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Artist Rashid Johnson Loves Being Black

In a wide-ranging interview, Johnson discusses art, race, and plans for his first film.

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by Touré



Somewhat recently, Rashid Johnson walked out of a fancy hotel that he was staying in. He just wanted to smoke a cigarette, but even a small action like that can be fraught when you're a six-foot-three Black man in America.

"I wasn't dressed well," he recalls. He knew that made him more vulnerable. "And as I walked out of this hotel, the doorman changed, right? A new guy showed up and he hadn't seen me leave the building." Seeing himself through the eyes of the new doorman, Johnson suddenly felt himself in peril. "I'm just kind of this underdressed Black character in slippers or something, smoking a cigarette. And then I'm going to be re-entering this very nice hotel."

He felt his anger and anxiety rise as he imagined how he would react if the doorman stopped him and questioned his right to stay in the hotel. "This is what Black people do," Johnson says, meaning that these kinds of heated internal conversations in preparation for moments of racial conflict are not uncommon. In that moment, Johnson planned out how he would respond to the doorman and what he would say to the man's manager, working himself up for the inevitable fight ahead. He finished his cigarette and walked to the door of the hotel. The doorman turned to him and said, "Welcome to the hotel, sir."

Rashid Johnson is a 40-year-old visual art star from Chicago whose work has been featured everywhere from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and the Studio Museum of Harlem to the Venice Beach Biennale. The doorman may have been observant, aware of all the hotel's guests, or even a fan of Johnson's work who was too intimidated to say something—we'll never know. But racism can function in such a manner that you come to expect it even more than you actually experience it. Through that sense of apprehension (and many other ways), racism becomes a constant impact on your life, whether or not it is experienced in a given encounter. "The fascinating thing about race," Johnson says, "is the fact that we know it does affect you, but one of the things that's most difficult to explain sometimes is how and when you're experiencing those specific things."



Johnson knows and embraces the fact that race influences his life constantly—even if he can't always put a finger on exactly how—and that's part of why he likes directly addressing race in his work. For him, when you realize that race has a perpetual significance in your life, then you can't make honest art that doesn't take race into account. "I'm not offended by being called a Black artist," Johnson says. "I don't see being a Black artist as a ghettoizing space. I don't think it's negative." He accepts being thought of as a Black artist because he accepts that Blackness has a deep impact on him, but also because he loves Blackness in all of its complexity. "I'm invested in the investigation of Blackness," he says. "I'm absolutely invested in that, and I am totally intrigued."

This investigation of race may not always be immediately clear from looking at his art—Johnson is often abstract. He loves to use burnt wooden flooring and shelves that he constructs in his studio. He makes marks with black soap as it hardens against a white background. He uses plants and adds photographs that he repeats so many times that they morph into something new.

But sometimes, his work is less opaque and you can see the discussion of Blackness more clearly. He uses album covers featuring the Reverend Al Green and Ben Vereen, Black stars of the '70s, his youth. He has used photographs of his father. Once he created an image in which a white substance resembling toothpaste was arrayed on a mirror in letters that spelled out "I Talk White," unearthing a conversation about racialized modes of speech and how some Black people are judged or socially attacked for not vocally performing Blackness in a traditional way.

Several times throughout my life, I have been told that I sound white or talk white—more often by Black people than whites. It can be a painful accusation: It's like you're being told that you're not doing Blackness correctly or that you're trying to erase Blackness from your voice in order to assimilate. With just a few words and a mirror, he sparked a conversation about racial authenticity and the definition of Blackness.

That last piece had a huge influence on me as I wrote my 2011 book *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?* I was looking for artwork that challenged traditional ways of performing Blackness, and Johnson had that. *I Talk White* was a brilliant indictment of the idea that there is one way to be Black. It mocked that idea. And it inspired me. It was key to helping me figure out how to articulate my ideas. Johnson's work spoke about Blackness, but not in a way that simply lionized the Black past. He pushed at the edges of Blackness and helped me find way to my thesis that Blackness is broad, diverse, and complex enough to support an infinite number of interpretations.

I interviewed Johnson for that book and his work has continued to inspire me, so. I wanted to understand his vision more thoroughly. I met him on a cold Saturday afternoon at his big place on the east side of Midtown Manhattan. I hoped to gain greater insight into his work by looking at some of the smaller yet important elements, like the way he uses black soap.

Johnson explains that, after heating it, black soap becomes extremely malleable for five to ten minutes. "It's almost like lava," he says. "It melts, and as it melts, you can kind of shape it. But as it hardens, you have almost like a new landscape, right? It's almost like a volcanic eruption."



While he likes the way he can manipulate the material, more important to him are the symbolic qualities of the soap. "I started making that body of work as Trump was running for office," he says. "I was concerned about that. I was concerned about police brutality. My son was kind of getting a little bit older. I started getting scared that I was going to have to explain it to him. I mean, I know the rules, right? I know how to deal with police, I know how to deal with bigotry—I know all of the shit. You're not going to fool me. But the idea that I was going to have to explain all that to another fucking human being was just painful for me. It gave me a tremendous amount of anxiety, you know? That I was going to have to tell someone else how to negotiate these same pitfalls, I was just dumbfounded by it. So, I started making these scrawled drawing in black soap and wax. Black soap is this kind of healing material that you can find in West Africa, but you also find it on the streets of Harlem, Brooklyn, and Chicago. It becomes this signifier, a symbol for cleansing material. It's for people with sensitive skin, so I'm talking about a sensitive issue, about sensitive people, and using this material that's meant for sensitive people. It becomes this combination of things that are a puzzle that you put together."

