

ART + PRACTICE

TRANSCRIPTION OF ARTIST TALK: DEVIN B. JOHNSON FROM JUNE 22, 2021

JOSHUA ODUGA: Hello everyone. My name is Joshua Oduga. I'm the exhibitions and public programs manager at Art and Practice. Thank you for joining us for this public program, Artists Talk, Devin B. Johnson. Devin B. Johnson is a painter originally from Los Angeles, currently based in Brooklyn. How are you doing Devin?

DEVIN B. JOHNSON: Doing well, how are you doing Joshua?

ODUGA: Doing great. Great. Thank you for joining me in this program, and thank you for the conversations that we've been having over the past few weeks leading up to this. I'm really excited to explore your artwork. As I mentioned to you when we first met, I came across your artwork years ago just around Los Angeles, and ever since then I've wanted to do something like this with you. I never thought it would happen here at Art and Practice, but I'm very glad to use this platform to share more information about the amazing work that you do. So I think we're going to do this program by sharing some images that you prepared, so I'm going to ... share your screen and then we can jump into that.

JOHNSON: Yeah I mean, I want to first start by saying thank you Art and Practice, and thank you, Joshua. And for me, this is an honor to be able to come to the public to talk a bit more about my practice, and especially coming from Art and Practice, being a staple as a nonprofit institution in Los Angeles, helping the community at large there. So, this is a great honor for me to share some of my thoughts to you all this afternoon.

ODUGA: Yeah. Thank you. Thank you so much for being with us and I really appreciate what you just said.

JOHNSON: All right. So I'm going to go ahead and jump into it. I'm going to go ahead and find my screen. Do you see this Joshua?

ODUGA: Not yet.

JOHNSON: Not yet? Okay let me go ahead.

ODUGA: There we go.

JOHNSON: You see where we're at? Man, just here we go. Here we go. All right. So my name is Devin B. Johnson, for those of you who are just meeting me for the first time today. I am from Los Angeles, California. I was born on March 4th, 1992. So I'm a Pisces and near the monkey is what [inaudible 00:02:24]. But moving forward, LA for me was where my roots were kind of stationed. In the earliest part of my life I lived in San Diego where I was taken under close consideration, close nurturement underneath my nana and my papa. And my brother we had very, I would say, very potent foundational years living in San Diego where, after school, I would go back home and I would spend a lot of my time drawing, looking at Bob Ross, looking at programs on PBS, or Discovery Kids.

And a lot of the creativity at the early age, I would say, I don't know, five on to 29, it was kind of this, I guess, confusion, or this curiosity that kind of stuck, I guess, through the whole course of my life. And this is why, I guess, I would say I'm an artist today is that I have this curiosity that is in me that I can't necessarily get out of. And so I'm compelled with my ideas and my ambitions, and my thoughts, maybe this thing called talent, that I could maybe manifest some of the ideas in my mind to either paint or whatever material. And so some of those things I've come to learn over the years, but it was something that I always was earning money for.

As a young kid, I was always very sure that I wanted to be an artist, more or less. My parents and my grandparents would always give me nurturing comments that this is something that I could potentially see for myself. And I know that's weird in a lot of cases, a lot of parents don't necessarily see the benefits of their children exploring the nature of their natural capabilities or even their talents, right? Whether it be the arts. But my parents and my grandparents saw that it was something that it was in me, and they did not want to cocoon me into a person I wasn't supposed to be, so they nurtured me into just artists.

And so I went to undergrad school at Cal State Channel Islands, which is in Camarillo, and I went into my first year of undergrad in 2010. And it was there when I kind of picked up a little bit of the fundamentals of [inaudible 00:04:55]. We took this project where we looked at a lot of Italian painting, Renaissance painting, and I liked Caravaggio a lot. He was one of my favorite painters from the Baroque period because he invoked a lot of drama, and he invoked a lot of mood. And I can feel that from the paintings. But from this assignment, I remember we had to go into any type of painting that we liked, and take a subsection, go into a close crop, and kind of recreate that close crop out of oil, and all the processes that we were told that the old masters did.

So there was pencil, line drawing, even the drawing of the composition straight on the canvas. Then there is the sealing up the drawing through either a fixative that you put to seal the drawing, and then you go ahead and do your sepia drawing to get your tones, your values, your mids, your darks, and your lights all situated in one color. And then after that's all [inaudible 00:05:56] in situated, you use a liquin or some part about the process where you start putting the color onto the paint. So that was kind of where I sort of understood a little bit of that painting oil process. And there was a lot of disfiguration that wasn't happening. Very tight, very, very rigid form. So I guess because of life drawing being a place of knowing how to place anatomy.

And so, over the years, maybe fast forward after I graduated in 2015, I was searching for something. I was looking for something that was, I believe promised to me, after I graduated from my undergrad. As a young student you think that the world is yours. And you have every right to believe that. But then you get humbled very quickly that the work is just starting even then as a young kid, getting your degree, the world is just starting. And the work for you is just starting, the road ahead is very rigorous. And so LA wasn't working for me, so I believe that in 2016 or so, I made an effort to change my situation, change where I was at, because LA just wasn't working for me. I was too comfortable.

