

Stackhouse, Christopher, "Rashid Johnson: In the Studio with Christopher Stackhouse," *Art in America*, April 2012, pp. 106-113



RASHID JOHNSON

IN THE STUDIO WITH CHRISTOPHER STACKHOUSE

RASHID JOHNSON'S ARTWORKS are meditations on the cultural phenomena that shape African-Americans as a social group. Viewers of his videos, photographs, sculptures, paintings and installations are looking at deft presentations of slippery conceptual surfaces. However, abstract form is equally significant to the artist and guides his process. Craftsmanship, autobiography, design, theater, ambience and historical scholarship are always evident.

Johnson began making art as a photographer in 1996. He received a BA in 2000 from Columbia College in Chicago and attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago from 2003 to '05. At SAIC, he was strongly influenced by critical theory through his studies with Gregg Bordowitz, a professor of film, video and new media. Upon leaving the Art Institute, Johnson moved to New York, where he has gained attention in solo and group shows with photographs, text pieces and altarlike shelving structures, on which he places objects that hark back to the 1970s and carry personal and social weight. Most recently, the objects have included books, record albums, oyster shells, shea butter and radio components.

Johnson had his first solo exhibition in New York only three years after his arrival, at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery. Among the works was the 8-foot-square wall-hung shelf construction *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (The Power of Healing)*, 2008, the title alluding to a classic sociological study by Harold Cruse, who saw in black intellectual leadership of the first half of the 20th century a failure to understand the depths of American racism. In the same exhibition, the sculpture *Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos* (2008), a rendering of a rifle's crosshairs at about 4 feet in diameter, introduced a motif that points to the political plight of black male youth in the 1980s and recurs in Johnson's work. The title is borrowed from a 1988 song by Public Enemy, whose logo features an image of crosshairs. The song addresses the dependency of the privatized prison industry on the incarceration of black males.

Johnson's recent exhibition in New York, his first at Hauser & Wirth, was called "Rumble," a reference to the historic 1974 Zaire boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman that headlined as "The Rumble in the Jungle." The bout was organized by boxing promoter Don King, who once owned the Upper East Side townhouse where the gallery is located. The exhibition included large abstract paintings that employ unusual supports such as tiled mirrors or wood flooring. Johnson's mark-making is often executed in black soap (traditionally made in West Africa) or by burning a surface with a hot branding iron. The image of the crosshairs turned up subtly and not so subtly. It appeared branded repeatedly on a section of parquet red oak flooring (*The Squared Circle*, 2011), along with other brandings of palm trees and the insignia of Sigma Pi Phi, the first African-American Greek-letter fraternity. It can also be found drawn in the sand in the 16mm film *The New Black Yoga* (2011). In the approximately 11-minute film, five black men on an ocean beach perform choreographed

moves combining martial arts and yoga, to a score of generic flute music accompanied by a simple, slow, rhythmic world beat. The work seems to offer an absurdist take on the dilemma facing the young black male: be aggressive and protect yourself, but be self-reflective and peaceful.

I visited Johnson on a sunny autumn morning at his studio in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn. The expansive, roughly constructed space looks very much like a wood and metal workshop. It was strewn with power tools and worktables. Avuncular, casually confident in manner, at age 34 Johnson is preternaturally clear about what inspires his creative output—American literature and the ways in which African-Americans are situated in that literature, as well as the influence that African-Americans have on American cultural production of all sorts. These subjects sharpen his focus on enduring physical objects with meaning and narrative. Offering a contemporary black American aesthetic, Johnson questions the uniformity of "black experience," openly interrogating the usual monolithic view of the black struggle for affirmation and recognition.

Opening this month at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, is "Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks," the artist's first museum survey. Organized by MCA associate curator Julie Rodrigues Widholm, it encompasses 36 works—paintings, sculptures, installations, photographs and videos—dating from 1998 to 2012, with a focus on pieces from the last five years. Johnson has shown extensively in the U.S. and abroad, including the 2011 Venice Biennale, and is represented by Hauser & Wirth Gallery, New York, and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

CHRISTOPHER STACKHOUSE What was it like growing up in Chicago?

