

Art in America

REVIEWS APR. 28, 2015

Rashid Johnson

LONDON,
at Hauser & Wirth

By JAMES CAHILL



Rashid Johnson: *Untitled Anxious Men*, 2014, white ceramic tile, black soap, wax and spray enamel, 96½ by 72½ by 2½ inches; at Hauser & Wirth.

Checking the walls of the first gallery of American artist Rashid Johnson's exhibition "Smile" were multiple prints of a 1950 photograph by Elliott Erwitt, showing a young black boy grinning as he holds a pistol to his head. In this jarring image, the boy's action and gleeful attitude are strangely at odds, the line between play and violence too fine for comfort. The picture—a portrait of childhood in all its posturing and anxiety—is also, inevitably, a record of the era in which it was taken: a window onto a world of poverty and racism.

Serially repeated like one of Warhol's silkscreened emblems of modern America, Erwitt's photograph reinforced the ambiguous mood of Johnson's show, in which personal and historical resonances commingled. Art history was deftly invoked in a group of bronze wall pieces that evince a formalist fascination with abstract shape and surface texture. Superficially, these objects—their titles (e.g., *If It's Magic*) lifted from Stevie Wonder songs—resemble leather drapes cut into and painted using sludgy black. Looking spontaneous and open-ended, they seem to deny their weighty classical medium. But the material is not entirely irrelevant, nor is the works' distant similarity to commemorative tablets. Johnson's mother, the show's

press release informs us, made bronze casts of his baby shoes when the artist (b. 1977) was a child—objects that serve as ossified memories, physicalized emotions.

Thus Johnson's work functions as a kind of allegory of remembering. In the sculpture *Fatherhood* (2014), a large gridded steel frame resembling a Sol LeWitt sculpture has been packed haphazardly with assorted memorabilia: plants, brass knickknacks and many books, including Bill Cosby's memoir *Fatherhood*. Here, what seem like personal effects—small tokens of a life and a personality—become compellingly entangled with an abstract structural device.

The strongest works in the show were in the final room. On a sequence of white-tiled supports, Johnson painted (or, more precisely, scribbled) a series of giant faces in black soap, the substance functioning paradoxically to stain rather than cleanse. Crude features emerge like phantasms from the churning grime. Although one can make easy comparisons with artists as disparate as Fautrier and Basquiat, the agitated, informel muck of the pigment—offset by the grids of tiles—has an impact that is almost brutally emotive. The series title, "*Untitled Anxious Men*" (2014), underlines the effect. Fraught and unfixable, the images demand a response that obviates art historical trainspotting.

It was the personal that welled to the fore in "*Smile*," as in that picture of the unknown boy. Johnson's art, which has been associated (helpfully or not) with the nebulous genre "post-black," replaces politicking with something bigger and rawer. Identity politics, while never absent, are relegated to the background; and as in Erwit's photograph, messing around is never far away from melancholy.