So I decided to challenge myself and apply to a master's program at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. And, so I end up telling my parents that, "Hey I want to apply to this master's program and it's in New York, Brooklyn." They were like, "Oh my God, are you sure you want to do this?" I was very, very sure and it was the first time in my life, oddly enough, where I was very, very sure that ... of something. And I knew that I was going to get it. And so I'm very grateful for that transformation. So when I came to New York, I was very startled by the energy of the city. And so I wanted to pull us to Romare Bearden's collage, which is one of my favorite works actually by the artist. This is called The Dove, and it's made in 1964.

And something about this piece in particular, just reminds me of Harlem, reminds me of New York city. In my case where I lived when I landed in New York, it was Bedstein. So for me this piece reminded me of Bedstein, the people and the landscape of what I'm seeing. Is the energy of this contained rectangle. And the very interesting thing about Romare Bearden is that not only was he an artist, but he was a mathematician. He had a very keen sense of space in mathematics. And so as you can see from this piece, that every quadrant is called for, and there's dynamics, symmetry and dynamics happening in every quadrant. Everything is counted for it and everything is equal.

And I find that very interesting and composing space, within the space of say a canvas, a square or a rectangle. So I find that very interesting from Romare. And so when I was a student, I kind of wanted to take that interview, what I was feeling of this fragmented of, this energy of the walls you can see, of the [inaudible 00:09:16] so graffiti and newsprint, and the way in which you're standing at a subway station. And you can see years, years of paint flakes coming from the subway. And, that energy, that grand intrepidness of, I guess, what you can say the city of New York is, or any urban city is, you can feel that so much. And I felt it. And it has an ever lasting effect on me and the work.

And so my first year, I was doing a lot of walking around, a lot of searching, a lot of looking up and down, underneath my shoe and around the corner, just from our surroundings, but also just so much sensory activity was happening. And what I started to understand, and what I started to pay attention to was the textures and the surfaces that are in the city, and how I feel that what I want to go to the studio, and I want to use paint as a material, I'm conflicted with the normal ways in which I was known to make marks, and known to apply paint through the horizontal and the vertical application of a brush. But when I see this, when I see just the raw paint, corrosion, erosion history, intrepidness, I feel something.

I feel something more real than anything. And so, when I go to the studio, I feel called to respond to pain that way, this really and tactile in a way that I can feel and see, and smell the paint. And so I get interested in that and that gets me really excited. So my investigations there early on kind of when, how can I replicate this feeling of protection and erosion and intrepidness that the city does? And so, when I was doing that, it was a lot of this slow, slow documentation of what's happening in the city. And I was doing a lot of these walks, and I would say, the walking practice for me was a very important practice to embody in my practice because it enlists some of these ideas of hospitality to a space.

[inaudible 00:11:38] taught something a little bit about hospitality. In a way in which, when you're new to a space, how do we engage in this new arena that we're in? And so I kind of wanted to slow patients with what I'm doing with my interests, and I did not want to set aside, and I don't want to put any, I guess, perspective that's not my own onto what I'm seeing. So, when I was first walking around, I linked up with my friend, let me see if the song ... who now is a publisher at Black Mass. We ended up having several studio conversations that were very beneficial for me as a young student, and we ended up taking walks to the West 4th courts in New York city.

When I was watching a pickup game of these fellows playing at this historic New York court, I'd never been there before. So I was grabbing some video, and it was like a four minute video and it ended up being this one character coming out from the side of the spraying and he was covered in the silhouette of the sun and the shadows of the trees and, you could just see him winding up for this dunk with great ease, with so much air underneath his feet that made you believe like he could fly. And it reminded me so much of the opening scene of Space Jam

where Michael Jordan's dad said, "You can do anything." And he believed that he could do anything. And so, my first week seeing this, I guess, apparition of that plot of that movie, it kind of enlisted me that, hey, I can [inaudible 00:13:26] seem to do anything. And it gave me confidence to try new things that I wasn't used to in my practice.

ODUGA: Yeah. And I think that's so amazing thinking about how you said, how you came to art and creativity as a person that was really asking questions. Some PBS and Discovery Kids, I remember watching things like that. And it being this really crazy introduction to the idea of anthropology for a little kid, exploring-

JOHNSON: Of course.

ODUGA: ... and exploring these different things, and the journey from Los Angeles to New York as a person, that's ... LA wasn't working for you. Like you said, that's so important to explore. And I mentioned this to you when we were speaking before, looking at your work in the way that it turns a lens to the world around it, that made so much sense. So I love that you are telling this specific story and sharing this image. I just wanted to kind of throw that in there, but feel free to continue.

