Educator’s Guide

**Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks**


**ABOUT THIS GUIDE**

This guide is designed as a multidisciplinary companion for K-12 educators bringing their students to view *Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks*, on view at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum from September 20, 2013, through January 6, 2014. Our intent is to offer a range of learning objectives, gallery discussions, and postvisit suggestions to stimulate the learning process, encourage dialogue, and help make meaning of the art presented. Teachers at all grade levels should glean from this guide what is most relevant and useful to their students. Vocabulary words that appear in **bold** are defined at the end of the guide.

The Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum would like to thank the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago for the development of the content from which this guide has been adapted.

All quotes from Rashid Johnson are from the exhibition catalog *Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks* by Julie Rodrigues Widholm (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2012) unless otherwise noted.

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**ABOUT THE EXHIBITION**

*Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks* is the first major solo museum exhibition to survey the career of this Chicago-born, New York-based artist. Using photography, painting, sculpture, and video, Johnson challenges entrenched ways of thinking about the black experience in America and, by extension, seminal issues of race in today’s society. Johnson incorporates commonplace objects from his childhood into his work in a process he describes as “hijacking the domestic.” He transforms these materials—plants, books, record albums, photographs, shea butter, soap— into conceptually loaded and visually compelling art that investigates the construction of identity. Steeped in individual experience while simultaneously invoking shared cultural references, Johnson’s work also references black American creative and intellectual figures, extending the legacy of these cultural icons.

While Johnson’s works are grounded in dialogue with modern and contemporary art history, specifically **abstraction** and **appropriation**, they also give voice to an **Afro-futurist** narrative in which the artist commingles references to experimental musician Sun Ra, jazz great Miles Davis, and rap group Public Enemy; organizations such as Sigma Pi Phi (the first African American Greek-letter organization); and civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois, and others. In addition to exploring his own personal and cultural history, the artist humorously shares his metaphysical journey with us as he contemplates the creation of the universe, art, and the self.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Johnson grew up a middle-class child of the 1980s, whose parents raised him in the waning days of the 1970s Afrocentric movement, in which black Americans sought to reconnect with African culture in various ways, such as wearing afros and dashikis and celebrating a recently created holiday, Kwanzaa. Having raised their son in this movement, Johnson says his parents “abandoned” him there after they became less interested in wearing and using distinctly African products. In hindsight, Johnson finds humor in the idea that one can attempt to apply “Africanism” to one’s body, yet Afrocentrism continues to inform his work.

Much of Johnson’s work explores the complexities and contradictions of black identity, in particular challenging stereotypical ways of thinking about “the black experience.” Johnson’s own middle-class experience was not typical of what was often portrayed in the arts or mass media. His parents divorced when he was two years old, and subsequently he split his time between Evanston, a suburb of Chicago, and the Wicker Park neighborhood in the city of Chicago. While he was growing up, Johnson’s father ran a small electronics business that sold CB radios, and his mother was a professor of history at Northwestern University, specializing in African and African American history. In his work he often draws on personal experiences, but he doesn’t attempt to speak for his entire race. He notes that while black Americans have a collective history, they don’t necessarily have collective experiences. As the artist explains:

There’s a generation of black artists before me who made work specifically about the black experience. But I think for my generation, having grown up in the age of hip-hop and Black Entertainment Television, there’s less of a need to define the black experience so aggressively to a white audience. I think it gives us a different type of opportunity to have a more complex conversation around race and identity. It’s not a weapon for me; it’s more of an interest.1

Johnson characterizes his work as more biographical than political and notes, “I grew up in a situation where experiences had as much to do with class or gender as with race. I project this story of the black middle class into my work, but also I want material representations of blackness in other ways. And I hope that the contradictions are never fully resolved.”2

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS
African American Studies, Art, Art History, Diversity Studies, Film Studies, Gender Studies, History, Literature, Music, Photography, Sculpture

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
Students will explore contemporary artist practices such as the use of appropriation, readymades, assemblage, abstraction, and video.

Students will discuss issues of race in contemporary society and how artworks in the exhibition illuminate this topic.

Students will examine how individual and cultural identity can be influenced by collective experiences using examples found in the exhibition.

BEFORE YOU VISIT
Suggested topics to explore, research, and discuss before visiting the exhibition.

