

BAMPFA Mounts First West Coast Exhibition of Rashid Johnson



On View from June 5 through November 28, 2027

**Nationally Touring Exhibition of Johnson's Celebrated Practice Receives
Sole West Coast Presentation at BAMPFA**

(Berkeley, CA) October 14, 2026— The Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive will present *Rashid Johnson: A Poem for Deep Thinkers*, a major midcareer survey of one of the most influential artists of his generation. The exhibition traces Johnson's artistic evolution from the late 1990s to the present through more than fifty works that encompass the full scope of the artist's multidisciplinary practice, including photography, painting, sculpture, video, and mosaic. BAMPFA's presentation of this nationally touring exhibition will mark Johnson's first solo



museum presentation on the West Coast, bringing nearly three decades of his work to Bay Area audiences for the first time.

Rashid Johnson: A Poem for Deep Thinkers brings together important bodies of work that have defined Johnson's practice over the past three decades, including *The New Negro*, *Escapist Social and Athletic Club*, the black-soap and wax *Cosmic Slop* paintings, his *Anxious Men* and *Broken Men* series, spray-painted text works, ceramic busts, mosaics, films, and architectural sculptures. Across these works,

Johnson uses materials with dense cultural associations—from black soap, shea butter, tile, mirrored glass, books, plants, and records to steel and ceramic—to explore artistic lineage, identity, parenthood, and the psychic pressures of contemporary life.

BAMPFA will be the sole West Coast venue and final stop on the exhibition's national tour, which began in New York at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 2025. Its presentation in Berkeley is organized by Julie Rodrigues Widholm, BAMPFA's Executive Director, who in 2012 organized Johnson's first major solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. *Poem for Deep Thinkers* offers an opportunity to revisit that curatorial dialogue fifteen years later, at a moment when Johnson's work has expanded in scale, material range, and international influence. He was recently included in TIME Magazine's "100 Most Influential People" feature, and in 2019 he directed the feature film *Native Son*.

The exhibition unfolds as a loose chronology of bodies of work, beginning with Johnson's early photography and moving through the increasingly hybrid forms that have defined his later

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practice. Early works connect personal narrative with broader cultural lineages, including self-portraits and photographs that invoke figures from Black intellectual and artistic history.

Johnson first gained national attention in his early twenties when he became the youngest artist included in Thelma Golden's influential 2001 exhibition *Freestyle* at the Studio Museum in Harlem. As his practice developed, he moved beyond photography into sculpture, installation, text, and video, while continuing to treat materials as carriers of social and cultural meaning. His breakthrough *Cosmic Slop* paintings, begun in 2008, employ black soap and wax in richly worked surfaces that merge abstraction with materials associated with Black domestic and diasporic life. Subsequent sculptures and shelf works combine books, records, plants, ceramics, mirrors, and other objects into environments that function simultaneously as archives and stages for contemplation.

The exhibition also foregrounds Johnson's sustained engagement with anxiety and emotional interiority. In the *Anxious Men* and *Broken Men* series, faces emerge from vigorously marked surfaces, translating psychological tension into a visual language that is both individual and collective. More recent works extend these concerns through materially dense paintings and assemblages, while Johnson's films consider family, intimacy, and the maternal and paternal histories that shape a sense of self. The exhibition title is drawn from an eponymous poem by the writer and political activist Amiri Baraka, whose work has long been a source of inspiration for Johnson.

Rashid Johnson: A Poem for Deep Thinkers is cocurated by Naomi Beckwith, Deputy Director and Jennifer and David Stockman Chief Curator of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and Andrea Karnes, Chief Curator of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. The BAMPFA presentation is curated by Julie Rodrigues Widholm, with support from Assistant Curator Tausif Noor.

"I am thrilled to bring this major survey of Rashid's work to the Bay Area. Across nearly three decades, his fluid movement between photography, painting, sculpture, and film mirrors the complexity of identity itself, the way each of us holds many selves at once. Rashid is eager for this work to be accessible to students, faculty, and communities at UC Berkeley and across the Bay Area, and BAMPFA is the ideal place for that. Film has been a vital influence on his practice, and our film program will give audiences a rare chance to explore that dimension of his work in depth," said Widholm.

About Rashid Johnson

Rashid Johnson (b. 1977, Chicago) is recognized as one of the major voices of his generation, an artist who composes searing meditations on race and class while establishing an organic formal vocabulary that fuses a variety of sculptural and painterly traditions. Though he employs materials drawn from specific autobiographical contexts—including those related to African American intellectual and imaginative life—and though his practice had its beginnings in photography and conceptual art, Johnson is equally interested in testing the ability of abstract visual languages to communicate across cultural boundaries. The visceral experience of art, on formal terms, is therefore considered inseparable from the social matrix that gives rise to it. Johnson's work is predicated upon moving freely between these two modes. The breadth and generosity of his vision has resulted in a wide range of two-dimensional and three-dimensional objects, installations, videos, and performances.

Johnson has also been the subject of solo exhibitions at institutions including Museo Tamayo, Mexico City, Mexico (2019); Aspen Art Museum, CO (2019); Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO (2017), which traveled to the Milwaukee Art Museum, WI (2017); Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, Russia (2016); and Drawing Center, New York, NY (2015). Recent group exhibitions include *Day for Night: New American Realism*, Palazzo Barberini, organized by the Aishti Foundation, Rome, Italy (2024); *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, New Museum, New York, NY (2021); *The Stomach and the Port*, Liverpool Biennial, England (2021); *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*,

Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY (2014); and *ILLUMInations, International Pavilion*, Fifty-Fourth Venice Biennale, Italy (2011). His work is in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY; Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo, Norway; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, France; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; and Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, IL. His first feature-length film, an adaptation of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and was released on HBO in 2019. Johnson lives and works in New York.

About BAMPFA

Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive ignites cultural change for a more inclusive and artistic world. BAMPFA has been uniquely dedicated to art and film since 1970, with international programming that is locally connected and globally relevant. It holds more than 25,000 artworks and 18,000 films and videos in its collection, with particular strengths in modern and contemporary art and historical Chinese painting, as well as the world's largest collection of African American quilts. As part of the University of California, Berkeley, BAMPFA is committed to artistic diversity through its robust slate of art exhibitions, film screenings, artist talks, live performances, and educational programs that shed new light on the art of the past and connect our audiences with leading filmmakers and artists of our time. BAMPFA sits on the edge of campus and downtown Berkeley, where it welcomes visitors from across and beyond the Bay Area in a repurposed building designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro.

Acknowledgements

Rashid Johnson: A Poem for Deep Thinkers is organized by Naomi Beckwith, Deputy Director and Jennifer and David Stockman Chief Curator, Guggenheim Museum, New York, and Andrea Karnes, Chief Curator, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, with additional support from Faith Hunter, Guggenheim Curatorial Assistant. The presentation at BAMPFA is organized by Julie Rodrigues Widholm, Executive Director, with Tausif Noor, Assistant Curator.

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Image credits

1. *Self Portrait laying on Jack Johnson's Grave*, 2006; chromogenic print mounted on panel; collection of Dr. Daniel S. Berger. © Rashid Johnson, 2025.
2. *God Painting "The Spirit,"* 2023; oil on linen; private collection. © Rashid Johnson, 2025.
Photo: Stephanie Powell.

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