

RASHID JOHNSON'S A POEM FOR DEEP THINKERS NOW AT GUGGENHEIM

Story and photos by Harlem Henderson

A Poem for Deep Thinkers, featuring the work of Chicago-based multidisciplinary artist **Rashid Johnson** is currently on exhibition at New York City's **Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum**. The show, curated by the museum's Deputy Director **Naomi Beckwith**, and **Andrea Karnes**, includes nearly 90 of the artist's works and runs until January 18th, 2026.

In this exhibition Johnson is not solely a creative seeking to conceive visuals challenging historic traditions. He is equally devoted to depictions of the Black experience, masterfully hybridizing site-specific installation, graffiti, film, and pictures through his unique approach of blending cultural ephemera. His use of Black line abstraction references heroes of old, and he erects sculptures hinting to ancestral memories through the medium of black soap.

The innovator exceeds his title as a visual artist by experimenting with the concept of death, a commonality integrally tied to the human experience, yet one whose frequency and indiscriminate immediacy is all too soon experienced within Black communities. Rather than viewing death as a definitive end, Johnson draws on Afrofuturist narratives—such as *Sankofa*, which favors historical reflection over escapism—to emphasize the cyclical and interconnected nature of time. In this view, the past is not separate from the present but deeply woven into it, offering contemporary individuals a source of power, meaning, and continuity.

Consider Johnson's striking photograph of himself lying as though dead atop a gravestone inscribed with the name "Johnson." The gravesite, located in Chicago, belongs to the legendary Jack Johnson, one of the first Black boxers to achieve national acclaim. His success in a sport long dominated by racial exclusion ignited inspiration and activism across the country. Using vertical symmetry, Johnson aligns himself—literally and symbolically—with this legacy, transforming the shared surname into a signifier of enduring Black excellence. In this framing, the artist's staged corpse is not merely lifeless but elevated, resting upon a name whose immortal significance outlives the temporal nature of the body.

Notwithstanding Johnson's namesake, one approximating him as a pivotal changemaker in Black history, the title of his exhibition itself responds to elements established by renowned writer **Toni Morrison**. Drawing from her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and The Literary Imagination* he debunks the pervasive stereotype of Black expressionism's surrogacy as a catalyst for emotions otherwise deemed unacceptable within the confines of American society. He instead, unabashedly draws upon the distinctly human intimacies of Black vulnerability, connecting them to questions long ago raised by Black philosophers, such as sociologist **W.E.B. Dubois** and the proverbial abolitionist **Fredrick Douglass**, who dared ask how it is good enough to be made equal in a nation incapable of even identifying who it does and doesn't even consider people?

The nebulous and transcendent qualities of Johnson's work serve both as a warning and a meditation, emphasizing the extraction of radical potential across Afro-Diasporic history to cultivate a continuum—one that stands in solidarity not only with Black rights but with all freedoms essential to our shared human consciousness.

492 words