

REASONS

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RASHID

JOHNSON

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CA I want to start by talking about materials, both the materials you used in your work and the readymade objects you often include. I am interested in how and why these objects are filled with specific personal memories and more generally how they are linked with the discourse about identity.

RJ Quite a few materials that I use are materials that I've had personal relationships with at some point in my life. As I archive my own life experiences, I often find some objects and materials stand out, and they stand out for different reasons. One is how I've employed them in the past and how that employment of those things has changed me, and changed other people that I know. Another is what those objects potentially could represent and how that allows us all to imagine our relationship with them. I am also interested in how those objects could be used and how the use of those objects can change the way we understand what they are. Books are one of the materials I use repeatedly. We all understand the employability of books – they are incredible delivery systems. In present day we have so many delivery systems for information, but the one that I engaged with earliest and most often was a book. It's where I discovered critical theory. It's where I discovered, in a lot of ways, art. In books I saw for the first time the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Franz Kline. It was in a book I first saw the work of Clyfford Still. I am less interested in the specifics of having found one book – I am not interested in found things; I am interested in the search for things and using things in multiples, which I often do. Through repetition, you get an understanding that these objects are searched for; they are not found, and they are intentionally being used because of what they are capable of giving to that particular artwork. That leads to shea butter, which is one of the materials I started using as a young man. Seeing how shea butter was distributed became interesting to me. My mother is an African history professor; we would travel to Africa and she would bring back different materials: we had shea butter, we had black soap... So to me these were very common things. And then I started realizing that they weren't so common and I started thinking about how they are distributed. When I moved to New York, I would see people in Harlem selling shea butter. These goods had a very specific audience and oftentimes trade was not happening in a store, but on the street. How are these things distributed? Why are they distributed this way? What are they able to suggest as a result? What do they look like? How does that material function and how does it change our understanding of order in artwork?

My decision to use oil paint versus acrylics or using certain kind of plaster versus bronze: we all understand tactility and what tactility different materials suggest, just as we all understand dryness and wetness. There is a dichotomy, and an opportunity in so many ways to take a material like shea butter and put it next to for instance steel. What does it feel like, who uses it, what does it say about people who use it, where is it from? There is a long lineage of a story. Same with a book: When was it written, who published it, who wrote it, who is it for, when was it read, how was it read, what does it do today? The way material lives in the past and its potential in the future. Black soap is something similar. It becomes an art material, becomes paint for me. It's also something you could use to wash yourself. Who washes themselves with it? The answer is, People with more sensitive skin. What does that sensitivity mean? Where does it come from? Africa. What does it become a metaphor for? Can it be just an art material? Choosing materials is this kind of idea of choosing these textures, choosing this symbolism, choosing a long line of potential narratives and placing them together and hoping for the most interesting of contradictions and hoping to build a story that in some ways can suggest my relationship to them, or gives you an opportunity to imagine a relation that you yourself have to those things.

CA What happens when these objects come together? How controlled are their relations, and how much do you leave to the viewer? In addition, I am interested in learning more about displays, such as the shelving system that you've used quite

Interview

Cecilia Alemani and Rashid Johnson

a lot. Is it a purely formal gesture or are you referring to a longer tradition of art history?

RJ I think the shelving begets the talk about how we read. Different people potentially read in different ways and have different cultural connotations for what they read. I read from left to right, like most of us do in the Western world. The combining of materials is about creating potential narratives. The great thing about an artwork is that unlike when we read stories, an artwork doesn't ask one to take away only one narrative, necessarily. We can begin to approach it from different angles. The shelving units are very much a display system. They are originally, for me, a means of getting things off the ground – forming connections between how the objects live in the space and how they live together and what narratives one conjures from their relationship or potential contradictions.

