

RASHID JOHNSON BROKEN TILES AS BROKEN MEN

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Through his deliberate and methodologically chosen media and materials, Rashid Johnson manages to establish references to the African identity and associates his latest body of work with developments in recent political history.

Johnson is an African-American conceptual artist, born in Chicago in 1977. After earning a BFA from Columbia College Chicago in 2000, he went on to receive his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.¹ His works span the disciplines of photography, painting, video, installation, and sculpture.²

At the age of twenty-one, Johnson initially rose to prominence while taking part in the group show “Freestyle” at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which included twenty-eight emerging Afro-American artists and was curated by Thelma Golden.³ This milestone might be one of the reasons why Rashid Johnson is often hailed as a standard-bearer for post-black art. Golden stated in the exhibition catalog, that post-black art includes artists who are “adamant about not being labelled ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply

interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.”⁴ Whereas Johnson once commented: “I like to say that I’m not sure what ‘post-black’ is, since I’m definitely still black.”⁵

In 2002, he had his first museum exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Since then, his works have been exhibited in solo shows in various institutions, including the Lisimore Castle Arts (2018); the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Arts (2017); the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art (2016); the Galleria d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea (2016); the Drawing Center, New York (2015); and the Kunsthalle Winterthur (2014).

More recently, the artist has once again attracted international attention with *Antoine’s Organ* (2016), which stood out at the Art Basel Unlimited in 2018, where he arranged seemingly unrelated, heterogeneous objects into a black steel scaffolding architectural grid, visually evoking forms associated with containment, rigor, and organization.⁶

Johnson’s work is known for its narrative embedding of a pointed range of everyday materials and objects, often associated with his childhood

and frequently referencing collective aspects of African-American intellectual history and cultural identity. To date, Johnson has incorporated elements, materials, and items as diverse as CB radios, shea butter, literature, record covers, gilded rocks, black soap, and tropical plants.⁷ Many of Johnson’s works convey occult and mystic rhythms: evoking his desire to transform and expand each included object’s field of association in the process of reception.⁸ For instance, he refers to his use of shea butter as a means of “psychological cleansing, as well as a physical cleansing.”⁹

The work *Untitled Broken Men* is composed of sculptural paintings in which Johnson utilized pieces of broken ceramic tiles to form mosaics which depict one or many rectangular shaped faces. The faces in this series are assembled in a similar way: they are predominantly shaped by black tiles, surrounded by white and some scattered mirrored or colorful tiles. Materials like black soap and wax were added and frequently used throughout his oeuvre.

The oval, hollow-looking eyes seem to be wide open in alertness, and the mouths are formed into



a rectangular shape, suggesting frozen grimaces. Such facial expressions are by no means a strange occurrence in Rashid Johnson’s work, since they are based on the widely exhibited series *Anxious Men*, where the artist carved abstracted faces in black wax applied on white tiles. The artist has stated that this series was his response to the geopolitical and social events at the time, including the political uncertainty during the presidential election in the USA in 2016.¹⁰

Johnson has used ceramic tiles in his works before, but in *Broken Men*, he began to use it in the form of shattered pieces, putting them together to reveal a mosaic. Johnson says that he was inspired by the streets in Barcelona and the Miró Museum there.¹¹ In the previous *Anxious Men* series, the act of building the work was very different: Carving the faces in hardening wax was a very intuitive and

brisk act.¹² Producing a work using small pieces of tiles is a much slower and more deliberate process. Johnson comments that in the mosaics: “the image is born in the surface, not applied to it.”¹³

Rashid Johnson acquired the tiles from a factory in Italy. He says: “I don’t need to make my own tile colors because I am not invested in inventing new things in the world—I am interested in combining things that exist in the world, giving them new characteristics based on the relationships they gain through combination.”¹⁴

The ceramic busts are an additional way to develop the idea of the anxious and broken men into the field of sculpture, inspired by his own shea butter sculptures. The busts are intended to be exhibited with inserted plants, which is emphasized by the organic and soil-like form of the busts themselves.¹⁵

In conversation with Nicola Erni, Johnson described the busts as a kind of totem, not only because of the visual similarities. As they are habitats for plants, the water they are given brings them back to life: “These *Broken Men* (...) are broken and we cannot unbreak them. That doesn’t mean we can’t grow, experience beauty, see the world through fresh, optimistic eyes (...).”¹⁶

Untitled Bust, 2018
Kiln fired clay with glaze
31 x 26 x 20.5 cm

Untitled Bust, 2018
Kiln fired clay with glaze
44.5 x 30.5 x 28 cm

Untitled Broken Men, 2018
Ceramic tile, mirror tile, spray enamel, oil stick, black soap, wax
126.5 x 95.5 x 5.5 cm

