

## Reviews

### FOCUS

- 302 Huey Copeland on **Rashid Johnson**  
304 Jack Bankowsky on **Damien Hirst**  
306 Jakob Schillinger on the **7th Berlin Biennale**  
308 Hannah Feldman on **"This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s"**  
310 Isabelle Graw on **Ellsworth Kelly**  
311 Jordan Kantor on **Rineke Dijkstra**

### NEW YORK

- 312 David Frankel on **Paul Graham**  
David Rimaneli on **Jacqueline Humphries**  
313 Robert Pincus-Witten on **Robert Overby**  
Jeffrey Kastner on **Tom Burr**  
314 Suzanne Hudson on **Albert Oehlen**  
315 Lloyd Wise on **Enrico David**  
Barry Schwabsky on **Moyra Davey**  
316 Johanna Burton on **Harry Dodge**  
Frances Richard on **Alex Bag and Patterson Beckwith**  
317 Donald Kuspit on **Peter Saul**  
318 Ida Panicelli on **Max Gimblett**  
Emily Hall on **Mamiko Otsubo**  
319 Lauren O'Neill-Butler on **Beryl Korot**  
Eva Díaz on **"Notations: The Cage Effect Today"**  
320 Michael Wilson on **Seth Kim-Cohen**

### WELLESLEY, MA

- 321 Francine Koslow Miller on **Radcliffe Bailey**

### SAINT LOUIS

- Ivy Cooper on **"In the Still Epiphany"**

### CHICAGO

- 322 Michelle Grabner on **"In the Spirit of Walsler: Rosemarie Trockel"**

### HOUSTON

- Jennifer King on **John Waters**

### SAN FRANCISCO

- 323 Lisa Turvey on **Nina Katchadourian**

### LOS ANGELES

- 324 Jan Tumlir on **Delia Brown**  
Ben Carlson on **Alex Hubbard**  
325 Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer on **Phil Chang**  
326 Travis Diehl on **Jeanette Mundt**

### LONDON

- Zehra Jumabhoy on **Zarina Bhimji**  
327 Jo Applin on **Hanne Darboven**  
328 Gilda Williams on **Sarah Lucas**

### NEWCASTLE, UK

- Lauren Dyer Amazeen on **Torsten Lauschmann**

### LIMERICK, IRELAND

- 329 Declan Long on **Allan Hughes**

### PARIS

- Lillian Davies on **Bayrol Jimenez**

### BERLIN

- 330 John Beeson on **"Querelle—Photographed by Roger Fritz"**  
331 Astrid Mania on **Brian O'Doherty**

### DÜSSELDORF

- Noemi Smolik on **Vera Lossau**

### ZÜRICH

- 332 Quinn Latimer on **Jonathan Binet, Lydia Gifford, and David Ostrowski**

### GENEVA

- 333 Yann Chateigné Tytelman on **Pierre Vadi**

### MILAN

- 334 Giorgio Verzotti on **Michael Filiri and Asta Gröting**  
Alessandra Pioselli on **Alessandro Roma**

