

Press Release

Rashid Johnson. Waves

Hauser & Wirth London

6 October - 23 December 2020



Unfolding across the entirety of both the gallery's London spaces, an exhibition dedicated exclusively to the works of renowned contemporary American artist Rashid Johnson opens on 6 October 2020. The exhibition brings together new paintings and ceramic tile mosaics evolving from Johnson's recurring themes of anxiety and escapism – subjects of poignant relevance in today's socio-political climate. Johnson's work has never ceased to confront the complexity of the human condition and the strenuous spaces we negotiate. This exhibition reveals the constant metamorphosis of Johnson's works, as he explains, 'I am interested in how these recurring themes are able to pivot in order to speak to the times we live in'.

Among these new works is a collection of sculptural paintings in which the canvas is replaced by a mosaic of fractured ceramic glazed by Johnson in his studio, as well as wood, brass, oyster shell, spray paint and mirrored tiles. These constitute a continuation of Johnson's Broken Men and Broken Crowd series. Between all the fragments contained in the works, a lyrical connectivity is at play, binding together these decade-spanning series. Within these bustling compositions of cracked colour and line, rudimentary renderings of human figures come to the forefront. These wild and agitated faces evolved from Johnson's Anxious Men series; wherein anonymous, abstracted faces are rendered in black wax on a grid of white tiles. With these new, ever-complex mosaics, the artist pushes the anxiety of the figures, both metaphorically and physically, to breaking point. Whether grouped or solitary, these 'broken men' speak to the collective and individual identities in the midst of shifting social realities. Contemporary sensibilities are deconstructed and reassembled in Johnson's collages, resulting in works of resounding catharsis.

Johnson updates the visual language of his long-established Anxious Men in new works as part of his Anxious Red Paintings series, which began as drawings made during and in reaction to the global lockdown, leading Johnson to produce expansive oil paintings. Using oil on linen and a blood red medium for the first time to depict

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the deceptively crude archetypal faces, Johnson has captured the 'life and death' urgency that has separated and connected communities around the globe. This red pigment, entitled *Anxious Red*, was created specially by Johnson for these paintings. The opacity and slippery texture of the medium itself brings a mobility to the works: a nod to the importance of movement and gesture within Johnson's oeuvre. Just as Johnson selects his typical materials and tools - such as shea butter and black soap - for the importance of their historical narratives, here he has chosen to use the canonically significant, and universally recognisable, medium of oil paint in order to communicate his message all the more urgently. As Johnson himself says, 'this body of works does not hide from its ambition to be understood'. As such, his *Anxious Red* Paintings can be read as history paintings for our times.

A new large-scale bronze sculpture by Rashid Johnson, 'Stacked Heads' (2020) will also be installed at Hauser & Wirth Somerset, made up of two imposing, black patinated busts standing ten feet tall and brimming with plants. Johnson will also display a participatory installation and sound work entitled 'Rashid Johnson: Stage' at MoMA PS1, New York, from 17 September 2020 – Fall 2021, drawing on the history of the microphone as a tool for protest and public speaking and its significance in hip-hop lyrics from the 1980s to the present.

About the artist

Johnson's multidisciplinary practice spans sculpture, painting, drawing, filmmaking, and installation, incorporating a diverse range of materials and objects, significant in their engagement with African-American and other African diasporic communities. His work explores themes of art history, individual and shared cultural identities, personal narratives, literature, philosophy, materiality and critical history.

To date, Johnson has incorporated materials and items as diverse as CB radios, shea butter, literature, record covers, gilded rocks, black soap and tropical plants. Many of Johnson's works convey rhythms of the occult and mystic: demonstrating his desire to transform and expand each included object's field of association in the process of reception.

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Gallery hours:

Tuesday to Saturday, 10 am – 6 pm

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Rashid Johnson in the studio
2020
Photo: Axel Dupeux

Rashid Johnson
The Broken Five
2020
Ceramic tile, mirror tile, spray enamel, oil stick, black soap, wax
250.2 x 430.5 cm
Photo: Martin Parsekian

Rashid Johnson
Anxious Red Painting August 6th
2020
Oil on linen
239.1 x 305.1 x 5.1 cm
Photo: Martin Parsekian