Appropriation, Abstraction, Readymades, and Assemblage
Research these artistic strategies and the movements associated with them. What are the main tenets of these strategies? How does Rashid Johnson employ them in the works on display in the exhibition?

Race, Identity, and Class
Much of Johnson’s artwork challenges stereotypical characterizations of a monolithic black experience in America. He is also interested in the perceived notion that there isn’t a black middle class. About the middle class as a “bridge between being Uncle Toms and being ‘down,’” Johnson says, “I think there is a really fascinating corridor there that the black elite and the black super-wealthy don’t have to deal with; because there is a sense they have almost transcended blackness.

2 Ibid.
Sun Ra and Afro-futurism

Beginning in 2008, Johnson embraced the fantastic elements of Afro-futurism, a movement developed in the 1970s and 1980s combining history, science fiction, and non-Western theories of the origins of the universe, to examine “what ‘blackness’ and ‘liberation’ could look like in the future, real or imagined.” The work of jazz composer and “cosmic philosopher” Sun Ra has been particularly important to the evolution of Johnson’s art. Research Sun Ra and Afro-futurism. What are some of the main ideas behind Afro-futurism? What did African American artists, writers, and musicians seek in Afro-futurism? Describe the sound and aesthetic of Afro-futurism.

IN THE GALLERY

Ideas to consider when viewing the exhibition.

Art Interaction: Houses in Motion, 2012
Branded red oak flooring, black soap, wax, and spray enamel, 96 5/8 x 120 5/8 x 2 3/8 “

Many artists have characteristic elements—signature marks—that recur throughout their work. For Johnson, these unique marks include the use of objects such as record album covers, live plants, gold spray paint, and black soap. These marks, along with certain lines and shapes such as those found in Houses in Motion, are reminiscent of abstract paintings. In 2010 he added a new mark, that of the branding iron, which carries sinister connotations of the practice of branding slaves as property. In recent times some historically black fraternities have used branding as an initiation rite, reclaiming, in a way, this brutal practice as their own. Johnson, whose artworks incorporate evidence of history and memory, asks the viewer to contemplate his or her own identity in relationship to history, present circumstances, and imagined futures.

Discussion questions:
What types of symbols does Johnson choose to brand into this oak flooring? Why do you think the artist chose these symbols? Are the branding marks randomly placed or do they exhibit a pattern or design? What other types of marks does Johnson incorporate into this work? How does Houses in Motion address African American history? This work also incorporates black soap, traditionally used in African cultures. Would the piece have a different message if the artist used Dove soap instead? How is this artwork like an abstract painting? Looking around the exhibition, what other marks or signatures does Johnson incorporate into his work?

They’re not black anymore—well of course they are black, but they are Cosby-black, Oprah-black, or Jordan-black. So what you are left with is a black middle class, which is kind of squeezed in between these two paradigms of blackness” (p. 30). Have a discussion with your students exploring Johnson’s statement. Discuss racial stereotypes that prevail in today’s society, particularly in the African American community, and how current leaders in the black community are challenging these stereotypes.

Art Interaction: George, 1998–99
Van Dyke Brown print, 29 ½ x 23”

Johnson’s interest in photography was piqued in high school. He worked after school with a wedding photographer and there honed his eye for portraiture. This work is part of a series of photographs of homeless men Johnson created using the nineteenth-century Van Dyke Brown process, which, unlike traditional black-and-white photographic processes, creates deep brown tones and results in photographs that resemble drawings or gouache paintings with their luscious matte surfaces. The subjects Johnson chose for his early photographs were typically Chicago’s poor, homeless, and disenchanted. In taking their pictures he was interested in representing their humanity in addition to the relationship between photographer and subject.

Discussion questions:
How does the use of these older techniques affect your reaction to photographs like George? How would your reading of this work be different if it was rendered in glossy, digital full color? Why is the relationship between photographer and subject important? Looking at George, what kind of relationship do you think Johnson had with George? How does this photograph compare to those in Johnson’s The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club series, both in composition and in subject matter?