### SALZBURG, AUSTRIA

- 335 Astrid Wege on **Anna Jermolaewa**

### AMSTERDAM

- Hans den Hartog Jager on **Steve McQueen**

### LUND, SWEDEN

- 336 Ronald Jones on **Miriam Bäckström**

### MADRID

- 337 Javier Hontoria on **Paloma Polo**

### BARCELONA

- Martí Peran on **Peter Piller**

### BEIJING

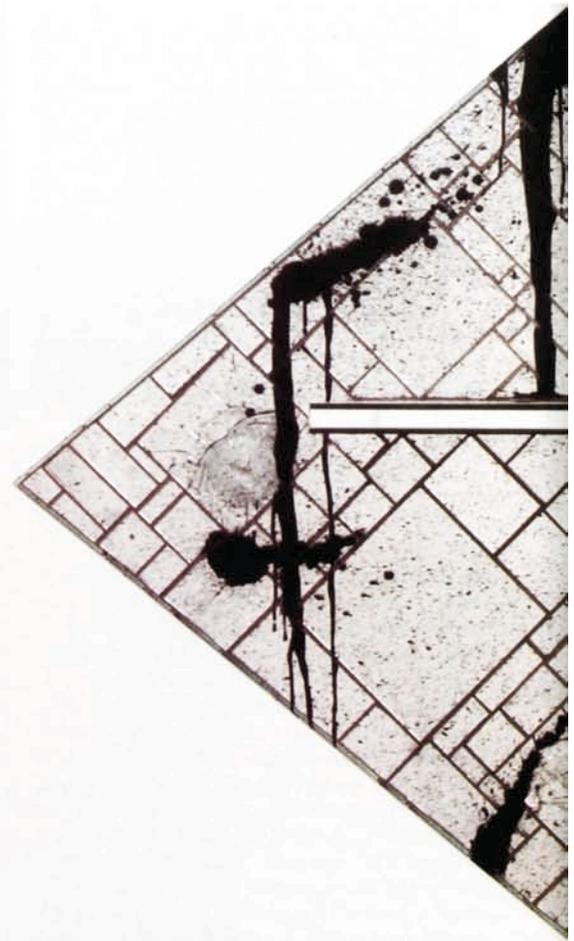
- 338 Lee Ambrozy on **Sui Jianguo**

### TOKYO

- Shinyoung Chung on **Akira Yamaguchi**

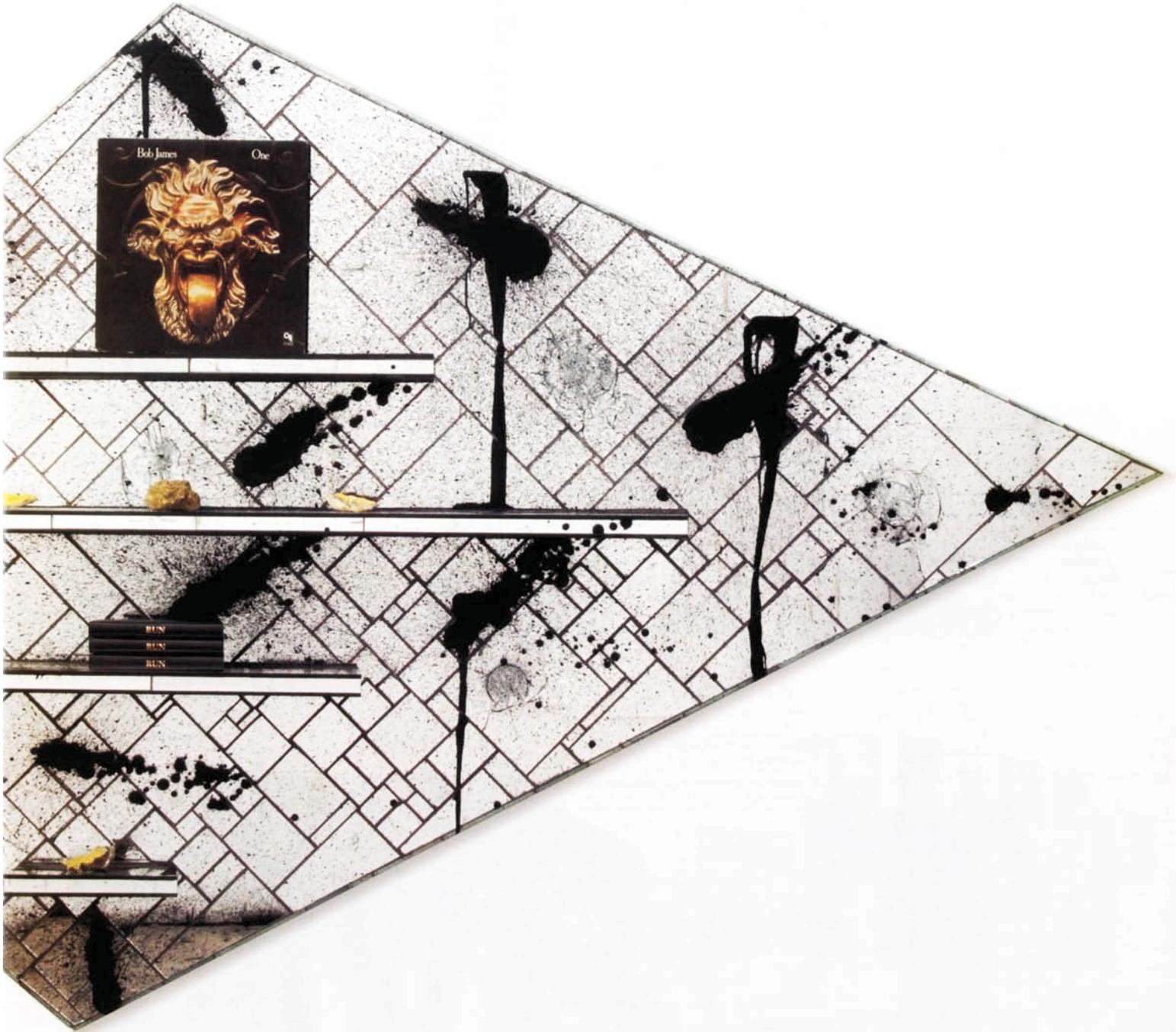
### DOHA, QATAR

- 339 Shinyoung Chung on **Takashi Murakami**



Rashid Johnson, *Watch This*, 2012.  
mirrored tile, black soap, wax, vinyl in album cover, books, shea butter, oyster shells, space rocks, spray enamel, 61 x 96½ x 12".

Copeland, Huey, "Reviews: Rashid Johnson, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago," *Artforum*, Summer 2012, pp. 300-303



## Rashid Johnson

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, CHICAGO  
Huey Copeland

IN THE PAST YEAR, Rashid Johnson has received both high honors and the occasional low blow from various quarters of the art world for his wildly referential, formally promiscuous, and increasingly slick conceptual practice. His current exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, "Message to Our Folks"—titled after the 1969 Art Ensemble of Chicago album and curated by Julie Rodrigues Widholm—thus offers a prime opportunity to consider the contradictory logics undergirding the artworks that have led one critic to dismiss his practice as symptomatic of a generational penchant for "rehashing received ideas about ideas," and others to breathlessly hail him as "the prince of post-black."

