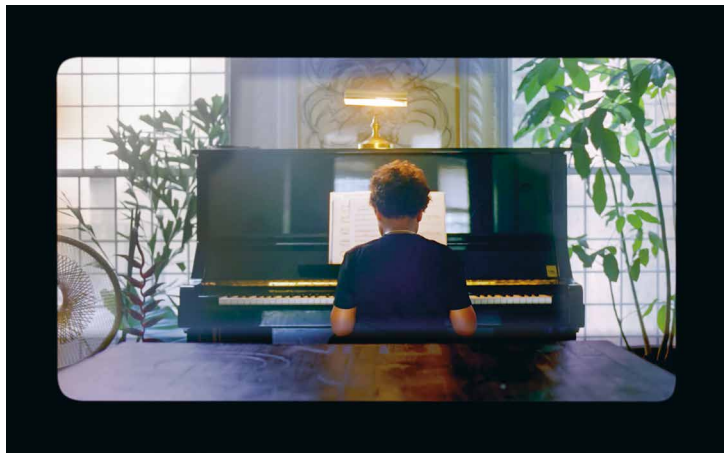


# THINKING-IN-ACTION

## A Conversation between Rashid Johnson and Kevin Quashie

This is an edited transcript of a conversation held on June 28, 2023, at 4:00 p.m. (EST) between artist Rashid Johnson and cultural critic Kevin Quashie. It lasted one hour and forty-six minutes.





Kevin Quashie: Can you start off by saying something about the title of the exhibition, *Seven Rooms and a Garden*?<sup>1</sup> There's such a simplicity, such a quotidian, ordinary, domestic scene that's articulated by that. I'm just in love with its intellectual lyricism.

KQ In your engagement of what might be called the domestic or domestic artifacts, you seem to be making domesticity into a site to think about gender. In your film *Black and Blue* [2021, see pp. 2–5 and 60–63], there are these everyday sequences that are largely set in a domestic space. There are some outside scenes of the protagonist, played by you, running in the woods, but mostly we're seeing your hands doing things. We're seeing the suppleness and the intimacy of hands at work,

Rashid Johnson: When you say *simplicity*, you're really starting to capture what and how the show attempts to deliver on a series of thoughts, especially in a scenario where my work and my ideas are in negotiation with Moderna Museet's collection—with that collection having its own history and legacy, having been stewarded by so many different folks over time. The thinking behind the title was to keep it quite simple and poetic and fairly direct, to try not to step on all of the rigor and all of the density that run through the exhibition.

You used another word that I think is really effective in how I've described my work in the past, which is *domestic*, this idea of domesticity in how one has access to things that are close to them. The idea of home, which informed the choice of the title as well, helps me think about some of the ideas around interiority and its relationship to home, thinking about the inside space that you own, the space that you get to produce and define. The title is born of some of those ideas and simplicity really being at the heart of it.

holding a book, opening oysters, and so forth. There's this way in which you use domesticity to open up thinking about masculinity and maybe even specifically ideas about black masculinity, rather than gendered femaleness, which is often the place where we locate domesticity.

*Black and Blue* houses exhaustion and boredom and a kind of slow quality, but also a frenetic quality. I just love how you're not afraid of the temporality and the philosophical openness that domesticity can offer us. Even thinking about the risk of being caught in a room, or stuck in a room with other people, like many of us were through parts of the pandemic. I really admire the way that for you the domestic becomes an engagement to think about an existential condition, moreover an existential condition of one or many inhabitants of masculinity.

RJ This really is central to how I think about being a maker, very much anchored in this idea of masculinity being conjured and considered in ways that are quite different. Interestingly enough, something that I've heard you talk about is the labor of something. Thinking about labor outside of how we have traditionally imagine labor. And you talked about reading as labor, an active labor.

So you find my protagonist over the course of that film looking at images, and at one point I'm reading in the kitchen with my son and my wife. She's kind of giving him a look and he's reading, and it's like we're all participating in this labor. As you suggest, your boredom becomes active in it. You very rarely see a black male outside of active performance. We think quite a bit about the potential of a black body performing as an athlete or the black body performing as the victim of aggression. But not the black body living with the agency or the opportunity for boredom, the body not doing, something that has long been associated with the feminine . . . The

KQ That scene around the kitchen table, the one you just described, calls to mind Carrie Mae Weems's *Kitchen Table Series*.<sup>3</sup> In your rendering, the kitchen table is a locale of incredible action that is happening at a pace that is at once slow and intense. There's all the labor and work that you're talking about that might be hard to see if we are only attuned to a certain kind of activity from the black subject and especially from the black male subject. There isn't a lot of dialogue and so much of it is quiet, but at the same time there's so much sound in the scene, including the exchange between the mother and the son.

There's a sound when you, as the protagonist, get up, bring back the pitcher of water, pour it, and drink some. Later, one hears the sound of you picking up the book. This soundedness exemplifies the activity lurking in such a small quiet scene.

I love attending to that scene so closely because it's emblematic of what I think you do so well with the domestic, that you highlight the complexion of time,

male is often seen as actively producing or using their body for labor to assist in the family's well-being.

I wanted to think quite differently about that. But it also is a reflection on how I understand the creative impulse. There's so much research on the reality that creativity often comes from inactivity, from sitting, from being bored, from finding time to daydream.

We so rarely give a black character, a black protagonist, a chance to be private, not public. This chimes with your ideas on interiority in the book *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, the parallel between interiority and agency.<sup>2</sup> The notion of the domestic gives us a chance to create an opacity for the black character, shielded by those walls that house us.

movement, action, and consequence. Confusion too, because the scene *seems* easy and simple—and it is that, easy and simple—but it also holds the fraughtness of being-with, as each of the three characters is doing the thing they're doing in company with each other, which is in sync, but not only in sync.

Again, your art raises the profile of domestic and interior action. Even when the protagonist is outside jogging, wearing all black and filmed from behind, the suspense of his moving vulnerability ties back to the suspense and suspension of ordinariness when he's in a white bathrobe brushing his teeth in the white bathroom. Through the aesthetic of slow and ordinary, the tension of his being outside becomes part of the domestic scene, when you remember that it's the same person in both scenes. The exterior scene amplifies the domestic scene.<sup>4</sup>

I'm so taken by that as a kind of aesthetic intervention made by your use of the domestic.

RJ I love some of what you're capturing and the nuance that you're recognizing in how I have approached making the film. There's a couple of things in particular, but one of the more obvious to some, although not to as many as I'd hoped, is the allusion to Carrie Mae Weems's *Kitchen Table Series*.

