

FIRST LOOK: RINDON JOHNSON

by Dana Kopel September 1, 2018

In recent sculptural pieces, Johnson uses cowhide—manipulates it, cures it, leaves it outside to degrade—to think through toxicity, neglect, and nurturance. Sun-bleached or coated with rust, worn away by acid or slicked with Vaseline, the hides have been destroyed methodically and with care. Several works in process, fermenting in the dirt outside the artist's studio in Upstate New York, look (via FaceTime, at least) like arid landscapes seen from an airplane window. He conceives of their components as by-products: the petroleum jelly in Vaseline, a material he rubbed on objects and human skin in early videos and performances, is a by-product of oil; leather is a by-product of cows raised for meat. Black Americans, Johnson contends, are by-products, too—of a country made with but not for them. In his practice, leather is a marked skin: weighted with decomposition and death, treated with materials—like indigo dye and coffee—that map the residue of chattel slavery.

Much as his work is charged with specific responses to physical and social context, Johnson also seems interested in letting things happen, allowing materials to assert their own agencies. This is less an attitude of resignation than one of openness to circumstance and environment, while acknowledging the latent violence and injustices of that environment. I think of a few lines in the poem "You Can Fuck Women and Still Love Them, Right?" from his 2017 book Shade the King, which read: "Must stop being so lazy. I did not even change my pronouns everybody did it for me. Or everybody else that looks like me changed their pronouns and so by looking like them I changed mine too."