

HYPERALLERGIC

Rindon Johnson Ruminates on the Expansiveness of Identity

By danilo machado, July 29, 2021



Rindon Johnson, *For example, collect the water just to see it pool there above your head. Don't be a Fucking Hero!*, 2021–ongoing. Rawhide, paracord, rainwater. Courtesy the artist and Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles. Photography: Kyle Knodell

Visiting after a string of unseasonably warm and dry days meant that no water had collected in Rindon Johnson's suspended rawhide, "*For example, collect the water just to see it pool there above your head. Don't be a Fucking Hero!*" (2021–ongoing), on view through August 2 at SculptureCenter. The sculpture has been weathering outside since January, a fitting introduction to the many kinds of collecting considered in *Law of Large Numbers: Our Bodies*, Johnson's first solo museum exhibition.

The show, curated by Sohrab Mohebbi, is presented in conjunction with the upcoming exhibition, *Law of Large Numbers: Our Selves*, at London's Chisenhale Gallery and an accompanying book published with Impatient Press. The volume — which Johnson describes as "my new book poetry, a manual, or maybe the autobiography for the exhibition" — recounts the artist's process and processing through writing, handwriting, sketches, screenshots, and conversations. The two subtitles conjure the feminist publication *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, first published under that title in 1971 (originally "Women and Their Bodies"), and reflects the show's questions of the individual and collective in relation to data. The multi-venue, multimedia presentation fits the expansiveness of Johnson's practice, as the work grapples with how to communicate largeness, wondering — as the titular statistics law describes — what happens when expansion slows.



Rindon Johnson, "Floating through the canyon, through the canyon, through the canyon, the Peace of Martial Law, the PEACE of Martial Law, the canyon walls are 2000 feet high, 2000 feet high, 2000 feet high, some rose-colored glasses, some rose-colored glasses, it is only a matter of time. No, this thing and not the other thing either. CREEK! It's only a matter of time. Find me inside, many of us were scared, but after they ate a pizza from the backpack of a man who was taking a swim, they were looking for dessert. They found the bag and decided to take it away" (2021), Rose Brooks leaded stained glass (image courtesy the artist and Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles; photo by Kyle Knodell)

Entering the lobby, light from a stained glass door seeps in from the courtyard. "Floating through the canyon, through the canyon, through the canyon, the Peace of Martial Law, the PEACE of Martial Law, the canyon walls are 2000 feet high, 2000 feet high, 2000 feet high, some rose-colored glasses, some rose-colored glasses, it is only a matter of time. No, this thing and not the other thing either. CREEK! It's only a matter of time. Find me inside, many of us were scared, but after they ate a pizza from the backpack of a man who was taking a swim, they were looking for dessert. They found the bag and decided to take it away" (2021) is an abstracted watershed map of the Catskills to New York City; jagged blue lines indicating streams break up rectangles of patchy tan indicating land.

On the other side of the courtyard, a Kodak 35mm slide projector hums an image of roped trees below eye level, made faint with the afternoon sun, its full title "A scale, in relief, absentia, the reason for the reluctance, fall for the land or the convergence, anything with teeth, like some, sorry, take it, sit there, alright. The sun is near enough, it rains in the evenings and sometimes the mornings or sometimes not on that particular day, but it always rains eventually. I am always dark as night and I look at my dark feet in the dark green grass in the rain or on that particular day, not rain, and I think this belongs to all of us. I think of many people I have known and have yet to know and I walk on, towards a meal, a glass of cold water, everyone, and I think about how I'll tell them about this particular day, about the form I drew and redrew and they'll talk about how they saw a leaf fall to the ground and we'll laugh together, observing the marks of the day across our skin, ears, temples, etc., with even better luck tomorrow" (2021–ongoing). On its opposite side sits another kind of projection. Sharper and horizontal in a darkened room showing precipitation from heavy clouds onto a waving ocean, "Coeval Proposition #2: Last Year's Atlantic, or You look really good, you look like you pretended like nothing ever happened, or a Weakening" (2021) is a live rendering of North Atlantic weather data from the "cold blob" at the approximate midpoint between SculptureCenter and Chisenhale. In the accompanying volume, Johnson writes that these "visualizations of data also function like

a mask and consequently abstraction too,” asking if “the hyper-specificity of the data [can] converge into pure abstraction.”