Part of the inspiration for that scene is to create an opportunity to put myself in this situation, in this story. I love that body of work of hers, and I love the way that it made me recognize the humanity and the condition of blackness. So few works prior had exercised the same muscles. So rarely had I seen this opportunity for simplicity like we've spoken about; for humanity, right outside of any more ambitious kind of content or activation; for the black body performing outside of how we have become accustomed to it, in terms of satisfying our interest in

KQ It reminds me of a distinction I try to make between *silence* and *quiet*. That you can't say that that's a silent scene because it's populated with sound. But even the sound of the mother, your wife, in the film talking to your son, your son reading and her saying, "Remember to cross your T," even that sound is quiet. There's something about the way in which the sound is being delivered on a register of preciseness, that is asking us to have to attend to, to listen to sound differently.

black bodies as activist bodies. Seeing that body of work from Carrie really made me say, this is something I want to imagine and dig into. And to your point, the sound in the kitchen scene in *Black and Blue* was the scene that I spent the most time with. It really was the scene where I took a granular approach to how I colored it with sound.

RJ When people talk about the way that sound was used in that film, they often talk about the music. They talk about the early intro moment with the Chicago Art Ensemble, creating this weird kind of space for the avant-garde. And then, of course, my son is playing Louis Armstrong's song "Black and Blue," which is a Fats Waller song originally. The song plays a major role in the exhibition as well. I always think of the song through the eyes of Armstrong, especially considering how complicated the lyrics are.<sup>5</sup> And of course, there is a reference to the song in Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* . . .<sup>6</sup>

So here I'm thinking about how Ellison uses it as this muse for *Invisible Man*. And so that stuff is important, but it's a much lower-hanging fruit to be honest as far as how the soundscape of that film functions. It's incredibly rewarding for me to hear that you were listening to the space in between the space. That space that I like to think of as liminal space. The spaces where we learn the most, or at least I do, is in those liminal spaces,



in those moments that we don't imagine are going to give us as much. There's actually a symbol I've been using quite a bit recently in my paintings. It's referred to as the *vesica piscis*, which is a kind of almond shape [see p. 34]. The shape is the space between two circles that overlap, the liminal space.

This goes off-topic a bit, but also very much into the subject of liminality. I was reading this great quote recently. Willem de Kooning goes to his fellow painter Philip Guston, who I'm quite interested in because of his use of Ku Klux Klan figures, and thus how he imagined his relationship to more problematic imagery. De Kooning says to Guston, "I think that your subject matter is freedom." I just fell in love with that idea for several reasons.

Who doesn't love the idea of freedom? I mean it is really a fascinating thing to define as one's subject. If you were to ask anyone, "Would you rather be free or something else?" Then freedom is likely what everyone will choose. So I asked myself at that point, What is the subject matter of my project? It's something I'd never even really considered, to be honest. Of course, I thought about describing my practice, and I've been able to put many words to how my project functions and what its ambitions are. But if I were to use one notion, one idea, where would it live? The idea of freedom is an option, but it is really *liminality*: my overarching inquiry is into the in-between spaces, the ungraduated, on the journey of. It feels like this is at the heart of my thinking, and it's destabilizing in a way. I wish there was something more heroic that I could give to it when I asked myself this question—liminality being the response is an answer I'm incredibly challenged by.

I think the kitchen scene and several other scenes in *Black and Blue*, and in other aspects of my work as

KQ It makes sense to me that you'd use that word, *liminality*, to describe the subject matter of your project. Surely, the term applies when I think about your *Seascape* painting series [see pp. 36–37] or the *Bruise* or *Anxious Man* series [see p. 35], where we are engaged with a reiterative process of the script or the figure being in a state of unfurling or becoming.

The suspension that one can read in some of the *Seascape* paintings makes me think of the great Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant and his discussion about the open boat.<sup>7</sup> So we've got what looks like these boat figures, the boat itself being this iconic representation of the transatlantic slave trade, this enduring experience of terror. Glissant theorizes the boat—on open water and under the night sky—as full of risk and violation but also of creativity, and possibility. For me, there

well, these undefined moments become manifest. These moments that leave you with questions rather than fully graduate to answers. I feel like this is an area of cultural production that tends to be underexplored. I think that there's oftentimes an ambition for didacticism in the work of black cultural producers, because we really want to be understood. We feel that our publicness, as you've described it in your book, has come at the expense of us not being understood as individuals or even as a collective. We're doing all this work to correct the wrongs about the collective us, not even allowing space for us to begin to unpack the individual character outside of that. We're still wrestling with public perception.

Those kinds of nuanced spaces that I try to put emphasis on in *Black and Blue* are really an attempt at starting to capture some of the agency that's born of not having to focus on a more broad, collective scope where the work is forced to teach.

is a connection between Glissant's open boat and your *Seascape* figures, a connection to your beautiful thinking about creativity—the possibility of the in-between, which I read as the way in which so much of your work invites a sense of recognizing practice or possibility.

Earlier, as I was looking at some of your work, I was reading some Lucille Clifton poems as well as some writing by Emily Dickinson. There's something about how both of those poets manifest thinking-in-action in small poems that just seemed so resonant with your approach. There's this thinking-in-action quality in *Seascape*, in the way that those repeated yet differentiated figures of the boat become vehicle after vehicle after vehicle. They're almost in motion then, right, you're almost watching them move.

RJ Absolutely. You're watching them and feeling you're in the waves, encountering a complicated terrain within the nautical space.

I had really hoped that people would approach this figure of the boat from multiple directions. You mentioned the complicated history of the transatlantic trade of African people, that you almost have to negotiate that idea in the space of the work. It's a given that this comes up and it would be foolish for me to suggest, Oh no, that doesn't belong in my thinking. I am incredibly conscious of how my exterior form and the legacies and histories of how I got here inform the reading of my project. That's one of the things that I think is incredibly complicated and leads to a very fertile space for artists of African descent in America in particular. There is a series of events that inherently will inform the reading of our projects. It's unavoidable . . . This idea that one can just be outside of the exterior condition affecting that identity, in particular black folks in this country, is absurd in some respect.

And so it's something that artists have to negotiate. That negotiation has led to countless, very long, and intense conversations and sleepless nights, asking how do I understand the inherited condition? How do I find space to use my own language? How do I find an identity that doesn't dismiss those histories, but gives me space to create my own understanding of the world through all of the existential opportunities that are born of it and the idea of the transcendental?

