

Art

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James Welling

Interviewed by Kathy Battista

The Documentary Effect

Mark Prince

Conceptual Writing

John Douglas Millar

Frieze Week

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meaninglessness. By incorporating objects and symbols into his work, taken specifically from the canon of African-American cultural history, Johnson is displaying the constituent parts of his ethnic identity so that we may know what it and, by extension, a certain US conception of blackness are made of. In other words, the work of Rashid Johnson is all about Rashid Johnson. Unfortunately this makes the fictional narrative used to support his first solo exhibition in the UK difficult to swallow.

According to South London Gallery's interpretation, 'Shelter' has been inspired by an 'imagined society in which psychotherapy is freely available to all'. The viewer is encouraged to consider the exhibition as an immersive *mise en scène* in which Johnson's works become the soft furnishings and wall adornments of a fictive therapist's office. In reality 'Shelter' falls far short of embodying this idea. We are asked to consider *Daybed (1-4)*, 2012 – four zebra-skin beds placed on top of Persian rugs that run up the centre of SLG's main space – as both a collection of therapists' couches and day beds in which a post-colonial African leader might take a nap. This incompatible double identity exposes the two central failings of 'Shelter': that beyond the garbled press release it is a display of decorative art, and that Johnson's engagement with a discourse of identity and racial politics seems more market-friendly stylistic choice than political gesture. Still, despite Marcel Duchamp's grumblings, there is nothing wrong with retinal art and *Daybed* is a visually compelling piece. In fact all the works in 'Shelter' – especially the series in which wall-based oak flooring is covered with dense layers of black soap and wax – possess a material richness that overrides the need for anecdotal alibis. The attempt to steer interpretation and engagement towards a predetermined hermeneutic just gets in the way of seeing and judging the works for what they are: attractive well-made objects that make a fairly interesting use of idiosyncratic materials.

The second conceptual obstruction to a phenomenal or aesthetic appreciation of work in 'Shelter' is Johnson's preoccupation with cultural identity. Like other artists that Studio Museum of Harlem director Thelma Golden categorises as 'post-black' (Kehinde Wiley, for example), Johnson's is a surprisingly narrow and conventional notion of blackness: legitimate, but reductive. In a similar vein to the film director Spike Lee, Johnson draws on an established set of media references, representing an outmoded, middle-class, African-American essentialism: in *House Arrest*, 2012, a wall-mounted assemblage of red-oak flooring, the familiar gunsight insignia of agit-prop hip-hop group Public Enemy is branded repeatedly across its surface; in *The End of Anger*, 2012, a mirror-tiled

shelf unit, splattered with black soap and viscid black wax, features a copy of Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers' 1962 12-inch 'Three Blind Mice'. Again they are both visually compelling pieces, but the hip-hop and jazz references are almost stereotypically predictable. Does the African-American experience always have to be reduced to a nostalgic mining of what was on the turntable back in the day? To be fair, it is unclear what Johnson's position is on all this. In the past he has spoken critically about the moment when, as a youth, he returned home to find all the hallmarks of domestic afrocentrism (dashikis and the like) had vanished, along with a certain 'conscious' way of being. You would think this might lead to regarding objects as perfidious and transient things, not emblematic and enduring signifiers of cultural identity. Perhaps 'Shelter's engagement with these worn out cultural tropes is an ironic, postmodern commentary on identity as affectation in post-black art. Who knows? Johnson's voice is far too ambiguous to tell; something a sure curatorial hand should have directed either way.

The End of Anger takes its title from a 2011 book written by the African-American journalist Ellis Cose. The text, which is also stacked on one of the work's mirrored shelves, speaks of a contemporary moment in which black rage has diminished in terms of the US's legacy of slavery, and white guilt is dissipating. One wonders what Johnson's take on this is, and why he includes the text here. Race and racism are still live issues; it is just that the grounds on which battles are waged have now moved into vague and indistinct territories – places where the existence of prejudice is questioned by the very individuals and institutions which display discriminatory behaviours and racist tendencies. For instance, what about the notion that black artists are still being pushed, by collectors and institutions, towards a commercially viable preoccupation with race? As an artist who happens to be black it is absolutely not Johnson's duty to tackle these issues, but the fact that he has a foot in both camps needs to be addressed. The fault here is again a curatorial one. 'Shelter' is an exhibition unsure of what it wants to say, but uncomfortable with the notion that it doesn't have to say a thing. It is a curator's job to dig through all this and guide the artist towards a crystallisation of voice, vision and intention ready for public display – especially in an introductory solo show. ■

MORGAN QUAINANCE is writer, musician and curator.

