

Interview: Rindon Johnson on poetry, identity and imagined futures

In a new show at Chisenhale Gallery, London, American artist Rindon Johnson explores identity, belonging and the space between physical and virtual realities



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

The art of American artist Rindon Johnson is rooted in language and fluid in media. In a recent show at SculptureCenter New York, and a newly-opened presentation at Chisenhale Gallery, London, Johnson traverses a wide range of subjects, from his identity as a Black trans American, to the environmental crisis and the space between actual and virtual realities. Through sculpture, installation, poetry, writing, virtual reality film and painting, Johnson probes at the very core of belonging.

Earlier this year, Johnson's 'Law of Large Numbers: Our Bodies' at the SculptureCenter, New York comprised commissioned sculptures, rawhide works, and video which dominate the ground floor galleries, lobby, and outdoor spaces.

The artist's companion exhibition 'Law of Large Numbers: Our Selves', has just opened at London's Chisenhale Gallery, which includes reconfigured and additional works.



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). Installation view Chisenhale Gallery', 2021. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London and SculptureCenter, New York, 2021. Courtesy the artist. Photography: Andy Keate



Rindon Johnson: 'Law of Large Numbers: Our Bodies', installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, 2021. Photography: Kyle Knodell



Rindon Johnson, 'Coeval Proposition #1: Tear down so as to make flat with the Ground or The *Trans America Building DISMANTLE EVERY-THING' (2021). Installation view Hertford Union Canal, 2021. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London and SculptureCenter, New York, 2021. Courtesy the artist. Photography: Andy Keate

In the large-scale sculpture, *Coeval Proposition #1: Tear down so as to make flat with the Ground or The *Trans America Building DISMANTLE EVERY-THING*, Johnson references the Transamerica Pyramid in San Francisco, an iconic landmark of the city's skyline. The building's concrete, steel, and glass with a facade covered in crushed white quartz has been reimagined in re-claimed redwood and ebonised, or darkened. As Johnson writes, this process allowed him to 'more readily see myself reflected in the building which by name and location reflects my trans identity back to me (we share a name) – my skin is brown, almost nearly Black in certain light.'

We spoke to Johnson earlier this year about the fusion of language and art, the power of science fiction, and the inspiration behind the new shows.

*Wallpaper**: Your practice ranges from writing, sculptures to paintings, videos, installations, and VR. Language also plays an integral role; when did your fascination begin, and which writers have been major influences?

Rindon Johnson: I started to weave it into my visual practice in about 2016 and more seriously in 2017, really pushing my titles to take on more space and substance. This was also around the same time I was taking my poetry writing more seriously, starting to think about what was possible between the poem and the sculpture.

There are lots of writers who are influential to me: Octavia E. Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin, Lyn Hejinian. In Saidiya Hartman's work, I am very curious and excited by the possible project of speculative fiction and collective imagining that she lays out in *Venus in Two Acts*. So there are two streams there about what fiction can do for us and acting that fiction, particularly in science fiction. I feel really strongly that we can imagine our future so science fiction is a great place to start to create a desirable other world.

*W**: 'Law of Large Numbers: Our Bodies' marks your first solo museum show. What does this mean to you, and what was the most challenging part of developing it?

RJ: Technically it's my first solo museum show in the States, but I did have a show at the Julia Stoschek Collection in Dusseldorf in 2019; that was my first solo show. I feel blessed to have an exhibition at SculptureCenter. There are a lot of people who have been offered this opportunity who I look up to very much. I feel really honoured to get to dialogue with them in that way. And to work with a space like SculptureCenter and Chisenhale and see what I can offer as my contribution to the history of these two spaces who have offered open platforms for artists like me for a long time, and have done so in a wonderful and exciting way.

As far as the most challenging part of developing the show, it's always challenging developing a show, no matter the time, but it was hard not to be able to follow the usual parameters. There weren't any IRL site visits possible and it occurred in a year that felt very intense for reasons that we all know. I got this amazing email from someone that said, 'the circumstance we're all in' and I think that's true, so given the circumstance we're all in, it was more challenging than an alternate reality version of me might have found without the pandemic.