We've made a playlist for the exhibition *Seven Rooms and a Garden*. One of the songs is Mothers of Invention's "Absolutely Free." Frank Zappa uses a word at the beginning of the song, which is *discorporate*, like a sense of being outside of your body. So much of what has been challenging to black artists is how do I discorporate without necessarily abandoning the realities of how my history and our collective histories have informed me? I want all of it! Stop making me choose from one side of the buffet. The question is, who has made you choose? Have you been asked to choose, or have you produced these restrictions yourself?

It's a really long and challenging position, and I've often said that race as a subject for me is one that I come by honestly. And one that I'm not employing. It's not for the purpose of finding a way to create content. It really lives in my thinking. I'm in a very sincere way intrigued by it, not angered, because I don't like the idea that my interest in race and identity is one that is inherently negative, because it's not inherently negative for me. It's an opportunity, and it creates a series of problems that gives me a chance to think about how one would go about solving them. It's been fascinating that whiteness and whiteness studies, and this ambition to imagine white cultural identity, is forcing artists who historically

KQ I think that's part of the success for me, the way that you use a kind of formalism: the intentionality of the line made over and again. These carvings or etchings that produce these boat-shaped forms that are only called "boat" because we've identified that shape in a particular context of signification. The formalism is an invitation to grapple with how quickly we turn the form into a sign of something that we understand, which makes sense because that's available to us. And how quickly the iterative nature of those forms across the canvas is asking us to consider where Glissant's spectacular poetics take us, to you pointing to the open thrall of that vehicle, which entails both the terror of being in open night on open water and the breathtaking freedom one might imagine of being on open water, on open night.

have not had to imagine their exterior self as constitutive to their production, to become aware of themselves in a very, very different way—in the way that women and queer folks and people of color have always been in the process of negotiating.

Just taking from what you said about the boat, and how we can imagine it informing my thinking. In other ways, the boat is just a vehicle. It's a very simple thing. It's simple lines. It's kind of canoe-like. I kept thinking, this is a space for autonomy. I could imagine a body leisurely lying in that vehicle and going or not going, being led, being taken, being given space. With all of the thinking about collectiveness and coalition building that the last few years in particular has brought us, some of that comes at the expense of autonomy. Do we not need our thinkers and our artists and our philosophers to be invested in autonomy? These boats were a way to think about all of that.

KQ Right! The formalism produces that. Across your work, this points to your use of abstraction; the kind of cryptographic or hieroglyphic markings that you use that are not devoid of figural capacity. Or in *Black and Blue*, which, as you note, opens with visual and sonic moments that don't fit or produce a clear narrative.

I read you as asking me as a reader, as someone who's trying to encounter the work thoughtfully, to not lose sight of the capacity of what abstraction offers us for thinking about art, making, being, being alive. If you want to add the word *black* in front of *art* or *abstraction*, you can, but whatever the case, not lose the abstraction in what looks like the figurative and in what looks like the clear narrative. That's part of the beauty of your use of the domestic, because you, like Carrie Mae Weems, do it in this way that all of a sudden this scene that seems clear and commonplace and understandable radiates with so much meaning and complexity.

KQ Yeah, which book were you reading?

RJ Absolutely, and the potential poetry of it all.

RJ It can become complicated and dense in ways that you never expect. I was reading a lot of Frank O'Hara at the time and then mixing that with the work of Amiri Baraka, his poetry volume *The Dead Lecturer*. Then I was given a gift by a friend, a copy of *Huckleberry Finn* that was previously owned by a twelve-year-old Amiri Baraka. These kinds of combinations of things, these ideas of the unexpected. When you become aware, and you refamiliarize yourself with this idea that everything affects everything, that we don't live in a vacuum, that we've never lived in a vacuum. It's funny, I was just reading a book by Paul Beatty—are you familiar with Paul Beatty's work?

RJ I was reading *Slumberland*, which is the one book that I hadn't read.<sup>8</sup> It was really the most brilliant book, filled with these great little nuggets. Beatty creates these moments where he, you know, catches guys like us and it just hits you in the gut a little bit. There is a moment in the book when one character is talking to another and says to them, "Don't try to impress me with your knowledge of white people things." [*Laughs.*] And it was about this Black character trying to explain to a white character something about rock music. He said, "Don't try to impress me with your knowledge of white people things." It was this moment where I thought to myself, Oh shit, I feel like I know that experience.

So back to the point, and it's a floating point more or less: meaning is so easily straddled. To go back a point that you made in *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, when you discuss that iconic image of the athletes John Carlos and Tommie Smith raising their fists as the American national anthem is playing at the 1968 Olympics medal ceremony. As you've argued, it's so easy to get lost in this idea that they are performing an action whose entire ambition is to create agency and opportunity for disenfranchised people, and to not explore the potential that they are satisfying something outside of that singular and overly prescribed concept of them trying to be activist. In your book, you're imagining that there's something happening in their interior life, you give us space to imagine that Tommie could be thinking about his mother. That Tommie could be thinking about . . . they were both barefoot I think, so bear with me on the simplicity here, but that they could be concerned with their bare feet and that exposure.

KQ I keep coming back to this thing about that phrase, *thinking-in-action*, because moments in *Black and Blue*

ask me as a viewer to imagine that this protagonist is a person who is thinking things. I don't mean thinking discrete and deliberate and clear things, but the representation of thought's capacious process. So that when the focus is on the protagonist lying in bed, eyes open, book across his chest, *something* is going on in his mind. And it's this kind of zoning into what we could see as a domestic arrival of a black male figure. This astuteness in your film rhymes with these two black men on the podium in 1968, arms raised, one whose head is bowed, this moment that is asking us to see not just the grace and beauty and force of their acts but also to imagine what are they feeling, thinking.

KQ It's just to be able to come close to the grave, incredible beauty of these two human beings doing this thing that we can only partly read.

RJ We give no space for ambiguity to them. None.

RJ What we take away is the humanity of John Carlos and Tommie Smith, when we employ them exclusively as activist tools. And those images are dispersed and consistently used this way. I saw Angela Davis speak recently. I think about her and the complicated way that we imagine her. Her entire person is almost frozen in time; as an activist, as a young woman, as this young thinker with the Afro and what she represented then. This idea of an icon and the production of the iconography that's born out of that.