As that moniker recalls, Johnson first came to national attention at the age of twenty-three thanks to his inclusion in the Thelma Golden's landmark 2001 Studio Museum in Harlem exhibition, "Freestyle," which introduced the notion of post-blackness as a way of emphasizing the unfettered range of black artistic and identitarian constructions in the aftermath of multiculturalism's discursive collapse. Johnson was represented in the show's catalogue by *Jonathan's Hands*, 1998, a photograph of one of the homeless men he encountered in downtown Chicago while an undergraduate at Columbia College. Produced

using the laborious nineteenth-century Van Dyke printing process, the work nevertheless refuses to picture Jonathan's face, echoing the Conceptualist critique of documentary photography that emerged in the 1970s.

Johnson frequently turned to video, sculpture, and installation in the intervening decade, but he has continued to rely on large-format photography to produce temporal cross-wiring in his work, perhaps nowhere more infamously than in his *Self-Portrait in Homage to Barkley Hendricks*, 2005. This piece and *Jonathan's Hands* are curiously absent from the present exhibition, yet they serve as touchstones for his art's tacking between historicization and self-fashioning, particularly as modeled by the images arrayed salon style in the second of four galleries devoted to his practice at the MCA. In these photographs, Johnson pictures himself and others in guises that vivify the modes of imaging and the economies of desire engendered by the construction of black masculinity in the United States, from *Self-Portrait Laying on Jack Johnson's Grave*, 2006, to *Sarah with Space Rock*, 2009, which depicts a nude blond woman holding the eponymous object while seated in the sort of wicker chair made famous by Huey Newton.

