not just for yourself. "Rashid is always looking for solutions," Beckwith told me. "He's in the studio every day trying to figure out what is the form that gives my ideas the best shape. We can all point to the problems, the lack, the misgivings, but he is always trying to find a way in which he can get resources or a person or an exhibition together that will solve for that lack or that lapse."

Johnson is so eager to help artists that he often pitches emerging talents to both Hauser & Wirth and his other gallery, David Kordansky, in Los Angeles. Johnson also refers artists he admires to collectors like LeBron James, Jay-Z, and pretty much whoever else will listen. "I got hit with the bug," the sports superagent Rich Paul told me. "It all started with Rashid." Paul met Johnson through Maverick Carter, the sports--marketing businessman, and has since purchased eight of Johnson's paintings, in addition to works by Lauren Halsey, Derrick Adams, and Amoako Bofo. Now Paul considers himself a kind of art ambassador. He often posts images from his collection on Instagram to show his half-million followers and tells the players he represents about the importance of collecting art. He recently even joined the board of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. "I'm pissed that I didn't get into it earlier," he admitted. "I'll tell you one thing, I would've bought a lot less cars and jewelry."

Angel Otero, an abstract painter and longtime friend, joined Hauser & Wirth last year after Johnson endorsed his work. "I always felt he really believed in me a lot, believed in my opinion and my vision as an artist," Otero explained. "I'm like, Yo, Rashid, this is how I see our friendship, man. I always have felt that you're crossing this river and the river's the art world and sometimes it's calm, sometimes it's wild, and you're seeing which stone to step on until you can hopefully cross to the other side. I'm sometimes far, sometimes I get a little closer, but I'm watching you. Sometimes I cannot step on the same stone as you did, dude, but at least I'm aware that there's a stone there. Depending on how the water is, up or down, I might be able to touch it. If not, I need to find my own. But just knowing that you crossed it gives me a lot of hope and confidence."

There are scores of late Black artists who were all but discarded by the art world during their lifetimes—the figurative painter Bob Thompson, the Abstract Expressionist Ed Clark, and color-field painter Sam Gilliam among them—whose reputations Johnson has now helped to resurrect. He's always been driven by the belief that the innovations of the artists who came before him is his cultural inheritance; recently he and fellow artists Julie Mehretu, Adam Pendleton, and Ellen Gallagher helped organize a campaign to save Nina Simone's childhood home. Long before he had the standing to push the art world to be more open, he made tributes to his heroes, many of whom died before garnering the recognition they deserved. In *Self-Portrait in Homage to Barkley Hendricks* (2005), he posed fully nude except for a pair of sunglasses, a gold chain, several bracelets, white socks, and a matching cap, to recreate Hendricks's winking self-portrait *Brilliantly Endowed* (1977). It's a sexually frank celebration of an artist he revered long before Hendricks was regularly being referred to as one of the great portrait

“Rashid sees himself as responsible for creating a discourse with a younger artist. He has always wanted to make space for influence and the future.”
David Breslin

painters of the 20th century. This fall, Hendricks will become the first artist of color to have a solo show at the Frick Collection, in Manhattan (an exhibition I am co-curating). In a forthcoming book accompanying the show, Johnson tells the story behind his homage: “I wrote to him to ask for permission but didn’t get a response until three years later! He wrote to say, ‘Oh I loved your photograph, absolutely, I’m so happy you made it.’”

David Breslin emphasizes Johnson’s appreciation for the sweep of art history and his place in it. “He, as both a confident artist and a generous one, sees himself as a link in the chain and not necessarily the whole chain himself,” Breslin told me. “He sees himself as responsible for creating a discourse with a younger artist. I always admired that about him. He wants and always has wanted to make space for influence and the future.”



On a late summer afternoon, the light fell across a large-scale private commission Johnson was working on in his sprawling Bushwick studio. He stood to the right of the piece, a 15-foot ceramic reinterpretation of Andy Warhol's biggest Last Supper painting, itself a Pop revision of the Leonardo da Vinci masterwork. The themes of the piece are obviously grim—betrayal, death—but the mood of the music he's been working to is decidedly more buoyant: jazz and bebop, Frank Zappa and the Grateful Dead. And, lately, a lot of Luther Vandross and Anita Baker. "I'm in love with love songs," he told me. "In particular, a genre and generation I consider to be the Blackest music on the planet: early-to-mid-'80s R&B. This is the only music that I feel a white audience never adopted. Like, this is true Negro music."

In the studio's front room, which has the white walls of a gallery, there were some completed works he'd kept back from the art market, and a few half-finished canvases he's readying for his upcoming exhibition. "Seven Rooms and a Garden," which opens in September at Stockholm's Moderna Museet, puts Johnson's paintings and sculptures in conversation with works by other artists in his collection and the museum's: Stanley Whitney, Rubem Valentim, David Hammons, Sol LeWitt. "There is a whole art-historical universe just in his practice alone," the show's curator, Hendrik Folkerts, told me over Zoom. Johnson, he said, describes this back-and-forth between his work and that of other artists as "occupying art history."