I think the challenge is always the translation, leaving room for a continuous translation. I feel like a good art show should have an ongoingness in the mind of the viewer so that even when the show comes down it continues to grow and shift and change just as the viewer grows and shifts and changes.

*W**: What inspired the title of the show?



Rindon Johnson: 'Law of Large Numbers: Our Bodies', installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, 2021. Photography: Kyle Knodell

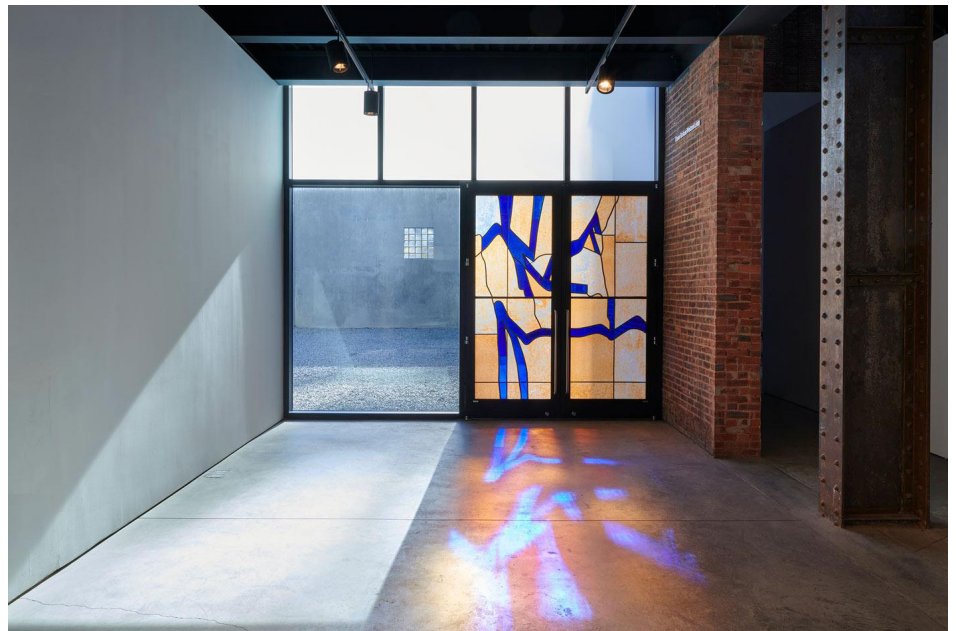


Rindon Johnson, 'Coeval Proposition #1: Tear down so as to make flat with the Ground of The *Trans America Building DISMANTLE EVERYTHING', 2021-ongoing. Redwood. Commissioned by Valeria Napoleone (VNXXSC) SculptureCenter, New York, and Chisenhale Gallery, London. Courtesy the artist. Photography: Kyle Knodell

RJ: Inspired feels wrong, but the title of the show was informed by the oddness of the term itself, specifically in finance, when a company is growing exponentially, eventually, the company will begin to devour itself. There's only one way to go eventually, and it's downward. I just thought it was an interesting and terrifying thing. Then I was thinking about this book, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Boston Women's Health Book Collective) which was a big book in the 1970s and is credited with catalysing the new version of feminism and [in helping] women to learn about their bodies. I'm a trans person, and I'm asking that question all the time; my body, my self, I wanted to suggest an 'our' or a 'we' because we're doing a lot of things together.

W*: *One work*, Coeval Proposition #1: Tear down so as to make flat with the Ground or The *Trans America Building DISMANTLE EVERYTHING, references the Transamerica Pyramid in San Francisco. What drew you to this building, and how did you create the work?

RJ: I'm a trans person, I'm from San Francisco, and it turns out there's already a building named for the person that I am: the Transamerica Pyramid. So it felt like it should be mine. Because of the circumstance we're in, the work was fabricated by an incredible studio called Tri-Lox in Greenpoint, Brooklyn and I'm grateful to Tri-Lox because they really understood the project and happened to be dealing with some reclaimed lumber from the New York City water towers which are redwood, from Northern California. There are other questions about what architecture is and who gets to control things, but ultimately the Trans America Building is about naming, who gets to name what and when and all of that.



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. Courtesy the artist and Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles. Photography: Kyle Knodell

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