For instance in *Between Heaven and Hell*, which is in the GAMeC show, you have a record by Oscar Brown. Oscar Brown is an incredible jazz musician who inspired so many other different artists. Part of what including that record does, is ask you to think about what that sounds like. You are not given the opportunity to hear it, necessarily, but you are given a potential opportunity to do some homework. If you are familiar with Oscar Brown, looking at the album you already start hearing the music, which is what I do.

There is a book by Ellis Cose, *The Rage of a Privileged Class*. That book is not talking particularly about black bourgeoisie (because that can be interpreted incorrectly) but the disappointment that the black middle class has. These people evolved from a history of slavery to being fairly well off, or at least in this middle class condition that's supposed to bring us all some joy or some peace. Cose writes a book about disappointment in this middle class. That middle class is always the group that then is responsible for larger bits of change in a classic Marxist sense – the bourgeoisie creates the revolution. Once the middle class gets disappointed that there is a grand change that potentially happens, in most political uprisings.

So in this work the Cose book mixes with Oscar Brown, mixes with an oyster shell. I started using oyster shells because I was reading a piece by Zora Neale Hurston. She says, "I do not weep at the world I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife". There are two things that are interesting to me about this. One, apparently you never sharpen oyster knives, that's not a thing. It would potentially be dangerous. Is she then creating a weapon? What is she going to do with this sharpened oyster knife, what is her expectation? Maybe she is too busy trying to figure out how to enjoy the fruits of her life and not marry two things that potentially would suggest that she should be an angry or a disappointed person. Again, right there, you have these two very different narratives. You have the narrative of Cose, talking about the rage of the privileged class and then you have the narrative of Zora Hurston saying, oh no, I am not angry, I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife. That all begins to play out, and it's theatre: the stage to theatre; and the sounds that we get are Oscar Brown, and the material that we suggest we put on ourselves is shea butter, which is a healing material. So this heals this confrontation that's happening in this piece. Now, do you need a lot of information to get to this kind of confrontation? Probably.

CA What if you have just half of that?

RJ You can live with half of that. You can live with zero of it. You know, I'm an aesthete, as well. I've got a real investment in the way things make you feel when you look at them, which is one of the reasons I am probably a very clumsy conceptualist. I think the opportunity – that you could arrive at a similar set of conclusions, or arrive at a completely different set of conclusions – is fascinating.

CA Can we talk a little bit about the *Anxious Men* series? It's almost like a return to drawing, so maybe you can tell me about the tradition of drawing in your own practice. What role does drawing play in this series, and how does the act of

erasing coexist with the creative gesture?

RJ So many things that I have made in my life have been about erasing. That's a very interesting observation and I'm glad you brought that up.

As far as their relationship to drawing, they are very much about drawing. I've become very interested in the line that I make. I think everyone has a line. It starts early, having watched my son, who is four now and has a signature – he can write his name. And the way that he writes his name is different from the way that I write his name, and will always be different. There is a profession of people whose job it is to tell if you have written your name as opposed to someone else's. So this idea of the line and authorship of the line is very intriguing to me. A lot of what happens with *Anxious Men* is an exploration of my line. What does my line look like? How do I author that line? What is my relationship to it? Oftentimes I do start with drawings, which is addictive for me. When I get to the final works, what I am doing is taking the melted bath of black soap and pouring it on the surface. And then it becomes completely about removal in order to make my line.

CA Do you cover the surface with the black soap completely?

RJ I cover the majority of it, and then I start removing what I don't need in order to conjure – in the case of this body of work – the presence of a face. That kind of removal is, while still investigating my line, ultimately what drawing is for me. I started this body of work a few years ago. I was in this very interesting place, having transitioned to a different time in my life, and I was feeling a tremendous amount of anxiety. There was only two ways for me to negotiate that: go to the gym, and then make these paintings because I needed to conjure myself out of this material. It was the material that was closest to me, which I was most familiar with.