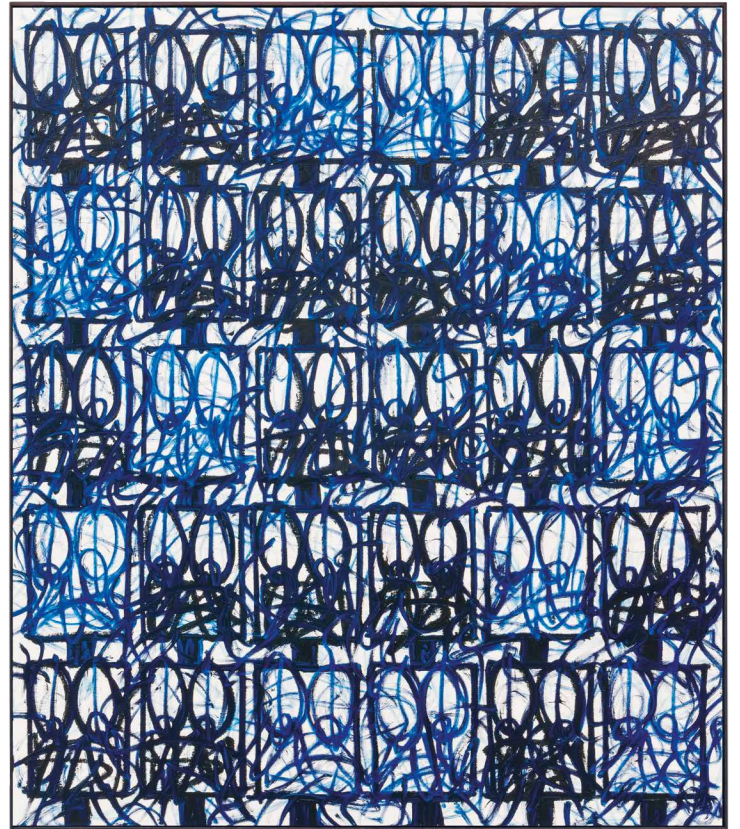
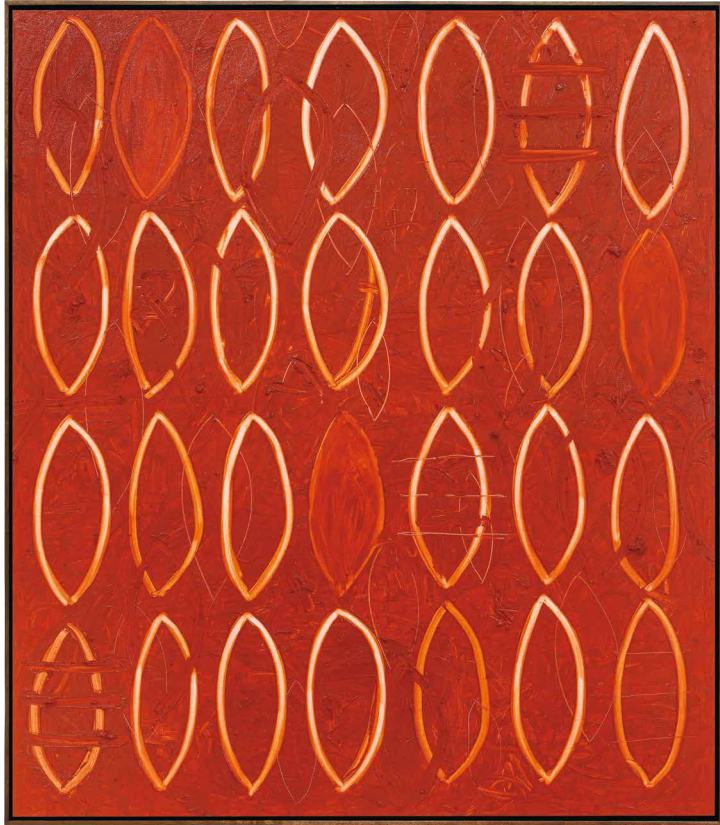
You use a word that I want to use as an opportunity to ask you something. You mentioned this idea of "multiplicity" and it makes me think of kind of a multiplicity or I'd even call it a poly-consciousness. And then to consider W. E. B. Du Bois and his suggestion of two-ness.<sup>9</sup> I just want to understand, because I was so taken by *The Sovereignty of Quiet* and your challenge



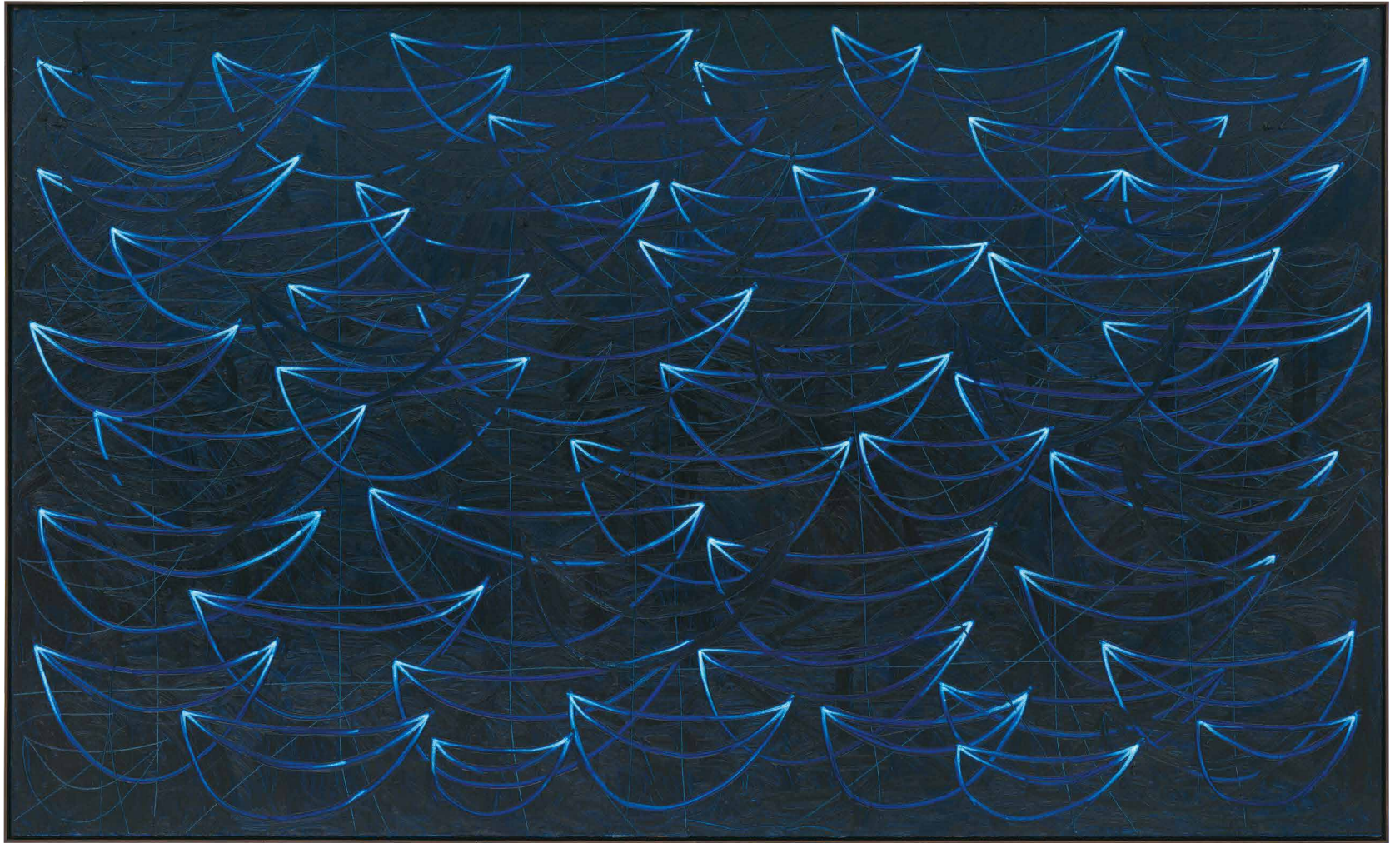
KQ For me, it was the gift of a cohort of black female thinkers who were asking those questions about gender and sexuality and class as part of the figuring of their racial identity. It's here that the binary of double consciousness just starts to fracture a little bit—the double consciousness that is utterly useful as a way to theorize something about a US-American national psychic formation, but it's on such a scale of iconicity that its utility to any of us might be limited.