JOHNSON: This is the first time I think I brought this in and I don't think I told the story. But, yeah, I think just seeing the world in a different way, right? When you grow up in a place, you're used to the rules and regulations and the formalities of that geographical place. But then when you're in a new territory, you feel this cowboy who just came into this saloon, but you're the hot shot. And so you kind of feel that way, New York makes you feel that way and it amplifies it. And so when I go to the studio, I know I'm picking up things, I was finding a lot of objects on the street. I was taking a lot of pictures of people, of things, of just texts that excite me.

JOHNSON: And this piece in my studio behind me is called, The Hang Time, my brother. And it's literally an image transfer from those stuff, the images that I just had in the last slide of that boy winding up for a dunk and elevation. And, so I felt this idea of the word, hang time with how easily you can levitate from the air to go for this dunk, and then also the same capability of which hang time right here, has that same I guess synonym meaning for certain cultures. And so I was kind of playing around with the idea of sentence and syntax. And so for this piece is a way in which I could play with that through images.

And this piece is called a Fragment of The Head. And again I was interested in the idea of history, and the idea of memory. And the one thing about memory and the subconscious that's very interesting is that, when we try to recall a memory, even though it was something that we hold fond in the back of our heads, when we try to recall that, that idea gets shifted, transformed, and moved into a different existence. So therefore it gets further and further away from its original memory. And so, calling upon those fragments, and even thinking about those fragments, I think about time and memory being fragmented. How can we ever pull together a whole picture of our memories, of our thoughts? It's very difficult, at least I find it very difficult.

And so, how do I manifest that idea in an image? And so early on I was thinking about, okay, I'm going to actually fragment the bottom, I'm going to fragment the face. I'm going to give only parts of the face that are recognizable to whom it might be, through the identification of the fullness of the lips, and maybe just the skin. Or maybe the softness of the jaw line, maybe it's a feminine character. So just having these features that might pinpoint to something, but not necessarily the whole thing. And again, this is again thinking about the fragments of marble

sculptures that are in the Met, and even the head of the Jasper, the Jasper head that's in the Met of the fragment of the queen, that stems from ancient Egyptian times.

More or less thinking about that historical context, and thinking about fragmentation in history.

ODGUA: Yeah, definitely. I love this piece and I love how you apply techniques to it as well, that speak to that idea.

JOHNSON: Yeah. And again, you can see in the back of this painting, the texture and even what's going on behind this figure is again trying to point at what I'm seeing on the street, what I'm seeing outside on the subway stations, and the graffiti overpasses. It's the idea of, there once was something there, there was a trace there, and there's a remnant still there.

ODUGA: Yeah, there's a really interesting sense of movement, and then the mark of your hand, I think that really speaks to that idea of graffiti in a really interesting way. And I always think of those mediums as how explicitly they are tied to the idea of memory. If you bomb something or you put something up, how long would it last?

JOHNSON: That's it. And I've never seen graffiti culture up close as what you can see in New York city. You know what I'm saying? You would say the genesis of it is here. I'm not a graffiti tag, I don't have ties to that, but the idea of these marks, these alphabets, this language that I'm seeing, these calligraphic marks that I'm literally seeing on the side of my ... on the streets every day. I don't know what it means, but I'm so invigorated by the energy that they carry. And so when I was in the studio, I started incorporating spray paint. I started incorporating these marks. I started trying to move the way in which I would know that marks are made on a street corner left and then covered up. Left again, and then covered up.

ODUGA: Yeah, yeah.

JOHNSON: I love that. I love that.

ODUGA: And I love how much that slow process that you mentioned, those walks, and then that studio time is so important. And the day just moves differently in doing those kinds of things. Even if you are afforded the time and the space, it's like there's a little bit of a sense of nobody walks anywhere around here, and things like that. So having that time and that space and all of these things, it's very interesting how all of this stuff is reflected in the work that you're doing. So, go ahead.

JOHNSON: Yeah. and it's funny because I bring it to New York the California sensibility of, I'm chilling, I'm taking my time. But because I'm chilling, I'm taking my time with so much to see, I'm taking so much in and I have to process it slowly, to make sense of it. So therefore the work and the ideas have to slowly burn, slowly churn. And then New York also gives me the energy which I can break up the space and actually have energy onto the canvas. I like being able to respond to what's around me. And so I started picking around trash, and [inaudible 00:20:53] debris from the streets into my own studio. And started bringing them into the studio and making collages, and works like this.

JOHNSON: And these are the spine colleges that happened through this idea of thinking about hospitality again. The walks come from this class that I had taken and prep, it's called walk scapes, and it was a practice ... It was a class based on the practice of just walking. Walking, and being meditative, and being reflected. After each walk you ruminate about what you saw, the minute details, taking notice through the smell, the textures. If it rained that morning, you write that. The little small things of what you take in could have so much poetic meaning, and I believe from the 1930s, the 1920s [inaudible 00:21:47] is where these walk scapes, these expeditions started to come about.