Art Interaction: The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club (Emmett), 2008
Lambda print, 48 ⅝ x 73”

Rashid Johnson’s body of work titled The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club explores a recurring escapist impulse evidenced in black literature and culture since slavery, along with the notion of “The New Negro” that arose during the Harlem Renaissance in reference to middle-class intellectual black Americans whose elevated status challenged old stereotypes. In this series, Johnson represents contemporary black bourgeois, academic figures whose portraits might line the halls of exclusive secret societies or fraternities. In The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club (Emmett), we see a double image of a man in a pose that recalls the iconic image of the African American youth Emmett Till taken shortly before he was murdered in 1955. Johnson’s frequent use of double or mirrored images references W. E. B. Du Bois’s notion of “double consciousness,” described by Du Bois as “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,” in which “one ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro.” Throughout this series, Johnson pays homage to great black cultural icons, from musicians to politicians, such as Thurgood Marshall, Samuel Delany, Marcus Garvey, and others. As the artist explains, “These singular figures challenged preconceptions about racial identity and railed against dominant, normative ways of thinking in their time, shifting the ground of certainty, often with provocative messages” (p. 38). The style of these photographs looks back to 1920s Harlem, but also toward the future.

Discussion questions:
Who was Emmett Till and why is he considered to be a black cultural icon? Who could be considered a black cultural icon today, and why? How do these contemporary photographs link the past and the present?

Art Interaction: Triple Consciousness, 2009
Black soap, wax, vinyl in album covers, spray enamel, shea butter, plant, and brass, 48 ¾ x 97 ½ x 6 ¼”

Triple Consciousness is one of Johnson’s signature shelf works, reminiscent of the way objects might be displayed in a typical household, and an example of the way he incorporates avant-garde artistic strategies such as the readymade, appropriation, and assemblage into his artwork. The objects displayed in Triple Consciousness, whose ground is made from melted West African black soap and wax on board, were chosen first for content and then for aesthetic qualities. Items in Johnson’s shelf works can range from those stereotypically associated with black culture, like shea butter, to those holding more personal meaning, like CB radios, which reference memories of Johnson’s father and his trade while
Johnson was growing up. Johnson, whose childhood straddled multicultural urban and suburban settings, says his shelf works are in part autobiographical, representing materials from his childhood in the 1970s and 1980s as well as from his current personal life. However, as he states, he is “aware of greater meanings and invites viewers to read his works from their own perspective” (p. 36). Johnson often displays books by influential black leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Harold Cruse, and LeRoi Jones in his shelf works. He also includes records that he listens to in his studio by artists such as Miles Davis, Al Green, and Charles Mingus. Johnson is expanding upon Du Bois’s notion of “double consciousness” (see The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club (Emmett)) through the title of the work and by displaying three copies of Al Green’s Greatest Hits (1975).

Discussion questions:
What objects can you identify in Triple Consciousness? How do the objects interact with each other? Does displaying these objects in such a way shift their meaning from another context? If yes, how? Is prior experience or knowledge of the objects in Triple Consciousness or Johnson’s other shelf works vital to an understanding of the work? What symbolism can be associated with soap? What objects are displayed on shelves in your home? If you had to choose objects to represent who you are, what objects would you choose and why? What can we learn about Rashid Johnson based on the objects he has chosen to include in this and other artworks?

Art Interaction: How Ya Like Me Now, 2010
Persian rug, gold embroidery, and shea butter, 7 x 110 ¾ x 150”

Rashid Johnson’s sculptural pieces are often referred to as assemblages of memorabilia. These assemblages, such as How Ya Like Me Now, frequently incorporate evidence of history, memory, and daily life. Johnson asks us “to contemplate our own identity in relationship to our childhoods, our homes, our history, our present circumstances, the objects that surround us, and even our imagined future selves, both individually and collectively”(p. 42). A recurring motif in Johnson’s work is the crosshairs of a gun (inspired by the rap group Public Enemy, which often used this image on their merchandise and album covers as a symbol of discriminatory targeting and racial profiling of black men by law enforcement). In How Ya Like Me Now this symbol is embroidered onto a Persian rug using gold thread. How Ya Like Me Now is also the title of artist David Hammon’s 1989 painting in which the iconic black politician Jesse Jackson is portrayed as white; the shea butter balls in Johnson’s work reference another work by Hammons, called Bliz-aard Ball Sale (1982), a performance piece in which Hammons sold snowballs, priced according to their size, in New York City’s Cooper Square.