If our entry into thinking about the existential condition accepts wholesale this binary frame, we blunt some of the language that we have to represent our irreconcilable grappling with *being*. I always felt a bit like you, that one is not only always thinking of and through this fracture. There might be others. If I can say it even in a more intimate way, that seeing these images of Smith and Carlos and being aware of how I was called by their image. I was struck by their beauty. I was struck by the elegance of what they were doing. I was struck by the composedness of their bodies. I didn't immediately read it as a sign against the racialized militarism of the United States, against racism. Surely it is that and still, the young person I was wondered, Who are these men? It's not unlike my encounter with the cover of John Coltrane's iconic album *A Love Supreme*, that image of Coltrane's face.

to Du Bois, whose notion of two-ness had become such a framed space to understand black duality. I've kind of evolved from thinking about the two-ness that he suggested, to thinking about poly-ness. Two-ness is not big enough, that is not a big enough space for me to even imagine myself occupying. That doesn't leave space for sexuality. It doesn't leave space for gender. I mean, how am I to fit in the space that he produced for me or for us at that point?











KQ Yes, thinking-in-action. Thinking-in-action. This is why I'm so taken by the happenings in *Black and Blue*. Let me give you another example. Part of the work in that film is the canon that you've been working with, not just a canon of books, but a canon of objects, like the oyster shells and so on. It's almost like you're rescripting canonicity so that the books are black objects and the oyster shells become black objects. There's something about how you, as the protagonist and artist, compel me to recognize all these objects as the thinking and practice of a black artist.

I'm glad to be reminded that there's a whole world of a canon that you as a black artist, a black male artist, an artist, a person, a human, is calling on. And then to be reminded for myself to think about, what's the canon I'm drawing on?

RJ In profile, with the light. That is so filled with interiority . . . It's a moment of black thought that is almost unparalleled.

RJ Absolutely, and the chance to think about how one builds an iconography. How we can parcel the different things that we've acquired or are at the center of our concerns into that, and then disperse those things and give them the opportunity to signify in different ways over the course of their employment. That is so important to how I think about objects and materials. As you bring them in, you are also bringing in the ideas and objects that already lived in them, so you're kind of borrowing and it becomes inherently collaborative at that point. This is how I color it, as you said, and then the people receiving it and imagining it, they have their own relationship to the thing. Again, it's this employment of something and you realize you can't fully capture or ever fully own or color it in a way that is exclusively

yours. That to me is one of the beautiful things to negotiate with the world when I make art.

In your work and writing, of course, it's words—words are these incredible vehicles. I love the way that you have kind of taken the word *quiet* and started to define it how you want to define it. You've made it malleable, and you've given it kind of space to be understood in your hands. How you've paired it and thought about it in relation to silence. You write about the fact that people think of them as synonymous, but they have completely different characteristics when we start to get into the more granular meanings and become rigorous in our investigation of these terms. I use words in that way in some of my work. But sometimes an object like an oyster shell does that for me.

Zora Neale Hurston's essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" comes to mind. She says, "I am not tragically colored, I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife."<sup>10</sup> So when I have an oyster and an oyster knife, Hurston is with me. I'm hearing her. She's a vehicle through which I color my thinking and my relationship to that particular material. In the hands of someone else or being witnessed by someone else, that antecedent is not present. The opportunity that it has to then speak using a different voice becomes quite interesting.

The word *quiet* in the hands of another author will mean something considerably different. *Silence* will mean something considerably different. *Aliveness* will mean something considerably different. The reason that I make what I make is because as things that come through, they get washed by me, then they go back out into the world and a little bit of my DNA is on them now. I love being part of this, part of that shared discourse, that shared dialogue, that shared opportunity,

KQ At the very beginning, you talked about how one parcels the things that one has come in contact with. These objects that the protagonist in *Black and Blue* reads, lives with, learns from, has come in contact with, but which he does not possess—he doesn't own them as much as they are part of this process with him. He's possessed by them. People who are familiar with the long arc of your work can see the kind of citation of a canon and understand how you are performing exactly what you just said. You are articulating ways in which objects or things you've encountered have become important to you or help you articulate or make or create, indeed to inhabit that liminality. Your work, by virtue of its openness, offers up these objects with the knowledge that they will travel with someone else in their own way.

that collective engagement. The most generous way to perform using different objects and materials is to catch and release.

RJ There is new legibility in these objects, in that they can be collected and made available and interpreted through the lens that I provide, but also be given complete agency to function in the way that they were brought to me.