That they would go out and go on these walks and they would take notes, or they'll take photos of people, but not necessarily portraits of people. They'll take photos of either their hands, details of someone's jacket, a button, or socks in someone's shoe. But, those elements then stood as making an indirect portrait of that person. And so the [inaudible 00:22:17] and surrealists have this idea of the pseudo hospitality that Bearden kind of speaks about. And so I kind of have been joined in my exploration of what excites me. And so these collages kind of speak to this idea. I'm walking, I'm walking, taking my time to come from my apartment, to go to my studio, and I'm finding these pieces of paper. And then when I put them together, I could find these relationships that actually have these poetic meanings.

They never really were intended to come together to be assembled in that way. When individual pizzas come together, they form a sentence. This piece to me is self-explanatory, it reads its own sentence. It creates its own sentence. And this was when I was living in Bedstein. And I wasn't there for too long, I ended up moving to Ridgewood, right after I had graduated. But around that time, I guess, my spring semester of my MFA. And so around that time my geographical spies changed. I wasn't around so much of the normal things that I would find in Bedstein I was originally. I was in Ridgewood and so I was a lot further than Bedstein.

And so a lot of the work was very influenced by my closeness to what I was getting in Bedstein through the West Africans, the Caribbeans, just the expansive, the diaspora, kind of just being there. In LA we have a lot of pockets of different people very spread out, and it's hard to kind of tap into. But in New York, because it's so dense, we could co mingle with so many different people on a daily basis. And, from there I was learning so much. This is an image from my solo, I guess, thesis presentation from my, let's say, MFA thesis. And it was called the Times of Consequences Solace.

And so, this was kind of the summation of my two years at prep, of all that I was seeing, all that I have learned and all that I was hoping to, I guess, make in the future. All that I was hoping to investigate. And so you could see there were ... There are installations and sculptures in this painting. And I was interested in all these materials, which I was using clay, and which a lot of the pieces in the middle. I guess that middle piece is a compilation of images and picture frames, and things that I found on the street. Then when I put together it makes this image and this sculpture.

ODGUA: I love that this work is a reflection of the various different locations that you were in during that really condensed period of time in your, like an MFA program. And I think for a lot of people when you do that, you're just immersed in one community, in one location. Whether it be the group of people that are in your MFA group. or the location of your program. And I think New York affords the ability to do that, but some people are not necessarily into that. Some people think about it differently, and they move into a different way. And I think for yourself and for a person that's thinking about this work in terms of asking questions, I think, just to take it back to how we started off, it's really important that you did have this kind of experience.

You're flexing those diverse works. And as a person who works with a lot of artists, sometimes I wonder when people make the move from being an oil painter to bringing in other things, which I kind of think artists can do whatever they want but, I just question when those things happen, what's the process? I'm really excited about this. You're showing that, you're showing that process so it makes sense that you have these things that you collected, the work that you worked on, in your studio, and this very slow process that all of this stuff comes together to make. I just wanted to add that in there but-

JOHNSON: Thank you. Thank you. And it's the funny thing that when you're making the work, when you're in real time, you really can't see the correlation, you really can't see how that one thing might lead into what you're seeing now before you know it. And that is because I'm rewinding back. I'm able to see this, the line of thought is changing. But I mean, I would definitely say if I didn't move to New York, I don't know where the work would have been. I'm always asking questions. I think my curious mind will always do that to me. I'm always going to be curious, I'm always going to want to change, and I'm always going to want to see what is next. Am I capable of blanking? And I think life can be a testament to that. I want my life to be a Testament of, can I do this next?

I don't know. I'll see if I do it. But, and so when I see this show and it's a summation of my efforts to leave home, to come to New York and I have a physical thing right before me of all my sacrifices and it feels good. And because of this show, I was able to then leave to go on to my solo show with ... residency in Inglewood. It was somebody who I've known for years and he's actually helped me a long time before my career had taken off. And Rick Garson, he has a space that he curated a show called the New Contemporary and brought together a group of contemporary artists who we now know.

But he had this particular eye that was just so great, and I owe a lot to him and his support. And so I ended up going to make the show with him in September of 2019. And at the time I didn't have a studio space. So that thing up in the air was kind of a big question mark, where was I going to land? And months and months were happening, and it's July, and I'm getting kind of nervous that I don't have a space and not much of the work is made and the show's in September. So I decided to go back home and I said, shoot, I'm just going to go ahead and do what I did before, and just paint in my room, paint in my backyard.

But luckily there was an alternative plan, which one of my friends, one of my great friends, [inaudible 00:29:17] who was working with zeal in residency, she told me that, "Hey I'm working with this residency who started this incubator period of this space in Inglewood, would you mind actually using the space? We can maybe jumpstart this residency by having you in the space." And I said, "Well, sure, why not?" And so the old space in Inglewood was Tod Gray's old space in which now Alan, [inaudible 00:29:50], Walter Cruz, and a number of other individuals, including [inaudible 00:29:54] are on the Zeal team now with this residency in Inglewood.

