

HAIL WE NOW SING JOY

A visual diary of the African-American experience

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Written in a bold yellow color, "Rashid Johnson: Hail We Now Sing Joy" covers the glass wall which leads into the Milwaukee Art Museum's first floor exhibition. *Antoine's Organ*, a complex contemporary work which utilizes black bookshelves and hundreds of live plants, is visible through the glass and acts as a frame for the title of the exhibition. Towering over viewers, the shelves hold stacks of books and display films which focus on the black experience. The prominent location of the piece introduces the relationship between African history and modern racial identity which persists throughout *Hail We Now Sing Joy*. Johnson drew inspiration from the intersection of different identities, including personal, cultural and racial, to construct an exhibition which discretely operates as a visual diary.¹ The exhibition title itself draws on African American history as the name of a jazz song by the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

Johnson uses unique materials like shea butter and black soap to draw on West African roots in the majority of his pieces. Their traditional healing powers

make them widely used in African American households and tied to identity formation. Johnson uses materials involved in his personal development to mark change throughout the exhibition. In addition to *Antoine's Organ*, the exhibition features three series—*Falling Man*, *Escape Collage* and *Anxious Audience*. In the *Falling Man* series, Johnson used white ceramic tile, mirror pieces and black soap to create figures which appear pixelated – like video game characters – and pay reference to his gaming as a child. While the figures are highly abstract, they appear violent and disturbing. In the middle of the room, Johnson created a sculpture by stacking shea butter on top of a worktable which is covered with a Persian rug. The piece has a balancing effect in the room which is otherwise graphic in its video game depictions.

For the *Escape Collage* series, Johnson splattered black soap and wax across canvases, depicting tropical imagery. Growing up in Chicago, Johnson viewed tropical environments as ideal and reflected on it in the series description. "As a kid, I remember thinking that if

you could actually live in a place with palm trees, if you could get away from this city and the cold, that meant you definitely made it," Johnson says.

Filling the final room of the exhibition, the *Anxious Audience* series uses repetition to cause an unsettled feeling in viewers. Several canvases feature rows of sketched faces; but instead of creating the images through adding color, Johnson scratched off black soap applied to white ceramic tile to make the faces. The removal process causes the series to give off a feeling of emptiness which pushes audience members to seek out what is missing. *Anxious Audience* prompts conversation on modern racial tension and societal instability, because it evokes feelings which are associable with the helplessness they inflict.

Through the use of African materials closely related to Johnson's personal identity, he constructs an exhibition packed with double meaning and an important record of the individual African American experience. ■

¹Milwaukee Art Museum



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