Discussion questions:
Consider the materials used to make How Ya Like Me Now: how do the objects Johnson incorporates into this piece pay homage to black culture and history? How do the objects relate to each other? What inferences can be drawn by the use of a Persian rug in this piece? Why might Johnson choose to represent crosshairs over and over again in his work? What or who is being targeted by the crosshairs? Find other pieces in the exhibition that incorporate the crosshairs motif and shea butter and compare them to How Ya Like Me Now.
Gary Simmons, *Plaza Inferno Grid*, 2008

Like Rashid Johnson, Gary Simmons’s work addresses identity and race in contemporary America. *Plaza Inferno Grid*, a multipart painting, uses the 1972 sci-fi B-movie *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* as its point of reference. Considered a metaphor for race relations, particularly the violence and destruction perpetrated in the Los Angeles Watts riots in 1965 that came to symbolize racial strife in midcentury urban America, this film used the skyscrapers found in the corporate environment of Century City in Los Angeles as the setting for a dystopian future. In *Plaza Inferno Grid*, created during the 2008 presidential election, Simmons produced a powerful work of art that resonates as a provocative symbol for the politics of race brought to the fore when the nation elected its first African American president.

Compare and contrast how Simmons and Johnson explore issues of race, politics, and identity in their works. How does Simmons’s mark-making compare to that of Rashid Johnson?

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**Art Interaction: The Shuttle, 2011**

*Mirrored tile, black soap, wax, books, shea butter, inkjet prints on glass, plant, and CB radio, 100 ½ x 125 ½ x 11 ¾”* ♦

*The Shuttle* brings together many themes and materials found in Johnson’s work: the notion of escape and outer space, the shelf motif used to display objects of historical or personal importance, and the mirror where viewers see their reflections. Johnson began including mirrors in his work as a way to capture “the now” and as a response to how we remember what we look like as we proceed with daily life. He wants visitors to have that connection to the present in their minds as they move through the exhibition. The book displayed on the shelf is Dick Gregory’s *Write Me In* (1968), in which the black comedian recounts his run for president. The CB, or citizens band radio, is a reference to Johnson’s father’s work in the electronics field. As a boy, Rashid and his father would play a call-and-response type of game with the CB radio, seeking to speak with whomever in the universe they could reach. In Johnson’s work the radio is a metaphor for communication across time and space, channeling Afro-futurist ideas about the blurring of the real and imagined, the past and the future.

**Discussion questions:**

What other objects appearing in *The Shuttle* can you identify? Look around the exhibition. Are these objects present in other works? What other books does Johnson include in his shelf pieces? Is there a common theme with these books? What other objects in *The Shuttle* symbolize space or escapism? If you could travel through time and space, where would you go and what time period would you explore?
Community is the driving force in Catherine Opie’s photographs. Trash is from a series of portraits depicting friends and fellow artists, many of whom are associated with marginalized communities—specifically, the gay, lesbian, and transgender communities of San Francisco and Los Angeles. Like Rashid Johnson, Opie explores how community and collective experience can play a part in forming individual identity. The facial features of the lone leather-clad figure in Trash are obscured by makeup, which makes it difficult to determine the gender of the subject. Opie emphasizes the dignity of her subject by placing the figure against a purple background, a reference to regal sixteenth-century portrait conventions.

While Opie describes her subjects as “modern-day icons,” Johnson pays homage to iconic black men from American history. Explore the use of the word icon with your students and how it is used by these artists. Consider also how it is used in the media today.

Charles Wimar, The Abduction of Daniel Boone’s Daughter by the Indians, 1853

Fascinated by the American West, Charles Wimar, a German-born immigrant to the United States, traveled up and down the Missouri River via steamboat, sketching and observing Native Americans. Typical Wimar paintings, like The Abduction of Daniel Boone’s Daughter by the Indians, were very popular among Europeans and affluent white Americans, and they helped to solidify Anglo-European myths and stereotypes about Native Americans.

How might different people interpret this painting? How might it have been interpreted in 1853 when it was made, versus today? Name a stereotype about Native American culture that is exemplified in this work. Whereas Rashid Johnson explores his own identity and culture in the works in Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks, Wimar is making commentary on a culture foreign to him. Does this make a difference in how you react to their work?