RASHID JOHNSON I was born in Evanston, about three blocks away from the Chicago border. My mother at the time was finishing her PhD in African history at Northwestern University. Soon after my birth, my parents split and my father moved to Wicker Park, which is on the north side of the city.

STACKHOUSE How did you divide your time between your parents? Half and half?

JOHNSON More or less. I was with my mother a lot during the week, and I spent time with my father on the weekend. My father owned a small company, called Gundel Electronics, where he did community band radio and some repair stuff. But mostly his business revolved around ham radio, CB radio, so the house was kind of an electronics . . .

STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADRIAN GAUT

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Apr. 14-Aug. 5, 2012.

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Rashid Johnson: *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (The Power of Healing)*, 2008, shelves, wax, black soap, shea butter, candles and mixed mediums, 96 by 96 by 12 inches. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

STACKHOUSE . . . laboratory?

JOHNSON Yeah, tons of lollipop microphones, buttons and dials. There was a lot of "calling out into the world" and people having "handles." My father had a big brick cell phone, before anyone had a cell phone, because he was really just into that kind of thing—communication devices. I grew up between my father's laboratory and my mother's library.

STACKHOUSE So your formative years were sandwiched between the tinkering of your dad with his electronics business and your mother's dedication to education?

JOHNSON Yes, I would say that. And I also give credit now to my stepfather, although we didn't have

the best relationship when I was younger. He had a strong interest in literature, and introduced me to a lot of writers and thinkers who have been influential to me.

STACKHOUSE Who are some of those people?

JOHNSON James Baldwin, Henry Miller, James Joyce, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker. There is an interesting essay by Hurston where she writes that people imagine her to be a tragic character, but she does not feel that way. She says, "I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife." I imagine her sitting out near a bay, shucking oysters and drinking beer.

STACKHOUSE Sounds fabulous to me.

JOHNSON Sounds like a great day, right? I think it's one of the more fantastic metaphors for a beautiful experience—this idea that she is just out sharpening her oyster knife.

That is something that has really followed me, both in the titles I have used and the materials. I often use oyster shells with shea butter in them. It's really a very direct reference to that essay, which my mother introduced me to as a teenager. But Baldwin and Wright were enormously formative for me. And I would also say Ellison.

STACKHOUSE With just one book, *Invisible Man*, Ellison laid out a road map for the African-American. The "accommodating negro" versus, say, "the revolutionary." It's playing out

"I AM INTERESTED IN SETTING UP CONTRADICTIONS THAT POINT TO THE FACT THAT THERE ARE MANY EXPERIENCES."

in American history right now in an odd way.

JOHNSON Yes, and there is a lot of overlapping. For me, every autobiography of a black male written after Wright's *Black Boy* is basically *Black Boy*, or an attempt. My mother introduced me to more academic-minded writers, Cornel West and Skip Gates. In her library I came across, when I was very young, Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, which is like a bible of Negro intellectuals from Frederick Douglass to Amiri Baraka. Even before I could understand anything inside of them, just seeing the books' spines and thinking about them was important for me as a child.

STACKHOUSE There is an emotional charge in the presence of a library. Do you think there is—I don't like the word nostalgia, necessarily—a certain amount of comfort in just looking at books or vinyl records?

JOHNSON I have found that to be the case for myself. I think that when you look at those things there is a sense of potential reward. The opportunity of just being in a space with them, I think, is an attractive thing. It is less about nostalgia or memory, more about opportunity.

STACKHOUSE The things you use to make your work have cultural, as well as personal, associations built into them. Yet it seems you are most interested in their materiality, their objectness. Can you talk about this difference?

JOHNSON The materials I've used over the last five to 10 years were things that were close to me, that reminded me of certain aspects of my experience growing up—for example, the relationship I had to Afrocentrism through my parents in the late '70s and early '80s. My mother would always have shea butter around, and she wore dashikis. I was celebrating Kwanzaa, hearing this unfamiliar language, Swahili, and seeing black soap and chew sticks around the house, things that were about applying an Africanness to one's self. Then my parents evolved into middle-class black professionals, and I was kind of abandoned in this Afrocentric space they had created. I was forced to

negotiate what that period and those objects meant for me. I saw these things, as I got older, in Harlem, in Brooklyn, being sold on the street. I always thought to myself: What is the goal now with these materials? What are people trying to get from them?