So I spent about two months there where I was making the work for the atmosphere of certain insurgency. And this work was kind of responding to the reading I was doing on Frantz Fanon's, *Black Skin, White Masks*. And when I was reading a lot of what he was trying to discuss about how the psychology of the black marrow is always kind of seen as being this horrific monster, I wanted to pick out certain points of what he was discussing. And I think the main crux of what I was getting out of Fanon's words was, the idea of simulation. What you walk into and what that perspective is rested on to us.

It's a thing that we don't necessarily want, but we walk into it every single day. And similarly to these masks that we might put on, these facial, frontal masks, I would take the

metaphor and I want to stretch it out by saying that, shoot, maybe shoot suit socks, socks that we physically put on every day. Then we go out to wherever we walk with this idea of, we have to deal with the simulation, having to deal with the social precepts that are forced upon our bodies. That leaves it at things that we have to walk in every day. But then again, the contract of that white against the black skin is that dual consciousness. That W.E. Du Bois skin mentioned.

And so I was playing with a lot of these ideas in which the physicality of legs and suit socks would represent. And, it was a series that was planning on trying not to make the words of Fanon seem so clinical, but kind of actually seem a little bit more real by it being, say your cousin or yourself, putting on your socks, putting on your slides and running over to the corner store. I wanted to make those things very personable. And so that was a little bit of what I was thinking about in this series.

ODUGA: Yeah, I love that. I love this idea of making Fanon less clinical. I think I sometimes struggled with the work when it was first presented to me by a professor. I studied English literature and various different forms of literature at school. That's what I have my degree in. And I never thought about it in the way that you just said. Making it about this lived experience, I think, is essentially what you're saying, right? Throwing on your tube socks, thrown on the slides and living in what that means and all the different forms that that comes in, which I think that this work reflects that really beautifully as well, the sense of movement.

And yeah, you just really put something in beautiful words for me that I was struggling with when it was first presented to me. Because I'm like, I hear this and that's [inaudible 00:33:06], but it's not necessarily what I am personally going through, or what a lot of people in my community go through all the time. It comes in a different form.

JOHNSON: Exactly. It shows up in the French Mozambique form to the colonizer. But for us who is the colonizer, and who are we, I guess, performing underneath? So I kind of wanted to transform those ideas and say, all right, how has this actually manifested in my life? Because yeah, it is very clinical. But I also was very aware that the audience that I'm talking to, doesn't have the same clinical background and PhDs that some people might know, that can dismantle the words of Frantz Fanon. So if I'm an artist and my idea and my ... I would say that my mission is to disseminate these ideas in which the public can understand and see themselves in. And so I felt this work was an attempt to do that.

ODUGA: Yeah. And just really quickly I will add that, in thinking about all of that, it's really important that community is a part of that. It's hard to do that on your own, you need certain people. So it was really beautiful for you to bring up people Eileen, and Rick, and their role in this experience as well. I'm so familiar with both of their work on so many levels and it's like, I love when I have an opportunity to talk to an artist and they bring those sorts of things into this conversation and ... so much reflecting of what you're talking about. So I'm

JOHNSON: We have to give rise, we have to give way to the people who made us, and people who helped us on the journey. I did not just arise from the soil overnight. I was watered, and I was given sunlight, and I was giving nutrients to my environment. And people that I meet, and the people that I have met, I'm a product of my interaction with them. So I do want to give my time and my space to give my people some flowers, for sure.

ODUGA: True that.

JOHNSON: So yeah, and sorry, but moving on. Yeah and this was a little bit of some of the work from the show, installation shot of [inaudible 00:35:24]. And then moving on to this, it was an interesting kind of point in my life where I was celebrating off the reels of having a very successful show at residency with Rick Garson, that all during that time, I had to make that with Nicodim Gallery in Los Angeles. So my show at residency had closed, then I linked up with a residency for, sorry, Nicodim for my solo show. And I had been working with Nicodim the months prior, even when I was in my MFA, they were able to show some of my works actually that I had shown in my MFA thesis, and some group shows.

And so, the relationship from then was ... it kept on continuing. And so I was offered a solo show in February, I believe it was February 8th. So I had just finished my show in September, and I had to now prepare for a show in February. And for a bigger space, a space that was far larger than I could ever see myself filling. I would say I would need to practice with something like that. But I guess this is real time for learning on the job. And so during those four months, I really had to channel a lot of different things out of myself that I wasn't necessarily called to do before. I made about, I believe 14 works in total over the span of four months, and all of which are bigger sizes than I've ever worked with. And with a medium that is very difficult.

And so it was a fete that I congratulate myself on but, I believe that, because I know myself and I know I need time, I know I need things to marinate, that this high [inaudible 00:37:34] making was almost these gym reps, at the gym where you're just feverishly getting these weights in, and these reps in to get stronger. And so by the time I was making this work, my skill set sharpened, it got stronger, and I was able to see myself making paintings a little bit more complex than I had seen myself making before. I started wanting to try new things as far as my technique. I started wanting to incorporate more of a visual space for the viewer.

