

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

For immediate release

Rashid Johnson

Coup d'état

September 22 — November 10, 2012

Opening reception: Saturday, September 22, 6:00—9:00pm

David Kordansky Gallery is very pleased to announce *Coup d'état*, an exhibition of new work by Rashid Johnson. This is the artist's second solo exhibition at the gallery. It will open on September 22 and run through November 10. An opening reception will be held on Saturday, September 22, from 6:00pm until 9:00pm.

Rashid Johnson has become known for his ability to engage both the physical and cultural ramifications of his chosen materials. Beginning with early work in conceptual photography, and an abiding interest in the African American intellectual elite, he has gradually broadened the scope of his practice, creating reliquary-like objects, installations, and wall-based works that increasingly take on established legacies of painting.

With *Coup d'état*, Johnson examines the neuroses of power that accompany established regimes of all kinds. In art, as in governmental structures, the concentration of power allows for stability on the one hand and the potential for overthrow on the other. The ways in which these themes are resonant throughout many interdependent spheres—from the personal to the patently political—find formal parallels in the mutable threshold between painting and sculpture, and in the variety of marks that animate Johnson's work. The exhibition will feature a group of major new works in a variety of materials, in which wood, mirrored tile and wax are used as grounds for a series of mark-making strategies; as well as a series of floor-based works that use rugs as supports for further gestures. Among these are several works that represent new typologies for the artist.

For the first time, Johnson has used black mirrored tile as the basis for large-scale, wall-based works that complicate the notions of domesticity, minimalism, and geometry that previous works first set out. If earlier mirrored tile pieces pressed their reflected environments into overt dialogue with the marks (scratching, poured wax and soap) Johnson applied to them, these depict their surroundings as zones of blackness. Any scratched or poured wax marks, therefore, become inscriptions in a black painterly field that is *also* a reflection. The work becomes a double-articulated instance of optical revolt: black mirror disrupts clear reflection, while the marks disrupt reflection altogether as they establish the work's own independent vocabulary.

Another new typology involves the use of wood that has been scorched to an intense, aggressive black. Whereas other wall-based wood works used branding as a mark-making tool, here fire has transformed the entirety of the ground itself, turning it into a field of charcoal-like mutability. Johnson renders the difference between additive and subtractive procedures moot; instead, the ground itself is altered. Here, as in the large-scale, wax-based 'Cosmic Slop' work on view in the exhibition, the mark legislates the transformation of the ground into a network of more- or less-visible gestures. Strict divisions between mark and ground are now impossible to make. Further complicating this relationship, the scorched wood work will include shelves that support found objects.

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Included among these objects are a record by the Art Ensemble of Chicago (displayed so that its back faces forward), and a copy of *Coup d'état: A Practical Handbook*, a book by the military strategist Edward Luttwak. While the book lends its title to the exhibition, its evocation of a step-by-step revolution also sheds light on Johnson's interest in broaching themes of political identity through the hands-on arrangement of materials. References to political overthrow therefore become metaphorical windows through which to view the upheaval inherent in the studio process; in order to progress, old approaches are jettisoned (sometimes violently) and the chaos of new procedures are allowed to take root.

While past exhibitions work were inspired by the ways in which elite African Americans have created more or less covert (and perhaps even fictional) organizations to wield influence, in *Coup d'état* Johnson shifts his focus to a broader—and more abstract—investigation of power and instability. Suddenly it becomes possible to imagine the wall-based works as trophies in the tenuous palace of a recently victorious African dictator, subject at any moment to deposition.

The floor-based works, meanwhile—which use Persian and zebra-skin rugs as grounds for branded marks, and the arrangement of objects—lend the exhibition an aura of menacing luxury. (They also remind the viewer that Johnson has long combined critique and humor as driving modes in his practice.) In effect, they are paintings that have been pushed into relationship with the floor, forced into an accord with sculpture. In this sense they occupy the uneasy ground marked out by Carl Andre and other minimalists who sought to rewire the perceptual experience of objects in space, though they do so by using objects with which the viewer is imminently familiar.

For at least the last century, aesthetic advances, especially in painting, are predicated upon rupture. Throughout *Coup d'état*, Johnson uses the terms of painting as a foil. As a result, philosophical and political endgames, like the futile attempt to define 'blackness', for instance, find a formal analogue in the endgame narrative that has come to define painting. Cultural advances of all kinds involve coups d'état; progress, however ambiguous a term it might be, is always dependent on destruction and erasure. For Johnson, personal advances occupy similar territory, and require a quasi-pathological insistence on pushing forward despite the looming specter of destruction.

Rashid Johnson's work is currently the subject of a mid-career survey entitled *Rashid Johnson: A Message to Our Folks*, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. In 2012-2013, it will travel to the Miami Art Museum; the High Museum of Art, Atlanta; and the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis. Also on view beginning in September, 2012 is a solo exhibition at the South London Gallery, London. Other solo exhibitions include shows at SculptureCenter, Long Island City, NY; Kunstmuseum Kloster Unser Lieben Frauen Magdeburg, Germany; and the Indianapolis Museum of Art. Recent group exhibitions include *In the Holocene*, MIT List Visual Arts Center,

Cambridge, MA; *American Exuberance*, Rubell Family Collection, Miami; *Becoming: Photographs from the Wedge Collection*, The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, NC; *ILLUMInations*, International Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennale; and *Secret Societies. To Know, To Dare, To Will, To Keep Silence*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt and CAPC de Bordeaux.