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CRITIC'S PICK

Rashid Johnson Finds His Promised Land at the Guggenheim

The artist's first major museum survey fills Frank Lloyd Wright's spiral with a rich mix of media, a view of the polymathic flux of a 25-year career, and a sense of healing.



Hilla von Rebay, the original curator of the Guggenheim, called its rotunda the "Dome of the Spirit." Rashid Johnson turns it into a giant grow-light for his new survey, "A Poem for Deep Thinkers." Credit: DeSean McClinton-Holland for The New York Times

By Holland Cotter

April 17, 2025

Averse to urban density, Frank Lloyd Wright preferred to make architecture for open, verdant sites. Accordingly, when, in 1943, he was approached by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation to create a home for a new museum in New York City, Wright campaigned to locate it far

from downtown, in fact outside of Manhattan, on a rise overlooking the Hudson River in the leafy Spuyten Duyvil section of the Bronx.

Guggenheim said "no way" and bought a plot on Fifth Avenue, for which Wright created the spiraling upside-down ziggurat that we have today. But he made a provision to bring the outdoors indoors. He crowned the building's rotunda with an enormous circular window to admit natural light into a space that he envisioned as nurturing both vegetation and art.

The museum's new exhibition, "Rashid Johnson: A Poem for Deep Thinkers," incorporates a similar image of growth: an installation, set at the very top of the museum, composed of banks of open storage shelves filled with living plants, sculptures, cultural artifacts and stacks of books. With the oculus just above, like a grow-light in a terrarium, the sight is a quietly joyous one, though the upward path to it brings many changes of mood.



Rashid Johnson's series, "Untitled Anxious Men," made of ceramic tile, black soap and wax, embody the tensions of generations of Black men." Credit: DeSean McClinton-Holland for The New York Times

Born in 1977, Johnson was raised in and around Chicago in a middle-class Black home. His mother, Cheryl Johnson-Odim, is a scholar of African and African American history; his father, Jimmie Johnson, is an artist who earned a living running an electronics business. (The pair divorced when Rashid was two, and married other people.)

In his teens Rashid Johnson was immersed in the new Black pop culture that had entered the American mainstream — hip-hop, soul, Spike Lee films, the *Cosby* Show — and still provides a deep well of reference for his work. He knew he wanted to study art and did. He earned a graduate degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and started out primarily as a photog-



Detail, "Untitled Anxious Men." Credit: DeSean McClinton-Holland for The New York Times

rapher.

The earliest works in the show, from 1998, are two shadowed and heroic-looking close-up portraits of Chicago homeless men made using a 19th century photographic method called Van Dyke Brown printing, which yields a richly loamy color. A few years later, Johnson is still making dark-toned portraits, but now they're named for historical figures and he's using himself as a sitter, as in "Self-Portrait With My Hair Parted Like Frederick Douglass," from 2003.

A slip-slide between serious and comical is a continuing dynamic in Johnson's work, one that has given some viewers looking for a readily locatable politics in his art the impression that's it's unserious, not to say lightweight. But keeping his work off balance, creating an art that offers multiple-choice responses, is pretty clearly what he's after.



"The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club (Thurgood)," from 2008, one of Johnson's fictional portraits of historical Black figures. Credit: DeSean McClinton-Holland for The New York Times

And it's what identified him as part of a "post-Black" generation of artists, so named by the curator Thelma Golden in her career-launching 2001 exhibition "Freestyle" at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which introduced a group of young artists interested in playing with Black identity, making it personal, but also abstract and critical. Johnson was in that show. He was 24. High-profile solos and art world honors eventually followed. (He's now represented in New York and internationally by the talent-hoovering Hauser & Wirth gallery and in Los Angeles by David Kordansky; in 2016 the Guggenheim appointed him to its board of trustees, a position he relinquished in 2023.)

He's never left photography entirely behind, but he's expanded his reach into many forms and media, including video, painting, mosaic, sculpture and performance, combining and overlapping them in sometimes kooky, off-the-cuff seeming ways that, again, have led to views of his art as unfocused, though this, in fact, accounts for its richness.