A material like black soap is no longer just a signifying material to me, it's considerably bigger than that. Talking about what its capabilities are, meaning washing yourself with it, is no longer just a conceptual tool. It's *the* paint that I know how to use, *the* thing that I've used for years, that I understand better than any other material that I've used. Thinking about this anxiety, was different than what was happening in the work prior in a lot of ways, you have this construction and a very confident narrative-building. In that work there is this confidence of building on top of history – talking about Cose and Hurston, talking about theory and talking about construction – I am putting together these contradictions and it's all very knowing. The *Untitled Anxious Men* body of work is not knowing: it's questioning. There is a different kind of thing that's happening. It's humbling for me, the investigation of where you are as a person, and thinking about things that happen in the world that would cause this concern, is what I needed to express. You start thinking about fear, where these fears are coming from, which of them are self-generated, conditionally generated by my personal experience, and how many of them are generated by what's happening around us. Whether it would be a cop shooting people on the street or refugees in Syria or a young boy whom you realize you are responsible for teaching and showing the world to, and then realizing that the world is not one that you want to introduce them to, in its current condition. It's really all those very human concerns. I hope that in some ways they give people an opportunity to feel OK about their own fears and realize that they are not alone in having them.

CA Do you find the process of making these pieces...

RJ Cathartic? Absolutely. They are very much about this kind of catharsis.

CA Just for this specific series or in general?

RJ I think in general in some ways. I think that's something not only I but also a lot of artists would say. Some people exercise, some people go to therapy, some people

smoke pot, and some people make paintings and sculptures, and some people do all of those things. We all have ways to deal with what is an incredibly complicated condition, the one of being human, the one that's constantly evolving. I felt like I needed to make this body of work. It was probably the least researched thing I've ever done. It didn't speak to what I need; it spoke to what we know.

CA Could you talk about the process of making, with its marks, burns and very visceral gestures?

RJ In a piece like *Goodbye Derrick* I use brands as the marking making tool. There has always been something in me, a interest in drawing and in mark-making and in figuring out a challenging way to deal with those marks, and then giving the opportunity for how those marks are made to play a role in how we begin to construct what they mean and what they are. For instance, a work like *Goodbye Derrick* has marks made with these large steel welded shapes that I make and then put in a forge and burn the surface with. These brands become a different tool for drawing. The mark is made not through addition but by the removal of the material. I think some of that has to do with my background in photography. Something that's as simple as *taking* pictures already suggests that we are removing pictures from the world. The idea of removing something has always been interesting to me. Half of what I do as far as mark-making comes from removal, whether I am scratching the surface to make a line though taking away material, or digging as deeply into the surface of the material as I possibly can by burning it. This may come off as a tad romantic, but there is always this feeling that I want to bury myself in the material. I want the mark to not be erasable, to be permanent. I never want to make artwork that lives exclusively on the surface of the material. I am not just trying to colour things. I am trying to be a part of things. I just think that is how my brain works. I'm not positive I can give the reasons for that.

CA Can you talk a little bit more about the relationship between these works and your background in photography?

RJ Again, I think it starts with that idea of taking, or of removal. One tool from my relationship to photography is how I think about how images are composed, and about narrative-building. I think very much about a Cartier-Bresson photograph called the *Great Leap Forward*. In the photograph you see a man, I believe somewhere in Paris. It's a rainy day, and you see him jumping over a puddle – and we all assume he lands. We don't know what is going to happen, and there is this opportunity to speculate. Cartier-Bresson calls it the decisive moment.

I think, in some ways, my mark-making feels decisive, more than confident, but decisive. The mark is made; it's now inside of the work. It can't be erased. It has taken on this permanence. In the case of someone like Cartier-Bresson or Danny Lyon or Robert Frank – the great street photographers – this decisive moment is incredibly important. Their shutter speed is 1/30th of a second, 1/60th of a second, and my marks have a similar urgency to them: this mark happened and that mark is done. We can't take that mark away. I can go back to it. It's there. It marks a place and time. Photography, historically, has done such a good job of marking place and time.