Sarah Dobai: Twenty Second Hold

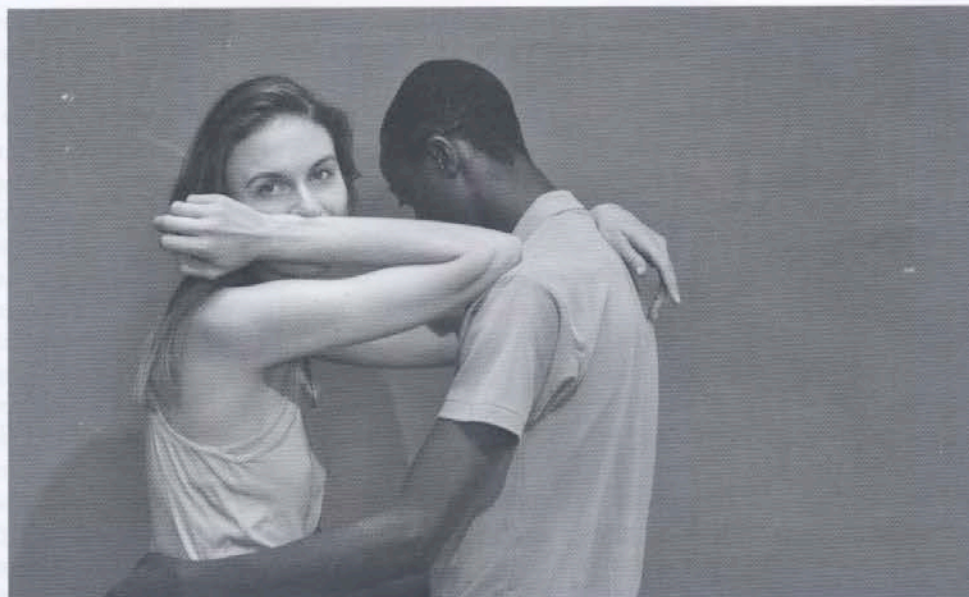
Works/Projects Bristol 6 October to 10 November

At Sarah Dobai's first show with Works/Projects since 'Studio/Location Photographs 2008/9' – photographs of empty, behind-the-scenes corridors of shopping centres alongside images of solitary models languishing in studio sets mimicking these locations – I found myself eschewing private view chatter, drawn instead to spending extended time reflecting on the present work. Projected onto a single freestanding wall, positioned diagonally out across the space from its big roller-shutter door, the video shows the models familiar from Dobai's stills pieces captured relaxing from the frozen poses that had been held for the long photographic exposures required to get the original still shots. This seemingly innocuous gesture has a curiously deflationary effect – as if pricking some deeply held and intangible belief. Enhanced by a deliberate inventory of camera movements – the long shot, the slow pan and the close-up – the repeated gestures of release, the relaxation of limbs and faces, trigger a sort of shock of animation.

Rashid Johnson
Shelter 2012



Sarah Dobai
Twenty Second Hold
 2012 video



Initially I read this surprise as being due to the models no longer performing the function of blank screens whose nonchalant poses and outfits, carefully co-ordinated with the muted tones of the sets, induced projections of identity and narrative but apparently instead displaying their own volition. Yet almost immediately came the suggestion that the gestures of release were themselves enacted, reflecting Dobai's professed interest in the work of Walter Benjamin on his unfinished *Arcades Project* from the 1930s. Studying the first covered shopping arcades from the end of the 19th century, Benjamin foresaw the awakening to consciousness of the collective mind distracted by early consumer culture. However, Dobai's work, in suggesting a nuanced relationship between reality and artifice, goes beyond structural dialectical opposition and operates somewhere in the gap between the two. One moment in the work succinctly illustrates this: the model Emily is seen breaking out of her pose from two slightly different camera positions and degrees of close-up. The effect of this device is to suggest the operation of self-awareness, of the thought patterns involved in constructing one's identity from a collage of different imagined images from an external, in this case photographic, position. It is as if the model's visualisation of herself has been transposed into the moving image that we witness on screen.

Dobai has spoken of her desire to 'picture something of the interior life of people – of how they feel', and she does this through the discreet use of artifice, but artifice that bears the marks of its own making. *Twenty Second Hold* conveys the idea that the real can be indicated more through artifice than through direct representation of surface facts. A curious instance of this is the fabrication of scuff marks on the blue walls behind the posed models, held then released from their posed filmic embrace. These traces are classic examples of an indexical sign, whose centrality to her work Dobai has confirmed in interview, the sign that is associated with photography and its veracity. Yet the inauthenticity of the marks is a reminder that in the philosophy of CS Peirce, such a sign is inextricably linked with other signs of his 'triadic system' of icon and symbol – and also with the notion of 'fallibilism', where doubt and belief create a constantly moving circuit. In addition the conventional use of the index as trace or mould, by André Bazin for example, to give

authority to photography's status of authenticity finds its limits in this example. More appropriate here would be the indexical sign that Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson propose in their revisions of Rosalind Krauss's unilateral use of it to see photography as 'uncoded' evidence of the real: this is the repoussoir figure more often seen in classical painting, such as the person looking out of the picture frame as indicator of some action 'off-scene'. However, in Dobai's current work the direction of the model's gaze is turned inward, turned in on the self, on their inner lives. By extension, and precisely because we have seen the characters to be fictive, we identify with them and so their inward gaze is transferred to us. For Dobai, who advocates the 'accumulation of viewing time', this attention is translated to the inner life of the audience whose dearly held belief in the concreteness of an external reality cedes to a fluid uncertainty – a becoming aware of the made-ness of even our most intimate personal identity. ■

COLIN GLEN is an artist.

Fernando García-Dory: A Dairy Museum

Mostyn Llandudno 22 September to 6 January

'Awareness raising', that pursuit of campaigners, activists and educators, is an endless task. In the 1970s, Yugoslavian-born artist Radovan Kraguly began addressing what he saw as humankind's alienation from the natural environment. Using the figure of the cow as an overarching symbol for the animals with which we regularly interact (via their milk, skin and so on) but largely ignore, he embarked on a decades-long series of drawings, paintings and sculptures that sought to redress that balance. Figurative images of cattle resting beside obtrusive, angular constructions gave way to later, more abstract black-and-white canvases, some of them bearing the recognisable patched markings of Holstein dairy cows. At some point in the 1990s, Kraguly began work on a 'National Dairy Museum', a cultural institution dedicated to 'art in the rural space'; it would have a library, offices, cafeteria and lecture rooms, with entrances for both humans and animals – cows would spend a day there and visitors could learn how to milk by hand.