It's a simple idea. I've always thought of my project as being one whose intention was to be generous. I stay away from certain kind of descriptors for art that I find challenging. One of the words I find challenging is *transparency*. If you asked most people, they would probably prefer *transparency* over *opacity*. However, the reality is they probably wouldn't. I mean, I can't speak for other folks, but I think *transparency* is something that people imagine that they want more than they actually do. But sincerity and generosity are things that are almost

KQ I want to ask you about texture and touch in your work. At the moment, I am interested in thinking about hands. Hands show up as a metaphor in poetry by some writers that I'm thinking with. But I come to hands through thinking about the word *here*, the indexical word in English that is at once precise and imprecise. If I say, "Here," I know I have some sense of exactly what I mean, even as that word does not do enough to point anyone precisely to an exacting position. I love the kind of precise imprecision of *here* as an articulation. There

never bad. It's almost never wrong to make available or to feel there is an openness to give. So whether something is opaque or transparent is not a factor I'm overly concerned with, but I am concerned with this idea that I can provide several ways to read my project, or various entrance points for you to understand a work. Sometimes I make them fully available in the form of just putting the book that I've read on the surface. It's right here, I'm not trying to hide here. This isn't magic, right? I'm not interested in magic. I'm not interested in the found object, this idea of the object as a heroic tool. I'm not. I like discovery. I like searching for something when it comes into my project. That's why I often use things in multiples. I'm much more interested in the idea of an object as a repeatable thing. Almost everything is repeatable!

For example, I include books in my installations *Home* [2023] and *Antoine's Organ* [2016, see pp. 38–39]. I say, okay, here's James Baldwin's book *The Fire Next Time*, and I'll put a stack of twenty of them in the work. I didn't just find *The Fire Next Time*, I looked for it. I am showing you this as a mark-making tool, as an opportunity for you to see my commitment to it, my willingness to expose my thinking. Here's all the stuff I'm trying to convey. I'm not alone, I'm reaching out.



are some poets who use the word *here* in striking ways, and I'm thinking about *here* almost as a sermon invocation. One can imagine Baby Suggs in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, who says, "Here . . . in this here place, we flesh."<sup>11</sup> And how that word *here* instantiates a way for every person in that collective to have to find their struggle to be here. Because your *here* and my *here* are not the same, although we are called to be in company with each other by that *here*. There is an invocation of *here* in your work as well. One of the ways I understand that is how prominent hands are in *Black and Blue*, but also how prominent texture and your deliberateness to expose texture is in your line work—say in the carvings of *Seascape*. The exposure of texture is part of a formalism and a lyricism in your practice. And even in some of your paintings, the deliberateness of the line is calling me, as a viewer, to want to touch that.

RJ Texture and touch are really central in my practice and always have been, from the very early stages in my work in photography, in thinking about the nineteenth-century process of photography and how you apply the material. I remember early on, when you're printing in a darkroom from the developer, as they call it, the image is born into the stopping baths. The action in that is that you feel the sliminess of the photograph disappear and it becomes this rough texture. I remember feeling a satisfaction in this marriage of how you touch and how you find something, and then how you watch it evolve and you become an active participant in the process of developing it. So even starting there, texture became something that was really at the center of how I understood an art work's opportunity to deliver.

I remember coming across the work of the artist Carl Andre, who made a work that consisted of these

lead or copper sheets that are positioned on the floor in different configurations. These sheets would be eight by eight feet or ten by ten feet. I would go as a young student to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and visit Carl Andre's work. It would be sitting on the floor and oftentimes the folks in the room weren't aware that you could stand on it, that the work of this artist was an invitation to activate it through standing. I don't know what Andre's expectations were or what his goals were, but to me and my friends with whom I was visiting the museum, the size of the work felt like a break-dance mat. I was eighteen, maybe nineteen years old, and most of the guards were black men overseeing these objects—they would watch us, without the ability to stop us from activating this thing in a way that is likely very different than Carl Andre would have imagined it or would have assumed we would be activating the work.

And even in that moment, I remember touching, because as you breakdance, the hands touch the ground and the floor—touching this metal and thinking about the opportunity to touch an artwork and what that felt like and what that gave me. In those moments, I'm thinking about the ground, I'm thinking about the formation of land, I'm thinking about volcanic eruption, all of this stuff is there in the way that I use materials.

I love what you're saying about the word *here*. There's something quite warm about the word. It also makes me think of the idea of home, about presence. As in, you are here, to be present. To be present in a moment. It's this personal location that you can project into places and into different time zones and into different historical moments. It was in this place, here, that something happened that is a descriptor of a previous action or moment.

KQ I think of presence as an operating principle of your work—you are making an offering to a viewer through the very materiality of the objects, and in the film, with hands playing piano and waving/signing from car window and turning pages of a book, the textural is an invocation of the haptic.

KQ *Invocation* and *provocation*, those two words, right.

KQ I wanted to ask you one more thing. Maybe you were starting to address this when you were talking about the kind of historical obligation that especially black artists in the United States face, where the imperative to speak for and speak clearly about and toward the terror of anti-blackness is so urgent. So many black artists and writers, perhaps most iconically Langston Hughes,<sup>12</sup> have grappled with what this burden means in regard to their art practice.

Do you ever find yourself thinking about the limits of what art and aesthetics can do given the scale of the world's problems, and when you find yourself there, how do you work yourself through that dilemma?

RJ You know, it's a provocation in a lot of ways as well.

RJ Absolutely. I want the visceral. I want to create things that people would want to be active with, because a lot of what inspires me is the opportunity to touch. I work with my hands in a very serious way. I'm a traditional kind of artist, in that have a real investment in my studio practice and that practice is a place for action, a place for meditation. But at its center, it's a place for touch and for engagement and my physical relationship to things. This is really important to how the work comes to life.

RJ It's a really important question for artists to think about. I have definitely found ways to navigate that and recognize how incredibly impactful an artwork can be in our most complicated moments. All I have to do is think

back to my own experience with art, and I say to myself, Poetry matters the most to me at my most challenging moments. When your back is against the wall or when you are deathly afraid, when the world is seemingly turned on you and created obstacles that you think are insurmountable, that's when I turn to art the most.

When you're just having a nice, normal day, an artwork might not change your life. Maybe not on that day, but on the day when you are most in love, it might change you the most. Or on a day when you are most fearful, it might give you a peace that you never expected.

I've seen art changing people's lives. I know it does because it changed mine. It gave me the opportunity to love. The first thing I knew to love outside of my family was art. It taught me how to be empathetic. It taught me how to see with different eyes.