And how was I going to achieve that? So I was just learning how to contain and how to feel a space. This painting is 70 by 80 inches, so it's a fairly large piece. And the subject that you see barely takes up a lot of the real estate of the canvas. But in between the figure and the real estate of the canvas and what you're seeing, I wanted the paint to really have a lot of expression, a lot of movement. So this piece took me about a few months to conceptualize and get through, but I would say I learned a great deal. It was one of my turning point pieces. This piece is called the Black Madonna. And this is oil sticking spray paint on linen.

ODGUA: Yeah. I love it, the paint does have a lot of movement like you said. And I love how you stepped up to the challenge, how you have this pressure of having back-to-back shows, and all the different things that that entails on such a deep level, but still thinking about the work and thinking about how your actual practice as an artist is going to evolve. That's really interesting, especially thinking about a few months prior to that, you were like, where am I actually going to make work at? How am I going to make it?

So that was another thing that I think we talked about very early on when I talked to you, and asked you to come and do this program, is that I really wanted to talk about how I see, as a really rapid rise in your practice, and the work that you're doing, especially as a person that followed your work from before you even went to Pratt. You know what I mean? So I love that, and I love this work as well. I think it is a turning point in your work and go ahead, proceed.

JOHNSON: No, thank you. Thank you. And so that was November 2019 when I, I believe, started this work. And yeah, I had a lot of questions then. And I find myself year in year building off where I was last year, as we always should. We should always continue to progress and be uncomfortable in the face of progression. And, I welcomed that because I know that if I'm

uncomfortable now, I'm not going to be uncomfortable forever. I'm going to have that tool set on my belt. And so I learned a lot with this, and I took some of that with me when I wanted to go to my residency at Black Rock Synagogue. And because everything was moving so fast, I graduated in my MFA program and in June of 2019, I had my first solo show with residency that following September, and then my solo show, my first solo show with my, now representation, in February.

So it was back to back like no other. But then when I went to Senegal it was a different pace. And again, I've gotten there March 1st and so the pandemic was starting to brew into what we are now in right now. So I was flying right when the beginning of COVID news was kind of happening. It was very, very scary. And so, I arrived on March 2nd, after 24 hours of flying. And I was welcomed to a few drinks and a few food laying around on some tables, and a laying around these couches around that food, and those drinks were [inaudible 00:41:50] and a few of the residents of the Black Rock synagogue I was going to actually stay four months with, little did I know.

And, I was supposed to be there for two months, and I ended up being there for about four months. And as you can see, my hair is shaved, but I had dreads then so, a lot has changed. But that is me, that is [Zuora Aporo 00:42:19]. I'm sorry, I'm not even going to say her last name because I'm going to butcher the last name. But her name was Zuora, and this is Kalechi. And they're brilliant, brilliant, brilliant. I love them so much and we had a great time in Senegal, even though we had to learn about how to maneuver during the COVID we had a great time there.

ODUGA: Yeah. That's such an unexpected thing. I love this photo, it's a good photo. And that doesn't even ... you look a different person.

JOHNSON: A whole different person, yeah.

ODGUA: [inaudible 00:42:52] look at a picture of a lot of people a year ago, or a couple of years ago, they look a different-

JOHNSON: Yeah, this is different than this year, you could just see how much, I wouldn't necessarily, maybe I would say trauma. I would say we experienced a lot of grief, trauma, and a lot of anxiety collectively. And I think we've shared that. I believe in the beginning months you've been here, when I was in Senegal, I was in a different country and seeing what was going on back home, and that was very scary. And everyone who was there at the residency equally too were not at home, and they were very scared, and they're away from their family and friends. And so we had time to console each other at that time, and be there with each other, which was very grateful. I was really grateful for their company.

ODGUA: That's great.

JOHNSON: One of the things that was really difficult that I found out was that, when I went to Senegal, the resources were just a thing that I had to figure out. What was available to me in the StAtes was not going to be available to me in a different country. And to have that put in perspective for me as someone early in my practice, it tells me that, don't get used to certain things and that your work can always change, and the practice can always change based on what is given to you. And so when I was at this store, this linen store, a lot of it trial and error

that I was facing, was trying to find the right linen that would actually stretch with my rabbit skin glue.

JOHNSON: And, I went through a lot of different fabric stores, and I went through a lot of different grades of linen, but I ended up going to this fabric store, which was one of my favorite ones. And I believe that the stack to the left of the screen is the linen that I would choose from that stack. And the only had, I think that stack of linen was maybe 50, maybe 60 inches across or so. So I didn't really have a lot to work with. So I ended up trying to see my canvases up sometimes. Black Rock was super beautiful. The shoreline was right there outside of the residency. You wake up, you go to your window and you can look down to the shoreline of the Atlantic and you get to see the rocks and it was just really beautiful.

And so March 4th was my birthday out there, and I turned 28, and luckily I was able to go to Goree Island, which is the place where the enslaved people were taken and then shipped to the various countries of the world. I was there on my birthday to see the door of another term, and that was the last day that I was able to go anywhere publicly. But it was a very powerful day where I spent the day with my friends there, and we met some of the locals there who are artists there, some of whom work with the sand, and some of them are musicians. But they live on this hill, underneath all of these beautiful rocks, but this island is a chunk of land that is, I mean for Americans, maybe for the Senegalese there too, it's riddled with how we became.

