



Watch a Two-Week Museum Installation Process, in Just Two Minutes

By KAT HERRIMAN, MARCH 16, 2016

When Rashid Johnson did the site inspection for his upcoming commission at the Garage Museum in Moscow, the Rem Koolhaas-designed museum was still incomplete. Now, almost a year after its opening, the New York-based artist is returning to the space for his first Russian solo show. His site-specific installation, "Within Our Gates," is only the third commission to inhabit the museum's airy atrium. "The lack of exhibition history presented a different set of challenges," the artist says. "It was something that I looked forward to."

During that initial trip, Johnson visited several local museums, and his first impressions of the Russian capital followed him home, where he plotted his first draft. An interest in Soviet architecture and its volumes became a central reference point for the living sculpture that Johnson constructed in Garage's lobby. "Part of what I'm referencing is the layout of Moscow. It has different lines than anywhere else I've been," he says. "It wasn't so much about a specific architect but more how the buildings sit in relationship to one another."

Johnson created a steel structure — vaguely reminiscent of a Sol Lewitt sculpture — and covered it with specimens from Moscow's botanical gardens as well as his signature mixture of found and fabricated items. Watered by a custom irrigation system, the plants were selected with the help of the botanical gardens' team. "I showed them and talked to them about plants I was interested in. Most of my interest came from choosing plants that were not indigenous. I wanted these plants to be visitors in the way that I am," Johnson says. "With that information, they picked out the ones that would be able to survive in the museum environment."

To construct Johnson's Edenic temple, it took the artist and his assistants two weeks of on-site activity. Johnson gave Moscow a rare glimpse into his process: The installation was visible to the public during museum hours. "It was less of a fishbowl than I expected," Johnson admits. "I'm not the most open person, as far as the way the sausage gets made. I'm much more of a traditional artist in that I have a fairly rigorous studio practice, and so much of the decision making of art is really hidden from the audience until such time as they get to participate with it. For me to have that side of the practice exposed, I thought would cause me more anxiety." But while Johnson isn't jumping to open his studio to the public on a permanent basis, he says he considers it a wholly positive experience. (Watch the entire installation process in just two minutes in the time-lapsed video above.)

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Johnson's greenery will be in good company. The artist Taryn Simon's "Paperwork and the Will of Capital" series, from the 2015 Venice Biennale, will also be on view in all its floral glory. Simon uses plants as signifiers for bigger ideas — in this case, the international conferences and decrees that influence governmental and economic systems. "Taryn really does an incredible job using her work as a conceptually rigorous delivery system and as a poetic and beautiful object. I think it's something that those works and my work can share," Johnson notes of Simon's flowery photographs and sculptures. "I think it's very exciting that these two shows can exist in dialogue with one another, if only for a moment."