

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

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Review The personal and political in Rashid Johnson's cubes



Rashid Johnson, "Plateaus," 2014, mixed media. (Fredrik Nilsen / David Kordansky Gallery)



By **Christopher Knight** | Contact Reporter

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“The most interesting characteristic of the cube,” artist Sol Lewitt once said, discussing the form that generated much of his influential sculpture, “is that it is relatively uninteresting.”

Given the enormous influence of Lewitt's art, his "uninteresting" form eventually became very interesting indeed. Like the Yucatan jungle swallowing up an ancient Mayan pyramid, the cube was inevitably colonized and overgrown.

Rashid Johnson swallows up Lewitt's open-cube sculptures in his provocative new "Plateaus," a monumental installation at David Kordansky Gallery in its handsome new location. One of the more interesting aspects of Johnson's use of this "uninteresting" form is the way he further frames it within a highly personal and political context.

A nearly 20-foot-tall step-pyramid of open cubes in black steel, "Plateaus" has here been invaded not by wild nature but by domestic potted plants. Rolled-up rugs, fluorescent tubes (in this context a cross between grow-lights and Dan Flavin light-sculptures) and slabs of shea butter, some of it formed into rudimentary sculptural busts, also fill the cubic shelves.

Shea butter is a common yellowish-ivory fat extracted from the nut of an African tree, which has been used in cosmetics and ointments since ancient Egyptian times. Johnson's shea-butter busts stand like sentinel ghosts in his industrial pyramid machine.

Stacks of books also turn up in the underbrush – nearly 60 of them, including seven copies of the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous and six of Harvard law professor Randall Kennedy's "Sellout: The Politics of Racial Betrayal," a controversial study of the practice of currying favor within white-dominated society. Richard Wright's classic 1940 novel, "Native Son," is by far the most numerous – here as well as in five wall-relief sculptures in an adjacent room. "Plateaus" holds 46 used copies.

These three books present religion-derived self-help from self-destructive delirium; a pressing dilemma faced by any African American artist working in white-majority culture; and a story of tragic inevitability and personal redemption.

They create a trenchant structural outline as distinct as Lewitt's open cubes. Johnson's homey pyramid contains multiple plateaus – understood as occupying high ground while simultaneously acknowledging that progress is stalled.

David Kordansky Gallery, 5130 W. Edgewood Place, (323) 935-3030, through Oct. 29.