It's riddled with our origins. And they're just sitting on this rock and it just felt really interesting. And the rocks are just borderline this, they call it Senegal. And so when I was making work, I was kind of aspiring again, to the landscape. I wanted to think about, how am I taking in what I'm saying? I don't speak the language, which is French, and the native tongue Wolof. So I'm really kind of careful with my observations, and my patience with what I'm seeing with this new space, the hospitality again. And, I really believe these rocks because it is on the Atlantic ocean, these serve as these totemic structures even of, all the spirits and all the people, and all the energies that have been cast, or get lost away at the sea, even at the Atlantic ocean. And we've traveled from the Atlantic into Pacific.

So I made this work called the Rocks Took a Hold of my Soul. And this is a work that is 60 by 62 inches. And at the top of the canvas you can see there's a seam line as the top where I've managed to saw two linen scraps of a canvas I had, and I saw them together too elongate it, but it actually made with this interesting textural division, and also, I just really liked how that looked as a means of necessity. But, I believe this figure walking on the rocks, as again, trying to capture movement that is walking offspring, a movement that is possibly continuous, maybe walking along these rocks. And I just feel this image for me kind of encapsulates what I felt from Senegal. And this image is something I found online, it's a stock image.

But, I like to go into Photoshop a lot of the time in my practice. And I take a lot of my images, my found images of things that I find online, and I put them into my digital applications, and I make different collages. I either rearrange things, see different colors which I can apply on the canvas. It serves as my reference. But what becomes really interesting in the painting process is necessarily the improvisation of, I guess you could say the sheet music, to then the in between notes of what the improvised freestyle would be from a trumpet player. I like to think of my references as being, again, the sheet music, a structure. But since I know a structure, I can then break it apart, I can then fragment it again, and bring parts of it to make a whole.

It's kind of bringing together that the whole is pretty much the sum of its parts. And if I make the whole out of interesting parts, as individual interesting parts, that the sum of the whole is going to be all interesting, all [inaudible 00:49:51].

ODGUA: And that's really great considering what you were saying about that class you took at Channel Islands, that first class where you had to paint a cross section, or think about it that way.

JOHNSON: Yes.

ODUGA: I look at your work. I'm always just like, he's a master of so many different techniques and really thinking about that. And for me, it kind of does go back to that. It goes back to those very fundamental ideas of, I hate to say that people need training, or that people need school or something that, the more I engage with art, I'm just like, there's so many different entry points into this, right? But then there is a case to make for people having that sort of thing, and thinking about it in that manner, at least. Even if you are going to paint in your room, or paint in your backyard like you were saying, I think all of your work really reflects that.

It really reflects how you're looking through a certain lens, even if it is a cross section. And this image is really interesting, and thinking about what you said about it being a stock image as well, and you jumping into Photoshop, I think that that's really, really important. And I can see where you kind of stitched together the two canvases as well. So that's even another layer of that whole conversation of how all the different sums come together to make the whole.

JOHNSON: Exactly. And you're right, the thing about me, I love painting, and I'm very interested in the entire Renaissance. I'm very interested in great painters like Goya. I'm very interested in Pierre Bonnard, Edward [inaudible 00:51:20]. I'm interested in paints. I'm an oil painter, and I'm inserted in that history. I mean look a specific way. Look at a different way in which that history may be written, but then I still mind my placement there. And so as a painter working in contemporary time, with training in various techniques, how do I either, I would say put a comma on what happened, and then continue the sentence, but how then can I add to what I was influenced by?

And so I'm always trying to figure out how I can bridge my intersection of how I see was based on what I was taught, the history, mining the history. And not say my intersection is just based on what I'm observing. And my day to day because of New York city being what it is, I'm seeing this. I'm seeing the concepts of news spraying graffiti, and again like you said, these marks, these language that's happening. And something very interesting had happened where, when I was in Senegal, George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, those things were happening, as well as the violence against the trans brothers and sisters across the nation. Those things were happening, and I came back to New York with boarded up restaurants, and plywood storefronts, and you can't go inside anywhere.

So I'm even more so banked, I'm banked on the periphery of society even more. Where, we kind of have to walk, stay outside, then if you're outside, what are you going to do? You're going to pay tickets [inaudible 00:53:16]. So I can take more inventory of what is around me. And so when I'm walking, this is what I'm seeing. I can't go inside. I'm seeing a lot of graffiti, I'm seeing all of these marks. But then again, I'm minding the system that I'm coming from as an oil painter. This image right here I'm about to pull up is by Peter Paul Rubens Four Studies of a Head of a Moor. This is a painting made in 1614.