With painting, he doesn't stay still. He does traditional oil-on-canvas work, like the scrawly, mask-like images called "Soul Paintings." But he also spray-paints words — "Run," "Promised Land," "Stay Black and Die" — graffiti-style on mirrors. In 2008, he made a series of abstract paintings from a mixture of African black soap and melted wax. In 2019 he started applying almost all of these painterly media to fields of broken ceramic tiles.

Possibly inspired by the art of Jack Whitten (1939-2018), currently the subject of a magnificent MoMA retrospective, the tile paintings are essentially mosaics, incorporating mirror-shards, shells, wax and cast bronze forms. With their high-relief texture they walk a thin line between



"The Shuttle," from 2011. Johnson's sculpture, pyramidal in shape and pieced together from mirrored glass panels, features a citizens band radio on a low shelf and a book with a single word title, "Universe," high up. Credit: DeSean McClinton-Holland for The New York Times

painting and sculpture. And the show's sculpture is some of Johnson's strongest work.

A few examples — one, "Post Prison Writings," a tribute to the anticolonial thinker Frantz Fanon and the activist Eldridge Cleaver — are free-standing. But the ones I'm particularly thinking of are large wall-dependent assemblage pieces suggesting a cross between home entertainment units and altars, a melding of the domestic and spiritual.

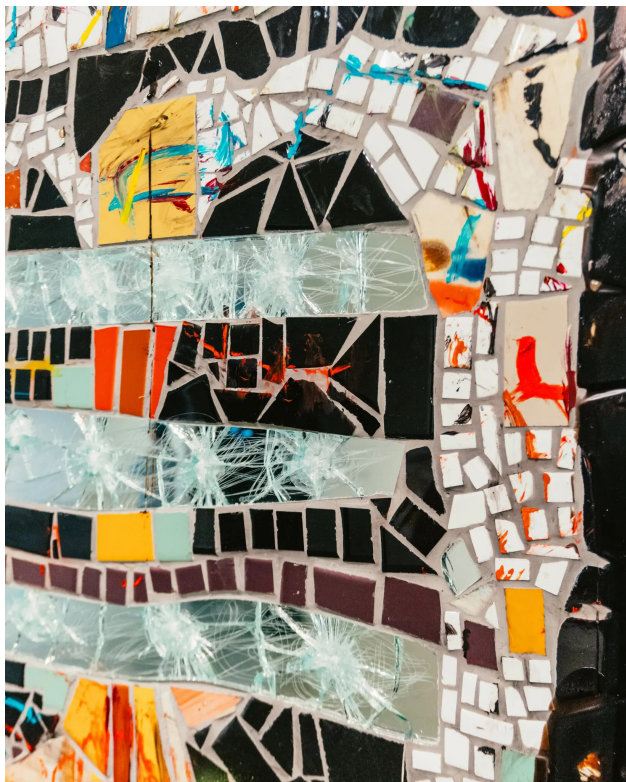
One, called "Triple Consciousness" — the title a riff on W.E.B. DuBois's definition of Black self-awareness — features three copies of the singer Al Green's sexy portrait from the cover of his 1975 "Greatest Hits" LP. They're set, side by side, high on a shelf, enshrined, like deific presences, between candlesticks. And on shelves below are small bowls filled with offerings of African shea butter, a cleansing and healing substance, of which Johnson makes frequent symbolic use.

Another sculpture, called "Fatherhood as Described by Paul Beatty," is different in tone. A bulky construction of dark wood floorboards scarred with branding iron burns, it's named for a writer of scabrous satires on American racism and has at its center a 1950 Elliott Erwitt photograph of a smiling Black child holding a pistol to his head. The ensemble feels tight with violence.