While these works refer, respectively, to the tragic fate of the African-American pugilist of the early twentieth century and to Black Panther imagery of the 1960s, about half of the pictures on view derive from Johnson's series "The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club," 2008–, and depict black men in suits whose images are variously doubled, shrouded in smoke, or multiply exposed. Many of these photographs are accompanied by parenthetical subtitles that evoke well-known historical figures—(*Emmett*), for instance, leads to "Till"—much as the hairstyling of several sitters recalls the coiffure of slave narrator Frederick Douglass, and the title of the project as a whole looks back to the New Negro movement of the 1920s. Taken together, these images fantasize an imagined space outside history where black men and those who love

them might congregate, a collective realm that remains fugitive today both despite and because of the civil rights movement's success in opening up spaces of autonomy for middle-class African Americans.

Indeed, the exhibition's black or mirrored sculptural tableaux, which dominate the third gallery, look, at first glance, like mementos of that transitional moment. Yet they summon the clichés of 1970s rec-room decor only to trouble them through the obsessive accumulation of recently published books, such as *Death by Black Hole* (2007), and through the assemblages' carefully aestheticized facture, which emphatically reads as "contemporary art." *Triple Consciousness*, 2009, offers a case in point: While the items showcased on the work's shelves are

**Johnson's works consistently gesture elsewhere for their charge—call it an aesthetics of misdirection.**

straightforward enough—three copies of Al Green's *Greatest Hits* (1975), a couple offerings of shea butter, some brass knickknacks, and a houseplant for that added domestic touch—these materials are mounted on an irregular octagon whose vaguely repellent surface of wax, black soap, and gold spray paint is as alien as the work's overall form and its titular reference to W. E. B. DuBois are uncannily familiar. Like many of Johnson's tableaux, *Triple Consciousness* invites comparison to a range of practices, from Mexican *ofrendas* to the sculptures of Carol Bove and the Black Paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, thereby "envisioning and prototyping," to quote exhibition-catalogue essayist Ian Bourland, "relics from an alternate future" in which all of those terms belong to one another.

These conjoinings make a certain sense given Johnson's interest in, as he once put it, "spelunking the death of identity," and in light of his own emblematically post-black biography. Born in 1977, Johnson came of age in the 1990s, when the consistency of blackness seemed to



be fraying at all ends even as racialized stereotypes continued to subtend cultural discourse, albeit often in euphemistic terms. So framed, Johnson's work can be interpreted as remixing a host of citations in order to provide what Sun Ra, another of his interstellar inspirations, might call an "alter destiny," a fresh set of possibilities for the modern-day Negro intellectual that derive from historical subjects who ostensibly had a surer grasp on their own sociopolitical coordinates.

This approach only begins to account for the ambitions behind his art's multivalent play of recurring references. Consider *How Ya Like Me Now*, 2010, which is given pride of place in the exhibition's comparatively jam-packed and materially inclusive final gallery. The sculpture features shea butter shaped into balls and then scattered across a Persian rug, which Johnson embroidered in gold with crosshairs not unlike those associated with the rap group Public Enemy, a motif the artist also branded onto the red oak floor that opens the exhibition and made into the large-scale sculpture that clinches its third room. The title of *How Ya Like Me Now* gives some measure of belated coherence to the work's motley array of signifiers by pointing straight to the trickster art of David Hammons, though, paradoxically, the form of Johnson's sculpture recalls not the older artist's 1988 blue-eyed Jesse Jackson painting of the same name, but elements of two other Hammons pieces: *Flying Carpet*, 1990, a Persian rug covered in chicken wings, and *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 1983, for which the artist hawked snowballs on a New York street corner.

In its apparent bid to conflate and so outstrip these earlier works, Johnson's effort falls short of Hammons's funky cuts into the signified, appearing comparatively unmotivated and inert—which is partly the point. If, as Frantz Fanon has taught us, blackness functions through a rampant metonymy that leads from black skin to "tom-toms, cannibalism," and "'Sho' good eatin'," then *How Ya Like Me Now* both accedes to and anticipates the protocols of racialized reading, holding out a host of "colored"

traces that lead not to the body of the other but merely to the objects themselves, whose competing metaphors of blackness effectively short-circuit one another and whose formal engagement with Hammons's precedents renders them haunted surrogates.