For instance, in the installations *Home* or *Antoine's Organ*, I use plants as living things in the sculpture. I've seen how people interact with these plants when they come museums and see them. I've joked in public lectures that I'm almost literally seeing people step over a homeless person to go into a museum in which these works exist and then demand to know who's going to take care of the plants. When I see that, I see empathy walking into the room, there is care that comes into the space now. They want to know who's going to take care of these plants. When I see that level of empathy, I notice how it affects and infects the space that that empathy came into.

And so yes, do I question it sometimes, does art matter today? Does it matter in this moment? Sometimes . . . but when I really, really sit down to think about it, I fucking know it matters, because it mattered to me. Anistium faceptatque estrum sum eveligniat volupta

## ENDNOTES

1 *Seven Rooms and a Garden: Rashid Johnson and the Moderna Museet's Collection*, September 30, 2023–September 8, 2024, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, curated by Hendrik Folkerts.

2 In *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), Kevin Quashie revisits such iconic moments as Tommie Smith and John Carlos's protest at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics and Elizabeth Alexander's reading at the 2009 inauguration of Barack Obama, as well as landmark texts including Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha*, James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, and Toni Morrison's *Sula*, to propose a move beyond the emphasis on resistance as a defining feature of African-American culture. Quashie suggest that concepts such as surrendering, dreaming, and waiting can remind us of the wealth of black humanity. As such, *quiet* is a metaphor for the inner life and enables a more nuanced understanding of black culture.

3 Carrie Mae Weems started her *Kitchen Table Series* in 1990. Set entirely in the artist's kitchen, the series of photographs depicts a fictional life around a simple wooden table that is illuminated by a simple overhead light. It is the first time that Weems's alter ego appears before the lens. This

"muse," as the artist calls her, interacts with other cast members who play lovers, friends, family members, and so forth: "[T]his woman can stand in for me and for you; she can stand in for the audience, she leads you into history. She's a witness and a guide. . . . Carrying a tremendous burden, she is a black woman leading me through the trauma of history. I think it's very important that as a black woman she's engaged with the world around her; she's engaged with history, she's engaged with looking, with *being*. She's a guide into circumstances seldom seen." See "Carrie Mae Weems by Dawoud Bey," *BOMB Magazine*, July 1, 2009.

4 This comment about inside and outside builds from a moment earlier in the conversation, when Rashid Johnson made reference to Toni Morrison's notion of being put outdoors, which is different than being outside, since to be put outdoors connotes a structural act that subjects one to disregard, harm, even violence. The matter of outside/outdoors figures in Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Set in 1941, the novel tells the story of a young African-American girl, Pecola Breedlove, who is deemed unattractive due to her dark skin and who prays for blue eyes, a feature she equates with the safety and attractiveness afforded to young white girls.

5 The jazz standard "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue"

was composed by Fats Waller with lyrics by Harry Brooks and Andy Razaf in 1929, for the Broadway musical *Hot Chocolates*. Louis Armstrong and his orchestra recorded it the same year, cutting the opening verse and singing, "Cold empty bed, springs hard as lead / Feel like old Ned, wished I was dead / What did I do to be so black and blue // Even the mouse ran from my house / They laugh at you and scold you too / What did I do to be so black and blue // I'm white inside, but that don't help my case / Cuz I can't hide what is in my face // How would it end ain't got a friend / My only sin is in my skin / What did I do to be so black and blue // How would it end I ain't got a friend / My only sin is in my skin / What did I do to be so black and blue."

6 "Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five. There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to feel its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing 'What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue'—all at the same time. Sometimes now I listen to Louis while I have my favorite dessert of vanilla ice cream and sloe gin. I pour the red liquid over the white mound, watching it glisten and the vapor rising as Louis bends that military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound. Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible.

I think it must be because he's unaware that he is invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music. Once when I asked for a cigarette, some jokers gave me a reefer, which I lighted when I got home and sat listening to my phonograph. It was a strange evening. Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That's what you hear vaguely in Louis' music." See Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 7.

7 Édouard Glissant wrote "The Open Boat" as a preamble to his book *Poetics of Relation* (1990), on identity as a fluid and relational phenomenon. "The Open Boat" is a lyrical account of the transatlantic slave trade, speaking through the allegory of the abyss—the abyss of the boat, the abyss of the ocean, and the abyss of memory and imagination (that remains): "For us, and without exception, and no matter how much distance we may keep, the abyss is also a projection of and a perspective into the unknown. Beyond its chasm we gamble on the unknown. We take sides in this game of the world. We hail a renewed Indies; we are for it. And for this relation made of

storms and profound moments of peace in which we may honor our boats. This is why we stay with poetry.” See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 8–9.

8 *Slumberland* is Paul Beatty’s second novel, published in 2008. The cover reads “After creating the perfect beat, DJ Darky goes in search of Charles Stone, aka the Schwa, a little-known avant-garde jazzman, to play over his sonic masterpiece. His quest brings him to a recently unified Berlin, where he stumbles through the city’s dreamy streets ruminating about race, sex, love, Teutonic gods and the Berlin Wall in search of his artistic—and spiritual—other.”

9 W. E. B. Du Bois introduced the terms *double consciousness* and *two-ness* in his essay “Strivings of the Negro People” (*The Atlantic*, August 1897), which was later included in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in reference to a conflict in the relationship between an interior life and an external perception. Du Bois writes, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength

alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

10 “But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all but about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.” See Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” *World Tomorrow*, May 1928, 215–16.

11 Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987) takes place in the United States between 1850, the year of the Fugitive Slave Law, and 1873. (In 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment in the US constitution was ratified in law and slavery was abolished.) The novel tells the story of Sethe, a former enslaved woman who, as a fugitive, tries to kill her children rather than have them returned to slavery. Sethe succeeds in killing her two-year old daughter who, eighteen years later, seems to return in the form of a young woman named Beloved. Through the form of a ghost story, Morrison articulates the haunting and ever-present threat of slavery. In a pivotal scene at the heart of the book, Sethe’s mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, delivers a sermon on self-love to the black

community: “Here . . . in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stoke them on your face ’cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you! . . . And all your inside parts that they’d just as soon slop for hogs, you go to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than the eyes or feet. More than the lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.” See Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 88.

12 See Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” originally published in *The Nation*, June 23, 1926.

## ILLUSTRATED WORKS

All works are by Rashid Johnson.