And again, this is as painter as you can get, old masters painting, the drawing, the underpainting, it's just got all qualities of a masters. But then my under section is a painter who understands the traditional side of painting. I wanted to go in and have that comma. So this is Peter Paul Rubens, Studies of a Head of a Moor, I said, what have I made the Four Studies

Women, acquire a scene of women who are soprano, alto, coming together in a mass, like these Four Studies of a Head of a Moor, but I'm flipping the gender, but then also kind of making it personalized in the point in which, I remember scenes in which my dad was a choir music director, or even an organ director for Baptist church on Sundays and Wednesday nights.

So I bring back a little bit of, part of that memory that comes from such a long time ago, from when I was nine, eight. I can recall back that memory of seeing my nana and her friends singing, belting soprano notes in the choir, but then I'd see this image again, I'm responding to a stock image that I've seen in mind of the choir. I get struck with the string and then starter that then brings me back to a place that was very familiar. My nana is singing in the choir. My dad plays the piano. Doing choir rehearsal on Wednesday nights. That's my intersection of life, my experiences. But I know how to use paint in a specific way. And so, again, with all that I've come to the table with, time, memory, movement, and also my idea of knowing how paint works, and my investigation of how paint works, this painting in particular it exercises the different ways in which the materiality of painting exists.

It can be dripping, it can be bold, it can be thick, it can be thin, it can have translucency. And I wanted to play with all the characteristics. They're like notes, they're like chords, they're like full phrases of music. And I wanted the painting to be thought of and composed of, and thought of like music movement, visual movement. So the work goes through all these different types of passes, interventions, like you would see in a New York subway station or a street. Putting newsprint on the bottom of the canvas, ripping it off, that's the thing I would learn from Mark Bradford. But there's this idea of looking, an idea of mark making, this idea of physicality, this idea of ... how do I put all that I'm emotionally embodying, and really release this naturally in law?

This is my attempt to really capture this thing that we were imposed on, that was imposed on us. Where we are forced to be on the periphery of things. Things are delegated, things are eroded, things are closed up. Time has won a little bit over the landscape. So let me put that in the visual realm. I'm thinking about Nina Simone's quote where a lot of great artists always respond to the times. And I think about it all the time. And, I wanted to really challenge myself to, how can I be true to myself? How can I be honest? But how can I speak to the time? How can I speak to what's happening, not only in history, but in the art market, in my practice, at the world at large, what I'm doing, how do I challenge these things?

And I'm always trying to be an instrument of recognizing that there's things to be challenged, but I want to be honest within myself and just take this forward, let me move on and that's all I could ever hope for. And this new body of work for me is, it's me moving honestly, and I'm really excited for the next body of work to come from this because I've learned so much over the course of the year. Time has been its greatest teacher, but time has also been my greatest friend because it's one of the mediums that I love so much, just as much as paint. And I've learned to use time, I've learned to let time be on my side, in order to really exercise what I love so much about painting.

ODGUA: Yeah. And I feel that's really amazing, right? In terms of thinking about time and the various different things that you can build. And you mentioned to me before this idea of alchemy, and how important that is to your work. And I think, to see the work and to see some of those early works you were definitely already in the realm of abstraction. You were already there. But now how much this past year, and this experience has tasked you with thinking about that in the work that you're making. And I remember when I saw this work, I think I came across it, I was doing Freeze, with this work was a part of your Freeze presentation.

JOHNSON: It was. Yeah this is currently ... it was currently ... It was for the Freeze presentation, but it's also going to be a physical show shown at Bucharest, my gallery Nicodim. Should be coming in.

ODUGA: I'm definitely not going to be able to make it to Bucharest, but [inaudible 00:59:42] when I saw this work is like, I'm a person that I think there's a ton of necessity, and great things that can happen from seeing work online digitally. But when I saw this, I was like, I need to see this in person. I need to see the techniques. I need to see everything that's applied, because I think having followed your work for so long I can see the natural progression, but also this was a little bit different. It's totally unexpected, and I think I really liked that because of all the things that you're doing, and I can see the figures there, in the background, and they're still very much a part of what's going on.

But it's just really interesting to see it in process. And then how it's turned on its side, it's not the way that you expect it to be presented in space, and all of this stuff. I think the time that you have been afforded over this year, which is something I think that we all have been thinking about, I'm thinking about it a little bit myself. It's just like, it's so great sometimes that things move so slow but also, everybody's forced to be doing that right now. Things still close down even if it seems things are opening up and stuff is changing. I think you make a really good case for just living in that, and seeing what can happen if you just let things go in a way.

And I'm really excited to see, in the future, where you take this kind of work, and what else you will do with the time that you've been afforded, I guess.

JOHNSON: Thank you, man. Thank you. It's been an interesting ride but, I would just say, as a thing to say to young artists out there who are possibly listening, this is your practice. This is your love, love it, cherish and protect it. And make sure that you're moving honestly, and you're moving with the intent of your heart. That's all I have to say.

ODGUA: I love it. I love it.

JOHNSON: Yeah man.

ODUGA: Thanks a lot Devin.

JOHNSON: Thank you so much Joshua.