Such domestication, however, hardly satisfies as the raison d'être of Johnson's oeuvre. In its unique range of combinatory modes, his practice possesses neither the clear permutational logic of, say, Edgar Arceneaux's exhibitions and drawings nor the ludic willfulness modeled by the sculptures of Rachel Harrison. Instead, Johnson's works differently negotiate the ways in which meaning, racial and otherwise, is now generated by specific visual phenomena that consistently gesture elsewhere for their charge—call it an aesthetics of misdirection. This dependence and divergence emerge most forcefully when both tendencies are tracked across Johnson's oeuvre, but they also come into focus within individual pieces. For example, in *Sweet Sweet Runner*, 2010, a middle-aged black man makes his way through New York's Central Park while the main theme to Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) plays in the background, registering the distance, however tenuous, that separates the video's bespectacled jogger from the film's fugitive hustler.

The ability of this work to read as humorous, innovative, or contradictory through its concatenation of pop-cultural reference and conceptual strategem is, of course, inextricable from the viewer's knowledge and subject position. Cast in this light, Johnson's work can be said to index the schizophrenic attitudes toward race that have come to characterize the era of post-blackness, which marks not so much an emergent racial paradigm as it freshly reveals the radical simultaneity of both "new" and "old" structures of racialization, whose varying effects include the election of President Obama and the murder of Trayvon Martin. As suggested by the cast of historical actors name-checked in his art, Johnson explores what Michelle M. Wright has called the "physics of blackness,"

which demands a reckoning with the relativity of temporal markers and puts pressure both on past periodizations of social progress and on each viewer's cultural assumptions.

Small wonder, then, that mirrors—tiled, shattered, spray-painted, sometimes all at once—appear regularly within the exhibition's arenas of reference and occlusion: At their best, Johnson's objects pose themselves as problems, in the etymological sense of "things thrown or put forward," that ask us to renegotiate our own affective positions before the work and within the world at large, much as the artist himself does. This is one reason why the exhibition's omission of works such as the John McCracken-inflected Plexiglas *Pink Lotion Box*, 2004–10, and the video mash-up *Untitled Boogie Down Baptist B-Boy Beathouse Crew*, 2001, is keenly felt. Although such projects may be less "nuanced and abstract" when considered alongside Johnson's other output, as Rodrigues Widholm implies in her catalogue essay, they serve to emphasize the ways in which his art contingently stages the problem of being within contemporary culture.

For its part, the MCA exhibition holds out a beautifully hung if slightly repetitive selection that highlights what are quickly becoming Johnson's signature forms and materials: photographs, shea butter, black wax tableaux, and the like. While this curatorial strategy lends his oeuvre visual coherence, it also risks confirming the critical and hagiographic simplifications that his work attempts to dismantle. For Johnson's parallax practice is most bracing when it conceptually reconfigures space-time through aesthetic means that, in coming together and falling apart, deliver on the promised freedoms of the present without losing sight of the productive constraints of the past. □

"Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks" is on view through Aug. 5; travels to the Miami Art Museum, Sept. 6–Nov. 18; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, June–Sept. 2013.

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Opposite page, from left: View of "Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks," 2012. Photo: Nathan Keay. Rashid Johnson, *Triple Consciousness*, 2009, black soap, wax, record albums, shea butter, plant, brass, 48 x 96 x 8". This page, from left: View of "Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks," 2012. Foreground: *How Ya Like Me Now*, 2010. Background, from left: *The Moment of Creation*, 2011; *Death by Black Hole "The Crisis"*, 2010. Photo: Nathan Keay. Rashid Johnson, *Sweet Sweet Runner*, 2010, still from a color film in 16 mm, 3 minutes 19 seconds. Rashid Johnson, *Sarah with Space Rock*, 2009, black-and-white photograph, 40 1/4 x 32 1/4".

