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Rindon Johnson

By Lisa Yin Zhang, Photography by Marc Gabor, May 6, 2021



The work of Rindon Johnson demands an entirely new framework for looking at art. The polymathic artist's sculptures, videos, and installations are aesthetically evocative but also austere, sometimes purposefully confounding or inert. Even when placed in a museum, there are no typical wall texts to be found, no tidy summaries of materials and meaning. Understanding Johnson's work means realizing that it paradoxically stems from language at the same time that it eludes it.

In his first solo museum exhibition, "Law of Large Numbers: Our Bodies," at SculptureCenter (a second iteration will later open at Chisenhale Gallery, in London), Johnson presents six installations that began as what the artist calls "linguistic conundrums": words or phrases with so many meanings they become portals into ways of thinking about history, ecology, and identity. "I spend a lot of time with words on the periphery of changing," Johnson, 31, said recently from his parents' home in San Francisco—the artist bounces between San Francisco, Brooklyn, Berlin, and Princeton.

The exhibition's centerpiece, a massive wooden sculpture, *Coeval Proposition #1: Tear down so as to make flat with the Ground or The *Trans America Building DISMANTLE EVERYTHING* (2021-ongoing), is built around the word "trans"—a word that even its Latinate form denotes movement and change. "I felt that it might be important to acknowledge my position as a trans person," he continued, "and to question what it means to be someone who is constantly being defined and redefined by sources that are external to themselves, but also then being someone who is in control of their own self-definition and the oxymoronic state that exists because of it." Fittingly for an artist whose work and manner are so rooted in speech and its potential, the form came to him while talking through those ideas

with a friend, looking out at the San Francisco skyline. “It dawned on me,” he said. “That’s the Transamerica building; I’m a trans American. Like—that’s mine.” He followed that line of reasoning “through to the bitter end.” What would it happen if he took that building as his own? What would it look like? How would it function? For Johnson, the quasi-new medium of architecture in the work—which draws its basic silhouette from the Transamerica building, but forms a protracted Star of David in profile and a cross-like base on the floor—is in some ways actually a return. “There are a lot of parts to my practice that I have always felt were unresolved,” he says. In graduate school, in 2017, at Bard College, he learned that enslaved workers were typically buried in coffins made of pine while their masters were buried in coffins of mahogany. As a result, the act of staining something, making it darker than it is, became significant to him, and he began making ebonized wood sculptures out of mahogany. He lays claim to his altered **Trans America* building also because its darkened Redwood façade more closely matches his own skin.

In the show’s other major commission, *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-ongoing), a computer-generated live rendering displays data collected on weather in the North Atlantic “cold blob,” a rapidly cooling section of the Gulf Stream’s warm ocean current brought on by global warming. Located at the midpoint between the show’s two locations, the weather data spans between March 2020 and January 2021, one year before the course of the exhibition. As such, it seems to extend the prefix “trans” to “transatlantic”—not only spanning both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, but referencing the geopolitical and physical infrastructure that connects the two sites under global capitalism, especially the Transatlantic slave trade. “My ancestors were drug across the Atlantic Ocean from Africa,” Johnson writes in the *Law of Large Numbers* catalogue. “Some of them were left in the Atlantic, where this exhibition is also held.” He says, “I’m thinking about the Atlantic as both a gravesite and as a memorial site, and also as an incubator for new life on the planet.” Situated in a pitch black room and set on the floor, the video work induces a queasy sense of seasickness. When viewed, it morphed from a sunset-hour feed, with sunlight gleaming off of slow-roving calm water, to video of tumultuous cloudy skies above a horizon, shafts of sunlight beaming down through cracks in the clouds.

In some way, each of works on view is concerned with transitioning and changing, much like how Johnson, in the wake of his first museum exhibition, now finds himself at a turning point. “The show is kind of about claiming things,” he says. “I don’t really know what it means to be an artist, I don’t know what it means to be a dude. I don’t know what it means to be any of the things that I am—but I am them.”