So I started playing with those ideas and objects on a formal level, fueled by my interest in abstraction and mark-making as well as my interest in the constructed object, in the recent shelving units, for example. How do these things become signifiers? What are these things when they no longer function in the way they were originally intended to function?

STACKHOUSE There was this kind of fissure in the late '70s. On the one hand, people were trying to make clear that they were full participants in American society, the capital-

ist system. On the other hand, they were trying to fully embrace being culturally African.

JOHNSON It makes me think of the idea of black neurosis. It is under-recognized and has led to generations of black middle-class people fighting to understand their position and having a difficult time locating themselves.

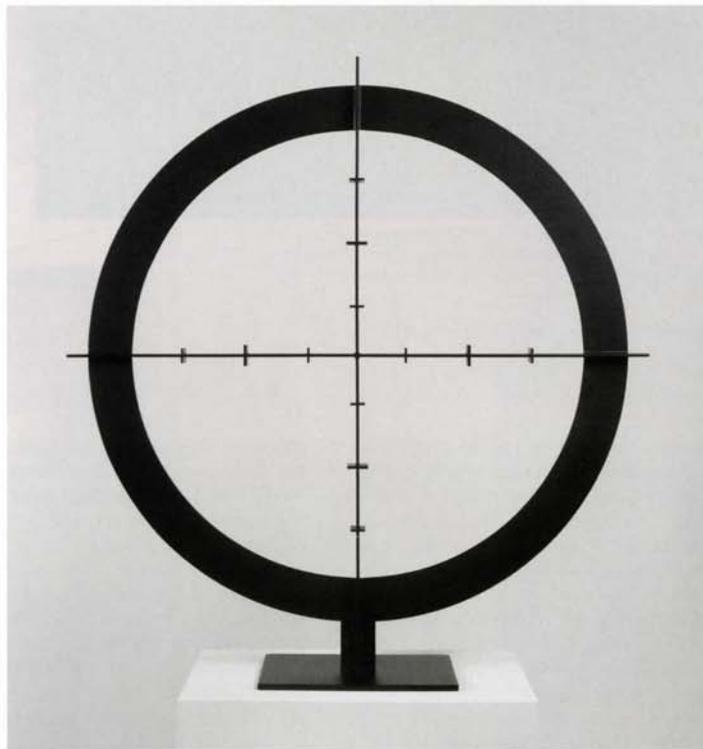
STACKHOUSE There is a particular insecurity in the black middle class—an instability in what defines it.

JOHNSON Inherently, there is an enormous insecurity in it.

STACKHOUSE This inherent tension is in your work. You address the "stuff" of the black middle class, the domesticity. You also address Afrocentricity, and the stuff of the black poor.

JOHNSON For me, it's always been about these kinds of contradictions. I grew up in a situation where experi-

Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos, 2008, blackened gunmetal steel, 43¾ by 39 by 12 inches. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery.



"JUST SEEING THE BOOKS' SPINES AND THINKING ABOUT THEM WAS IMPORTANT FOR ME AS A CHILD."



Above, *Death by Black Hole*, "The Crisis," 2010, steel, black soap, wax, books and mixed mediums, 96½ by 76¼ by 30 inches. Courtesy Gagolian Gallery, New York, and David Kordansky Gallery.

Opposite, Johnson's Brooklyn studio, 2012.

ences had as much to do with class or gender as with race. I project this story of the black middle class into my work, but also I want material representations of blackness in other ways. And I hope that the contradictions are never fully resolved.

STACKHOUSE You're not interested in the narrative of victimhood.

JOHNSON I'm not. There is an interesting line by Aaron McGruder, who wrote the comic strip called "The Boondocks," which later became an

animated television show. A character at one point says something like, "We weren't all chased by dogs and sprayed by hoses." You know there is a generation that is really upset by that kind of joke, because they feel that they opened the door for us. And it is not clear how to pay homage to them without sacrificing the freedoms and opportunities that their efforts gave us.