American Places: Painting the Landscape in the Nineteenth Century

In conjunction with the Kemper Art Museum’s exhibition of artwork by Rashid Johnson, a special exhibition of nineteenth-century landscape paintings in the Museum’s Garen Gallery explores how notions of national identity influence depictions of the landscape. How might the exploration of identity manifested in these paintings compare to Rashid Johnson’s investigations of the same theme in his sculptural works?

The 1968 Exhibit at the Missouri History Museum

Visit The 1968 Exhibit at the Missouri History Museum (October 5, 2013–January 5, 2014), which examines the swirl of social forces that characterized the 1960s and how key events in the year 1968 fueled a persistent, if contradictory, sense of identity for a nation at war and a new generation coming of age. Compare the African American figures and historic events represented in this exhibition, including the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the rise of Black Power, with those seen in Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks.
Hijacking the Domestic
Rashid Johnson often refers to his practice of incorporating objects from his childhood, home, and studio into his work as “hijacking the domestic.” Have students bring in one object from their home that represents their identity. What does the object mean to them? How might their connection to this object be different from someone else’s? Ask them to discuss how they feel their current identity was formed and what part their community plays in shaping their identity.

Cultural Icons
Have students research the writers, musicians, politicians, and intellectuals represented in the exhibition and discuss the impact of these cultural icons on African American history and identity and on culture more broadly. Have them discuss who they think are the present-day black cultural icons. See if they can name other iconic figures from different cultures.

Titles
The title of the exhibition, Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks, was appropriated from a 1969 jazz album by the Art Ensemble of Chicago. What meanings might this title have in relation to the exhibition? What is the message and who are the folks? Many of the titles of the artworks in the exhibition make references to books or music. Have students pick their favorite piece from the exhibition and research what the title might refer to or mean, and ask them to explore how that contributes to their understanding of the work.

VOCABULARY
1. **Abstraction** – In visual art, works that do not realistically represent a person, place, or thing; can also refer to works that simplify these, such as, for example, using geometric shapes to represent the human form.
2. **Afrocentric** – Centered on or derived from Africa or Africans and regarding African or black culture as preeminent. The Afrocentric movement, in which black Americans sought to reconnect with African culture such as by wearing Afros and dashikis and celebrating Kwanzaa, developed mainly in the United States during the 1970s.
3. **Afro-futurist** – A philosophical movement developed in the 1970s and 1980s by artists with a shared interest in envisioning black futures through a literary and cultural aesthetic that combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, Afrocentrism, and magic realism.
4. ** Appropriation** – The use of preexisting objects or images with little or no transformation applied to them.
5. ** Assemblage** – An artistic process by which one makes two- or three-dimensional compositions with found materials.
7. **Disenfranchised** – Deprived of power; marginalized.
8. **Gouache** – A type of paint made of opaque pigments ground in water and thickened with a gluelike substance; a method of painting using this type of paint.
9. **Harlem Renaissance** – A black cultural movement of the 1920s that flourished in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. This movement saw the blossoming of African American artists, writers, activists, musicians, intellectuals, and other cultural figures, including Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jessie Fauset, Alain Locke, Aaron Douglas, Lena Horne, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway and Romare Bearden.
10. **The New Negro** – A philosophical notion proposed by Alain Locke, a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, referring to middle-class black Americans who fought for their rights as citizens and represented themselves in ways that challenged old stereotypes.
11. ** Readymade** – A term coined by Marcel Duchamp in the early 20th century to describe the common, mass-produced objects he transformed into artworks by placing them in an artistic context, most famously a urinal.
12. ** Shea butter** – A yellowish fat extracted from the nuts of the African shea tree traditionally used by Africans to moisturize the skin but also as cooking oil, for hairdressing and medicinal ointments, in candle-making, and much more.
13. **Van Dyke Brown photographic process** – Named after the brown color used by Anthony Van Dyke, a seventeenth-century Flemish oil painter. In this multistep hand-printing process, a negative image or object is placed on paper coated with the photosensitive chemical ferric ammonium citrate, then exposed to ultraviolet light.
14. ** West African black soap** – A healing plant-based soap mixed with ash traditionally from the country of Ghana.
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Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks is organized by Curator Julie Rodrigues Widholm from the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, where it debuted in 2012. The St. Louis exhibition is curated by Meredith Malone, associate curator at the Kemper Art Museum. The exhibition also has traveled to the Miami Art Museum (fall 2012) and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta (summer 2013).