

Shea butter, soap, books: Rashid Johnson's life becomes raw art at Kemper Museum

STAR

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"Antoine's Organ" (2016) by Rashid Johnson. Its materials include plants, black steel, grow lights, shea butter, rugs, monitor, books, piano



New York-based artist Rashid Johnson now exhibits internationally and is considered a practitioner of “cultural abstraction,” in which materials such as shea butter and black soap are used for symbolic reasons as well as being tools for painting and sculpting abstractly. **Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and Museum**

“Hail We Now Sing Joy,” the big, brash, poetic new exhibit by Rashid Johnson at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, is both a living oasis and a platform for themes of angst and violence.

Eschewing traditional artist materials, Johnson mixes soap, butter, mirrors, tiles, photographs, rugs, live music and plants to create an environment drawn from black history, contemporary western art, and his own personal narrative. This terrific show feels simultaneously overwhelming and nurturing.

Three mesmerizing mural-sized white tile panels, covered with skull-like faces painted with black soap and wax, confront the viewer at the gallery entrance. All are from Johnson’s “Untitled Anxious Audience” series, which he began several years ago because, as he said in a recent talk at the Gem Theater, “I needed to make these portraits. Black males are not seen as fragile or vulnerable in our culture, nor are their fears recognized.”

When Johnson first exhibited works from “Anxious Audience” at the Drawing Center in New York, he was surprised to hear from numerous visitors who told him they had similar feelings. For the artist they represent the “collective anxiety for our times.”

“Photography is incredibly important to my practice,” Johnson says, and he is well known for his photos and “Black Yoga” videos. In “Untitled Escape Collages,” he incorporates family pictures and images of palm trees along with black soap and enamel aggressively sprayed onto tile, uniting images of violence with those of calm.

“Nothing I use comes from an art store,” Johnson says. “I use all domestic materials, which are intended to make some complicated narratives. But they can be unwound like rhizomes, and viewers can imagine their own scenarios.”

“Untitled (shea butter table)” combines three totally different media: a large wooden table with esoteric symbols burnt onto the surface covered by a rug from the Middle East topped with mounds of shea butter.

Johnson lives in New York City. He was born in Chicago in 1977, where his mother was a professor of African history and his father a jazz aficionado. Johnson was well versed in both subjects by the time he attended Columbia College and the Chicago Art Institute. At 24, he was included in the now historic exhibit “Freestyle” at the Studio Museum in Harlem. He now exhibits internationally.

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Growing up, Johnson’s family used both black soap and shea butter, products from Africa.

“Shea butter,” Johnson notes, “has a healing quality for people who have been burned or scarred.”

One of Johnson’s best-known pieces, installed here, is the massive “Antoine’s Organ.”

Inspired by the minimalist sculptures of Sol LeWitt, Johnson has constructed a grid from black steel and wood that challenges the rigidity of LeWitt’s structures with the placement of living plants in handmade pots and grow lights. Inside is a piano to be played throughout the duration of the show by local musicians. (Other musicians, playing different instruments, will also participate). A number of Johnson’s favorite books, such as “The Autobiography of Malcolm X,” are stacked on the shelving units.

“You’ll often see the same books repeated on different shelves,” Johnson says, “which is about the weight of what that object suggests. Objects can become gestures and mark making, too.

“I like the fact that my artwork is alive. Merely viewing an object is a passive activity. I want viewers to be witnesses, and to recall later what they’ve seen. I’ve always felt that my work was meant to be given away.”

“HAIL WE NOW SING JOY” BY RASHID JOHNSON

Through May 21. Closed Mondays. Free. Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 4420 Warwick Blvd. 816-753-5784. www.kemperart.org

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