In the southwest corner of the gallery, Johnson installed a chair sculpture with a speaker that serenades the room with Louis Armstrong's "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue," a nod to the way modernism reflects jazz's sense of improvisation and rhythm. "This is how Blackness enters the discourse of modern art!" Johnson said. He also mounted a work from the beginning of his career: a 2001 Van Dyke print into which he had politely carved, through the brown surface into the white underlayer, five lowercase letters: *n e g r o*. It was a condemnation of the racist history of the art world, and of America. It was also the notice of his arrival and ascent.

"I closed my eyes and was looking up at the sun. It was a warm day. I saw this red behind my eyes and I said to myself, This is incredibly simple. I'm going to call that thing God."

Johnson created several new works for the exhibition, including an abstraction he's calling *Untitled God Painting* (2023). When I visited his Bushwick studio, the work was in progress. Johnson had gotten sober nearly nine years previously, and now he was trying to capture that transformation on the canvas. He had already dropped hints by putting AA literature in some installations, and arranging others with chair sculptures, as though an AA meeting were about to take place.

And why was it important for folks to know about your struggle with addiction?

"I'm not completely positive that it's important that they know it necessarily," he said with a note of uncertainty. "I think that it's important that I don't pretend that it's not part of my story." Later, he recalled that his AA coach had told him to "find a higher power."

"I was like, Okay, well, what the hell, and how the hell do I even begin the process of figuring out what this is?" He hadn't been raised in a devout household: His father was evangelical in his atheism, Johnson said, while his mother was vaguely spiritual without a religious location. "I hadn't grown up with this idea of God or what have you, so I figured I would just buy in." He explained, "I happened to be outside one day laying with my family. I closed my eyes and I was looking up at the sun. It was a warm day. I saw this red behind my eyes and I said to myself, This is incredibly simple: I'm going to call that thing God."

On the linen canvas before us, he'd repeatedly carved an almond shape with a brush and a palette knife into the thick coats of red oil paint layered on the surface. The shape was a play on the vesica piscis—the intersection between two overlapping circles. The space, he explained, was an expression of liminality. It was also a nod to the reverence he holds for the things he cannot explain but feels inside himself. What he was trying to conjure, I believe, is a simple idea that can be challenging to visually articulate: rebirth.

In the middle of the Stockholm show, in the *Witness* room, Johnson is presenting a new set of blue Bruise Paintings. They will be positioned across from Louise Bourgeois's *Janus Fleuri* (1968), a bronze sculpture of the two-faced god, looking backward and forward, hanging above a small triangular blue stage. This setup, Johnson said, is about the confrontation between being witnessed and being seen, a central motif in his oeuvre. For Folkerts, the interplay between the Bourgeois sculpture and Johnson's work strikes a poetic note about how he continues to look "forward and backward at the same time within this huge history of artists that he feels related to, and that he has incorporated and integrated in his own thinking."

A similar scene plays out in Johnson's own living room. There is a corresponding polished-aluminum sculpture, twisted like a cocoon, created by Bourgeois in 2004. Suspended from the 20-foot-high wood ceiling Johnson salvaged from a 17th-century palazzo in southern Italy, it hangs across from Simone Leigh's *Sentinel IV (Gold)* (2021), a bronze-wrapped-in-gold-leaf sculpture of a slender woman with elongated proportions that soars some 11 feet into the air. This arrangement represents an exceptional exchange between two women sculptors who have bent common metals into a commentary on spirituality, femininity, and power.

The day of my visit, both works were glittering in the late-afternoon light. Complicating this scene, however, was a large black cyclops outside peeking through the living room's huge windows. Striking a contrapposto stance on a pedestal, the

Sargent, Antwaun, "The Anxiety and Ecstasy of Rashid Johnson," *GQ.com*, October 3, 2023

sculpture, by Thomas Houseago, was casting a shadow over a team of gardeners busily readying the green space for summer. I looked at Johnson and recalled the Pryor quote. *Nigger, twenty-three years...Gave that shit up. No room for, no room for advancement.*

Johnson and I had our last conversation while he was working in his new studio, in East Hampton—an austere white space in a cedar-shingle house on the town's main drag. Toward the end of our time together, I asked him how he finds the energy to reach out to so many galleries, museums, and would-be collectors on behalf of other artists. Wearing a black V-neck from which a gold rope chain was visible, he answered me as he painted, moving a red oil stick across a 60-inch canvas—the last in his *Anxious Men* series.

"I come by this quite honestly," he said. "My mother's a historian. I feel like my work is best suited when it's contextualized. That way you can best understand the kind of conditions and concerns and obstacles and opportunities that my work provides." Johnson told me he's always been "interested in what happened before." He likes the context offered by the bigger picture. But he's also fascinated by another question: "What happens *now*?"

Antwaun Sargent is a New York-based writer, curator, and director at *Gagosian*.

A version of this story originally appeared in the October 2023 issue of GQ with the title "The Anxiety and Ecstasy of Rashid Johnson"