[pp. 2–5, 60–63]  
*Black and Blue*, 2021  
Stills from 35mm film transferred to 4K video, 7:50 min.

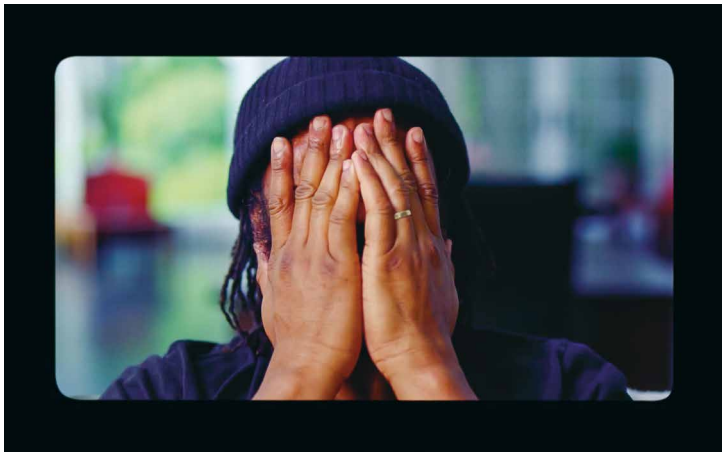
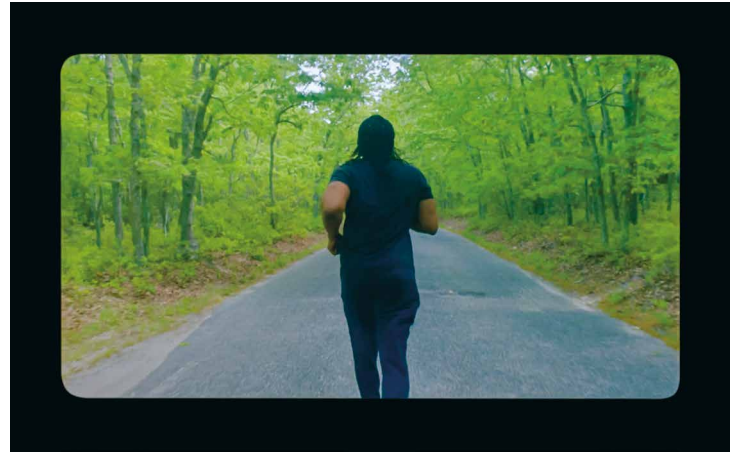
[p. 34]  
*God Painting “Closed Eyes,”* 2023  
Oil on linen  
182.9 × 152.4 × 4.3 cm

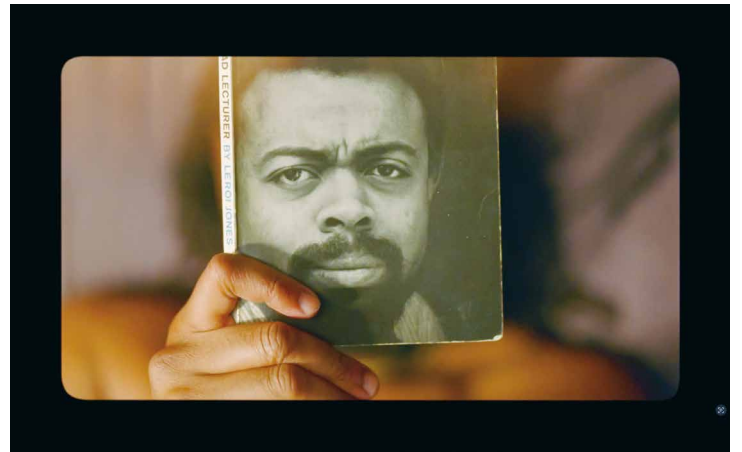
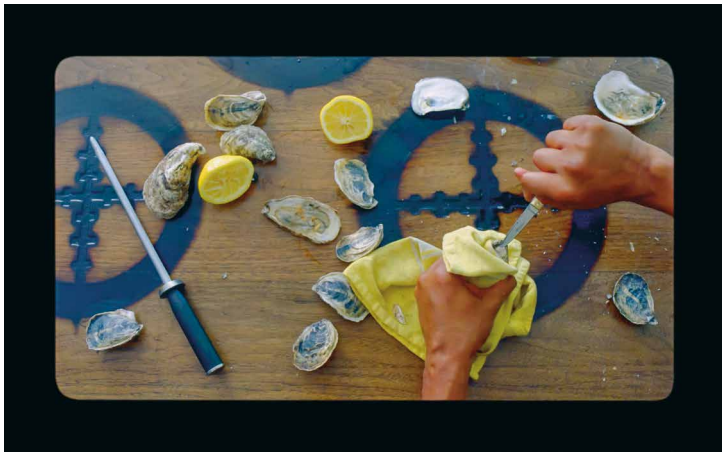
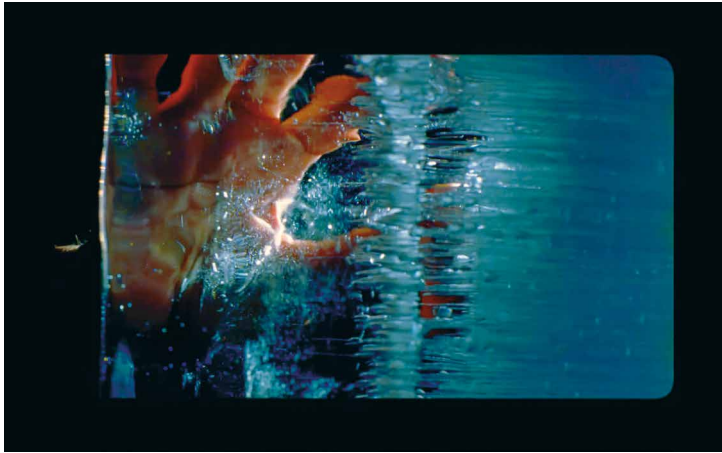
[p. 35]  
*Bruise Painting “Get in Line,”* 2023  
Oil on linen  
243.8 × 213.4 × 4.3 cm

[pp. 36–37]  
*Seascape “Elevation,”* 2021  
Oil on linen  
239.4 × 396.3 × 5.1 cm

[pp. 38–39]  
*Antoine’s Organ*, 2016  
Black steel, grow lights, plants, wood, shea butter, books, monitors, rugs, piano  
480.1 × 858.5 × 322 cm

Images courtesy of Rashid Johnson and Hauser & Wirth







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