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RASHID JOHNSON:



Rashid Johnson, 'Shelter', 2012, installation view

A strange storm seemed to have swept through Rashid Johnson's exhibition. The kind of freak weather that could up-end a series of beds but leave them meticulously aligned, that could send houseplants flying but allow them to settle upright in the rafters. In the South London Gallery's vaulted Victorian hall, Johnson created the impression of a space held in abeyance – as if an energy of catastrophic proportions was being narrowly contained by a series of ordered installation views. The artist, who was born in Chicago and is based in New York, could not have known of the destruction that 'Superstorm Sandy' would wreak midway through his first solo exhibition in the UK, but the events certainly charged his works with an added currency, especially given the show's title – 'Shelter'.

Johnson first came to prominence in 2001 when he was included in Thelma Golden's important exhibition, 'Freestyle', at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which showcased 28 young African-American artists interested in 'redefining complex notions of blackness'. As a result, he is often summarily explained through the 'post-black' genealogy, as the younger sibling of an artist like Glenn Ligon (who, along with Golden, coined the term in the late 1990s). Yet with 'Shelter' – which continued the South London Gallery's tradition of offering international artists their first solo exhibitions in the UK – Johnson was given the space in which the power, scholarship and humour of his work could play out.

The exhibition's one-word title left the visitor in doubt as to whether they were being issued an order or an offer. The central space was dominated by a row of day beds, variously positioned on their head, side and tail (surely the appropriate language given that they were upholstered in zebra skin) so that only the final one, Untitled (Daybed 4) (all works 2012), presented the possibility of use. Arranged like flayed animals, the undersides of the beds were made from burned red oak (a native of North America and the state tree of New Jersey), which had been spattered with wax and scratched with a web of angry marks. The scene brought to mind the extravagance of latter-day post-colonial despots such as Teodoro Obiang in Equatorial Guinea, while the repurposing of furniture at a time of crisis evoked recent filmic visions of apocalypse, such as Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012).

Beneath each bed was a Persian rug, which could have belonged to the collection at 20 Maresfield Gardens, London, where Sigmund Freud sought shelter in 1938 following the Nazi annexation of Austria. Johnson visited the Freud Museum while researching this exhibition and the press release explained that his starting point was 'an imagined society in which psychotherapy is a freely available drop-in service'. Yet the arrangement of items and the gallery context made it clear that there was no hope of lying supine. Instead, in the spirit of free association, the mind could jump from the Oriental rug to the problem of Orientalism and to Edward Said's seminal 1978 book of the same name, which considers how the Western mentality imposes cultural distance by exoticizing the non-Western as 'other'.

Johnson's environment encouraged critical distance when viewing the nine works hung on the surrounding walls, which might otherwise have been read as the outpourings of a series of therapeutic sessions. Take the three Cosmic Slop paintings, in which a surface of wax and black soap courses with scrawled lines that are as feverish and aleatory as the jazz records that he has described listening to while making them. Should we believe the artist's essentialist narrative of production or make assumptions about the use of West African beauty products? The visual allusion these paintings make to Ad Reinhardt and his 'black series' from the 1960s seems to chasten any temptation to do so. With titles such as 'Independence' and 'Unrest' – words which belong to the practice of abstract-expressionist mark-making as much as to the history of African-American struggle – the artist associates ideas while disassociating himself. For Johnson, shelter is to be sought in scare quotes.