

INTERVIEWS

RINDON JOHNSON

May 14, 2021 • Rindon Johnson on “The Law of Large Numbers” and the power of a name



Visitors to Rindon Johnson’s “The Law of Large Numbers: Our Bodies” at New York’s SculptureCenter (March 25–August 2, 2021) pass first under the drawn whole hide of a cow. On damp days, the skin droops; in the rain, it holds water; the sun bakes it solid. It also gathers more than moisture. Before being hung, the rawhide spent six months in the museum courtyard, cooking and flexing, adding marks to those accumulated during the cow’s life. The piece is a harbinger—for the stained-glass courtyard door depicting New York City’s watershed; for the continuous rendering of an edgeless Atlantic Ocean; and for the way Johnson’s show as a whole portrays the sickening, awesome slosh of possible futures.

WHEN I KNEW that the show would exist in two places, at SculptureCenter and then Chisenhale Gallery in London later in 2021 and 2022, I realized that there’s a midpoint, which of course is the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean—an area called the North Atlantic Cold Blob where cold water from the melting Greenland ice sheet is disrupting ancient ocean currents. The

North Atlantic Cold Blob is literally one of the scariest things happening on Earth right now. Holy shit. That's where my show is. When you hear about the level of discord our planet has found itself in, you're like, Okay, can we stop for like an hour and think about that? I wish I could spend a year inside of the Cold Blob. I wonder if I could feel it. So *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 hyperrealistic, self-generating rendering of what it would look like if you were in the middle of the Atlantic, one year ago to the day. So, if it's the fourteenth of May, 2021, then *Coeval #2* will show the cold blob on May 14, 2020.

The whole show is about water. I wanted nothing to be stationary or stable in various registers, especially the rawhide work over the entrance [*For example, collect the water just to see it pool there above your head. Don't be a Fucking Hero!*, 2021–]. That piece is incredibly assertive. It really will look completely different from one day to another. It just soaks up the atmosphere, so when it gets wet it becomes malleable and floppy, even filling up with water, and when it dries it becomes super hard, holding its shape. I wanted that back-and-forth to be high on your mind when you enter the show.

Rawhide is pretty much as close to the animal as you can get without a stinking pile of skin. At the moment, my budget allows for buying hide at its cheapest, on the internet. Usually, those cows are coming from Argentina or Brazil or Chile, or the States. Much of my original interest in rawhide was around this idea that leather is a byproduct of another system, the beef industry. I learned early that only a desperate farmer would end up bothering to process the skin into rawhide or leather in my price range, which felt like a poignant and confusing position to be in as a consumer. Ideally, I would take a cow, let it live out its existence, and then when it dies turn that into whatever the hell it is that I make. I guess they're sculptures; I guess they're also paintings.

There're all these abstract dude artists swirling around the show. One is Ed Clark. He got me interested in ovals in a way that's kind of outrageous—as if you could have a form, as he so happily puts it, that never ends. And so that's the shape of the wall-based hide work, titled *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–. I was also thinking about Jack Whitten, who talks all the time about this phenomenon of the painter “finding their color.” You don't mix the color. It finds you and you find it at the same time. I always thought that was a really important way to think about abstraction and also about, I don't know, fucking being a person. With the leather, I wanted to mimic the importance of that moment. The questions of mark-making and care are always around, too. If I take a little bit of care of something, what happens to it? What if I take no care of something? What if I string it up with paracord and leave it alone for six months? The hide works are where so much inherent artistic self-doubt arises for me: I'm not sure it's okay to string up bodies, but I do it anyway.

As a trans man, I feel like inherently, I'm constantly asking questions of masculinity. Like, if I'm a dude, then do I make buildings? How big are my



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. Real-time animation software, projectors, platform, computer, dimensions variable.

buildings? Are they a little too big because I'm confident? I don't think I want to make buildings, but what if I make a building that's not a building? With *Coeval Proposition #1: Tear down so as to make flat with the Ground or The *Trans America Building DISMANTLE EVERYTHING*, 2021–, I realized I could make the Transamerica Building my building as a trans American, just by renaming it. The building that is my building is only two gestures, the pyramid and then the upside-down version of that pyramid. Its digital-skeletal nature is very present to me because I design things in the computer first. Then, when we started working with Tri-Lox to make the sculpture architecturally sound, they brought up this reclaimed redwood from the New York City water towers. I was like, that's great, we can talk about water. It's another cycle back to San Francisco. It continues this oval, if you will, around the show. That piece is kind of like my serendipity machine, like finding color.

I think if we change what we call things, we might actually get to the things that we want. I see this idea as not just key to trans liberation but as a revolutionary principle. Poetry and sculpture are similar that way. To understand a poem, you have to remember what came before, and to understand sculpture, you have to remember the parts you can't see. With my longer titles, I want to create an echoing linguistic space in the viewer's mind instead of shutting that down with a name we can agree on. Persistence and repetition show up again, for instance, when I'm quoting John Giorno in the title for the stained-glass piece: *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. That sensation, that repetition of "through the canyon," the way Giorgio
would read a poem is almost a demand that you get inside of the poem.
Repetition doesn't take no for an answer. I mean that in a sweet, funny way.

I called the shows "Law of Large Numbers" after a law in both economics
and mathematics. It has a different meaning in each. In economics, it states
that if a company is growing exponentially, eventually it will begin to decline.
They describe this process as a company eating itself. As we're watching the
climate crisis unfold, we get to see in detail what could be understood as our
cannibalistic existence. I wanted to tease out the casualties of being at scale.
And also: Could we, as bodies in this process, stop that whole thing, break
it all down, dismantle it all? There's a naturalness implied in the law of large
numbers: It's a law, it must happen. The idea that anything "must happen"
feels quite odd to me.

-As told to Travis Diehl