STACKHOUSE How are we supposed to culturally address the past, and still move forward?

JOHNSON The black academic in the Northeast in 1950 or 1960 had a completely different set of concerns than, say, a person living in Mobile, Alabama, at that time. And I am interested in setting up contradictions that point to the fact that there are many experiences.

STACKHOUSE How does working in New York now differ from working in Chicago years ago?

JOHNSON Chicago is a very complex place. It is incredibly segregated, I mean *hyper-segregated*.

STACKHOUSE Yes, it is. Whenever I am there I am always a little surprised by that.

JOHNSON Before I moved to New York a lot of my work spoke deliberately to segregation and other polarizing issues. I made a piece called *I Wish I Was White* [2004]. The words were on a piece of paper that folded out.

STACKHOUSE Was the paper white?

JOHNSON No, the paper was pinkish. Actually it was kind of pinkish yellow.

STACKHOUSE And was the work a monochrome?

JOHNSON It was a monochrome, yes [*laughs*].

STACKHOUSE I think that is funny.

JOHNSON [*laughs*] A lot of my work in Chicago had humor in it. When I moved to New York, honestly, my concerns were just different. But it was really important to my development as an artist to go through those steps and to come out in a very different place from where I began.

STACKHOUSE What is indicative of a "post-Chicago" work?

JOHNSON Now I deal with the more formal concerns of abstraction, even in works like the branded wood pieces, which also relate to critical and conceptual notions. Form is where I really started as an artist, before my work became involved with other concerns. I've gone back to issues around how you make decisions as an artist, as well as the materials and tools that you use to make those decisions.

STACKHOUSE You mentioned your interest in the history of black abstraction, and what black artists were forced to contend with by excluding what would otherwise be thought of as black content from their work. We were talking about Norman Lewis . . .

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JOHNSON Yes, Norman Lewis and Ed Clark and Al Loving . . .

STACKHOUSE Jack Whitten, Sam Gilliam, Alma Thomas . . .

JOHNSON All artists who I have a real affinity for.

STACKHOUSE Lewis's work has an urban black id to it.

JOHNSON I would say that about Clark and Loving as well. But, it gets interesting with Gilliam because, in his early work, you see no sign of any sort of cultural designation.

STACKHOUSE It's purely formal.

JOHNSON Formal and maybe existential issues but not specific concerns to black fraternity or a cultural group. Though you do see some of those references in the later work.

STACKHOUSE In what way?

JOHNSON It happens with Al Loving as well. They start moving into issues of patterning. It makes me think of the way people perceive Martin Puryear's work. Wasn't he making most of that stuff in Sweden or something? He studied in Sweden. He did spend a brief period

in Africa, but all of it seems to be really about formal concerns. Again, it becomes about this tension, this contradiction. Regardless of what you make, in all likelihood some sort of cultural experience is projected onto the work. And I really want to take some ownership of that, to be able to shape the conversation in a way that deals with my experience, in my time, while still participating with the other decisions and issues you confront as an artist.

STACKHOUSE Do you feel you fit into a line of black American painters and artists? Do you feel part of a continuum, or don't you see it as a continuum? Is it more like a crowd than a line?