Johnson loves puzzles and constructing them. "Art is really just the game of problem-solving," he says. "The artist is a problem-solver. The difference is that a lot of the problems that they're solving are ones that they created themselves." Working in the studio with his hands, constructing pieces day by day, he likens himself to his father, an electrical engineer who had a studio in the garage of Johnson's childhood home. Dad built alternators that he then sold. Now, like his dad, Johnson enjoys being alone and working with his hands, putting together complex things that will be sold. Of course, Johnson's work is a lot more esoteric.



For example, sometimes he places plants within the work. These may be small house plants stacked many feet in the air or larger plants that sit within his work as a decorative item. What's that about? "There's something really poetic about plants," he says. "I grew up with plants in the house. There was this need to take care of them. A lot of what happens in my work is about how we're going to care, you know? Like, who's going to take care of whoever, is this material going to take care of you? So, who's going to take care of the plants? Who's going to feed them? Who's going to keep them alive?"

Ok, then, who? Is it you as the creator/father of the work or is it the museum/institution/private collector who now must take care of the plants? Do you include watering instructions that the museum or new owner have to follow?

"I actually build irrigation systems into the works," he says, flashing some of his engineering ability. "But I just kind of leave it up to people to take responsibility for them. I'm not, like, that caring. I really don't give a fuck, you know?"

Wait, what? What do you mean, you don't really give a fuck?

"The plants can be replaced."

What if they're not the right plants? Then the work changes doesn't it?

He says, "I have a big plant work that I helped reinstall at the Louis Vuitton Fondation in Paris. They called, they said, 'We're going to install this piece.' I'm like, 'That's great.' They're like, 'Which plants should we get?' I was like, 'Well, there's images of all the plants. You're welcome to get those plants or you can get some others if you don't find those exact plants.'"

Instead of exacting standards and esoteric demands, he was open to whatever they chose. "I think that was quite confusing for them." But wouldn't getting different plants make it a different work? "It's different every time you install it."

Johnson decided to become an artist while listening to NPR when he was in college. The legendary Black photographer Roy DeCarava came on the radio and, as Johnson recalls, "All I did was listen to him talk about what picture-making meant to him and the way that he was able to translate picture-making into telling the story of a time and of timelessness. I was like, I want to do whatever that guy does. He called himself an artist and I was like, Well, then I should just do that." Johnson would go on to graduate school at School of the Art Institute of Chicago, but it may be that his first, and perhaps most important, art school was in the streets of Chicago, where he was a teenage graffiti artist. There, he began to negotiate the impact of his body on his art. But back then it wasn't about race, it was about size.

He was already over six feet and he realized that small, fine movements were harder for him than for his shorter friends. Johnson wasn't easily able to draw in a sketchbook or master movements based in the wrist, but when he was out tagging walls and painting from his shoulder, he could excel. He says, "I just take up a bigger space to make the gestures that I think are most effective and most honest for me to be able to make. I'm a firm believer that your hand can only do certain things, so you have to kind of find the way that you naturally move your hand. Whether it's with a spray can, with a pencil, with a paintbrush—with any utensil. You have a certain kind of movement in your wrist. It's like a fingerprint in a way. Once you start to understand the way that your wrist and your hand move, then you start to be able to establish your own style. But it starts with learning your body."

At the dawn of his art career, Johnson was focused on how to function within his body and how to best use it to make art. As a growing teenager, he focused on his physical form. As an adult in Trump's America, he focuses on race.

Indeed, his next big step is to direct a film based on Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*, a seminal piece of American literature that tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a Black man in the 1930s who accidentally kills a white woman by suffocating her with a pillow while she sleeps. Shooting begins in March, with Ashton Sanders (well-known for his role as 16-year-old Chiron in *Moonlight*) playing Bigger.

Johnson's version of *Native Son* was created in conjunction with the famed writer Suzan-Lori Parks, who wrote the screenplay. Their version is modernized—it's set today. "I think my Bigger is a little bit more of a vulnerable character," Johnson says. "He's this black kid who's listening to punk, who's just a little bit different than a lot of the people around him. He still has some of the misanthropy that I think makes Bigger what he is in a lot of ways, but he's definitely more vulnerable and more fragile than maybe Wright initially intended."

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Even as he moves into film, Johnson is still dealing with his core principles and trying to stretch the boundaries of Blackness and challenge its definitions. No matter what medium he chooses—film, photography, sculpture, soap—he's interrogating and exploring Blackness. It's a central part of his work because it's a crucial part of him that shapes how he interacts with the world. But Johnson doesn't simply let Blackness shape him; he's a thoughtful consumer of it and an active shaper of it.

To Johnson, like black soap, Blackness is malleable and yet firm, sensitive and complex.