

# ARTSY

## The Most Influential Living African-American Artists

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In 1926, the historian Carter G. Woodson instituted Negro History Week. The second-ever African-American recipient of a Ph.D. from Harvard (after W.E.B. DuBois), Woodson wanted to acknowledge the vibrant cultural achievements of African-American individuals that were rippling through the country. At the time, Harlem was brimming with poets such as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, while Louis Armstrong and Fats Waller were developing Chicago's jazz scene. In 1976, President Gerald Ford officially transformed Woodson's initiative into the month-long celebration we honor to this day: Black History Month.

While it's impossible to capture the full impact of black artists on art history, we asked prominent art historians and curators reflect on 20 living African-American artists who are making a mark on painting, photography, performance, and sculpture. Below, with the artists listed alphabetically, are their reflections.



Rashid Johnson, *Antoine's Organ*, 2016. Photo by Martin Parsekian. Courtesy of the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and David Kordansky Gallery.

From Erin Dziedzic, Director of Curatorial Affairs, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art:

Rashid Johnson's works inspire slowly unfolding viewer experiences and express personal and complex histories through objects and mark-making, something that was palpable in his 2017 exhibition "Rashid Johnson: Hail We Now Sing Joy" at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. *Antoine's Organ* (2016), for example, is a massive sculpture with a network of live potted plants, books, lights, videos, Persian rugs, and mounds of shea butter built up around an upright piano at its core. Its open, modernist, gridlike framework provides accessibility, while its contents imply attention, responsibility, and care.

Johnson's diasporic matrix evokes ideas about time and history. It's tactile and textural, deeply personal, and profoundly relevant. The work expands a network of elements related to African and African-American identity and history, inspiring an opportunity to contemplate the past in the present moment. Johnson's art inspires slow, measured reflections from the audience. This aspect of his oeuvre has always resonated with me, one of many important forces offered up in his penetrating body of work—which, among other major themes, addresses art history, literature, cultural identities, and materiality.