Although these and other sculptural assemblages were all produced in a short span, between 2009 and 2011, they're spaced widely apart on the ramps rather than grouped together. Similarly, many of the mosaic pieces, while sharing a date, are placed early and late in the show. This is a



"Fatherhood as Described by Paul Beatty," from 2011, a construction of dark wood floorboards scarred with branding iron burns. It has at its center a 1950 Elliott Erwitt photograph of a smiling Black child holding a pistol to his head. Credit: DeSean McClinton-Holland for The New York Times



Detail from "Untitled Broken Men" from 2018 evokes the idea of bullet holes. Credit: DeSean McClinton-Holland for The New York Times



"Untitled Broken Men," 2019, made of ceramic tile, mirror tile, spray enamel, oil stick, black soap, and wax. Credit: DeSean McClinton-Holland for The New York Times

smart idea. Seen in bulk in a gallery, the mosaics, like various series of abstract paintings, can look like assembly-line products. Here they do not.

And in general while this midcareer survey is loosely chronological in shape, its curators — Naomi Beckwith, deputy director and chief curator of the Guggenheim, and Andrea Karnes, interim director and chief curator of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, with Faith Hunter, a Guggenheim curatorial assistant — have departed from a strict timeline to give a sense of the polymathic flux and even disorder of Johnson's career.

At the top of the spiral, directly under the oculus, tensions and confusions encountered along the path seem to lighten up, as if altitude was clearing the atmosphere. Most of the paintings here on the highest ramp are recent, abstract, straightforward oil-on-canvas, and have simple names: "Soul Painting," "Surrender Painting," "Quiet Painting," "God Painting."

In a short 2024 video titled "Sanguine" we see three male figures — Johnson, his father, Jimmie, and his young son, Julius — relaxed and reading in a homey living room. Then we see them in the same room, each holding an African mask to his face. And finally, we see them walking together on a beach at sunrise or sunset. The videos, whose title can refer to either a color (blood-red), or a mood (chill) — seem to be a portrait of a family at peace with itself and with its heritage.

In one lovely scene we see Jimmie Johnson in a garden gathering a bouquet of gorgeous flowers and holding it out toward us like a gift. And a real garden, or greenhouse, composed of shelves



"Sanguine," a video depicting Rashid Johnson, his father, Jimmie, and his young son, Julius, relaxed and reading in a homey living room. Credit: DeSean McClinton-Holland for The New York Times

upon shelves of potted plants and books of Black social criticism and poetry — a poem by Amiri Baraka gave the show its title — is the show's living centerpiece, one that would surely have pleased Wright, and that will repay the daily attentions of museum staff by flourishing through the run of the show.



A piano hidden inside of the "Sanguine" installation. Credit: DeSean McClinton-Holland for The New York Times



A view of the "Sanguine" installation. Credit: DeSean McClinton-Holland for The New York Times

That run will be an unusually long one. The Guggenheim is in a post-Covid rough patch. Money is short. Staff has been cut. Visitor traffic is down. And, like many other museums, the Guggenheim is, at present, trading its standard exhibition schedule of mounting major shows every three or four months for a more cost-and-energy efficient one. "Rashid Johnson: A Poem for Deep Thinkers" will be on view for nine months, into 2026.

To help keep the show feeling active and fluid over that span, the museum is organizing programs of performances. Musicians — seasoned professionals, talented hopefuls, students — will be invited to play in the top-ramp greenhouse. (A piano is already in place.) And a stage has been set up in the museum's lobby for spoken-word events such as poetry readings.

Will such activities pull in new audiences? Entice people who have seen the show to return? It's a gamble, as so much is these days, culturally speaking. But how much more enlivening it is that the Guggenheim, right now, is taking the risk of using its space and time to be an open seedbed of new art, rather than a walled garden of yesterday's art history heroes.



"God Painting 'The Spirit'" from the installation titled "Sanguine." Credit: DeSean McClinton-Holland for The New York Times

Rashid Johnson: A Poem for Deep Thinkers

April 18-Jan. 18, 2026, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan, (212) 423-3500; guggenheim.org. The show will travel to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth in 2026.

Holland Cotter is the co-chief art critic and a senior writer for the Culture section of The Times, where he has been on staff since 1998.