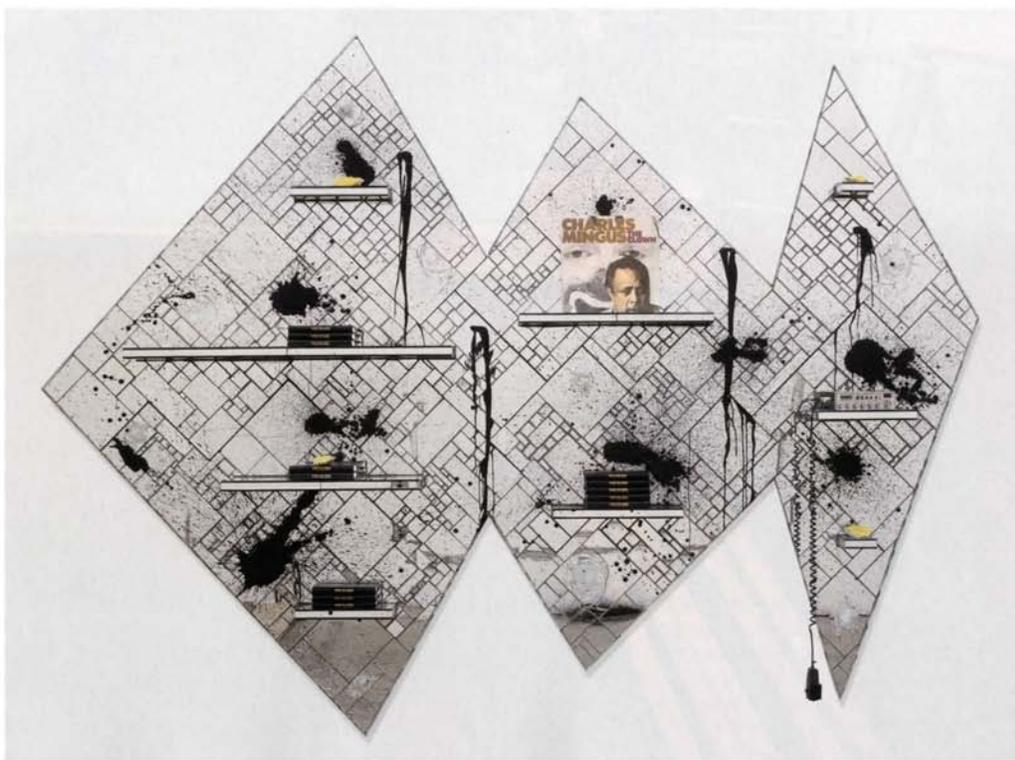
JOHNSON That's a difficult question. In a lot of ways, and maybe unfairly so, I do see a line that I fit into. I might look at Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, and see how that leads to Norman Lewis and then Martin Puryear, and see how that gives birth to David Hammons and then Mark Bradford, and then how an artist like me fits in.

I have left out a lot of people in that list—a tremendous number of people. In the early '90s, there was a lot of work that explored and reexamined a narrative that had been somewhat abandoned by the abstract painters. I'm talking about black female photographers like Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems, as well as Glenn Ligon after them. It all starts to twist and turn, to become a complex of both history and contemporary art practice.

STACKHOUSE I find it disconcerting that the advent of abstraction in American art is tied to Hans Hofmann. From a conceptual and material standpoint, the ways that the black community has estheticized itself in terms of color, line and shape, all of the components, involve the concerns of formal painting. There has always been this attention to abstraction. Do you see this persistence?

JOHNSON Yes, as much as I reject the idea of a singular black experience, I do.

STACKHOUSE Invention and reinvention.



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"NOW I DEAL WITH THE MORE FORMAL CONCERNS OF ABSTRACTION, EVEN IN WORKS LIKE THE BRANDED WOOD PIECES."



Above, *The Sweet Science*, 2011, branded red oak flooring, black soap, wax and paint, 96½ by 132½ by 2½ inches. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth, New York.

Opposite, *Glass Jaw*, 2011, mirrored tile, black soap, wax and mixed mediums, 88½ by 118½ by 12 inches. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

JOHNSON Reuse and improvisation. Some things are almost necessarily consistent to the black experience. Moving and adjusting. It happens throughout the day, depending on who you're talking to, you may use a certain tone or a certain command of the language to communicate.

STACKHOUSE Code switching.

JOHNSON Yes [laughs]. And this affects the way that you move in

space. In an art practice, that movement may influence the way you consider marking, consider mapping, negotiate the terms of experimentation and improvisation.

STACKHOUSE How do you feel about potentially being exoticized as a "young black artist"?

JOHNSON I am not concerned about the issue of ghettoization or being exoticized in any way. You

are going to be treated or perceived in whatever way the audience is capable of dealing with what it is you do. And if you sit around overly concerned about those issues, then you are probably just not going to be productive. ○

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is a writer and artist.
See Contributors page.