Rindon Johnson, “Coeval Proposition #2: Last Year’s Atlantic, or You look really good, you look like you pretended like nothing ever happened, or a Weakening” (2021), realtime portrait animating program, projectors, platform, computer (image courtesy SculptureCenter, New York and Chisenhale Gallery, London Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles; photo by Kyle Knodell)

Inside the main gallery, “Coeval Proposition #1: Tear down so as to make fat with the Ground or The *Trans America Building DISMANTLE EVERYTHING” (2021–ongoing) repurposes the iconic 1972 Transamerica Pyramid in San Francisco into a monument to trans people. Johnson’s retooling is linguistic and material, constructing the sculpture from reclaimed ebonized redwood instead of the original concrete, steel, and glass — materials which also conjure means of transportation. The wood’s darkening process is crucial for Johnson. He describes his skin as “brown, almost nearly black in certain light,” and notes how the browns of a skyscraper photograph “preserve their natural obscurity in almost any light!” Reminiscent of a Frank Stella star, the sculpture feels fitting inside the space’s ceiling of many X’s and industrial bolts; on a floor whose grid is interrupted by cracks shaped not unlike the streams of water.

“A Round, Solid figure, it has occurred to me that I exercise to make myself cheaper for my insurance company, I mean for myself, Anthem, noun a song of loyalty or devotion, sung antiphonally, sung recited or played, the sung sun asunder, alternatively, the sun sung asunder, is this now, stand by yourself then, in or into a separate place, Solid figure, we’re up all night, it has occurred to me that I exercise to make myself cheaper for my insurance company, I mean for myself, Anthem, we decided a group of us, a noun a song of loyalty or devotion, sung antiphonally, sung recited or played, the sung sun asunder, alternatively, the sun sung asunder, is this now, stand by yourself then, in or into a separate place, Solid figure can we go to the woods now? Let’s stay out of all things together, apart” (2018–ongoing) contains, in part, another ebonizing, this time with coffee. The work is inspired by Ed Clark’s oval painting “Yenom (#9)” (1970). “It never ends,” Johnson writes of the shape. Like “For example [...],” the work is also made of weathered leather, along with indigo dye, rust, and bleach. The title tells of strategies for navigating insurance, rounded math and rounded edges – here not through the Transamerica Corporation, but Anthem, with Johnson transforming the insurance company name into a song. Throughout,

Johnson's winding poem-titles ask as much as they tell, with repetition, address, and alternates.



Installation view of *Rindon Johnson: Law of Large Numbers: Our Bodies*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2021 (photo by Kyle Knodell)

In the book's afterword, Mohebbi describes Johnson's work as "processing the lockdown as studio." Part of the book is titled "COVID-19, i.e., I'm not going to understand any of this until it's over & Everyone Is A Sissy" and, indeed, the pandemic weaves in and out of the text, with the artist picturing himself as the virus, requesting security camera footage from a closed SculptureCenter, and experiencing the global responses from Berlin. My own visit — one of my first post-vaccine, after months of not seeing art in person — felt like a kind of reemerging. One of the few exhibitions I saw last year was *MONUMENTS NOW* at Socrates Sculpture Park, where one side of Jeffrey Gibson's kaleidoscopic ziggurat "BECAUSE ONCE YOU ENTER MY HOUSE IT BECOMES OUR HOUSE" (2020) read "IN NUMBERS TOO BIG TO IGNORE" — "Numbers" and "Too" fittingly tripled. The declaration references activism around missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two spirit people but more broadly, the presence and collective power of many marginalized communities. It was a summer of censuses and cases, ticker counts of infections and hospitalizations — all urgent, consequential, and inequitable. Now, a year later, the number of deaths in the United States from COVID-19 — over 600,000 and counting — is too big to ignore, although it seems we're trying to, despite continued disparities.

On the way out of SculptureCenter, I look up again at Johnson's suspended rawhide. It seems to ask just how much our surrounding supports can hold and, perhaps also, how quickly something evaporates to make room for more.