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Art in Review

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By Holland Cotter

Rashid Johnson

The Dead Lecturer

*Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery
526 West 26th Street, Chelsea
Through Saturday*

Rashid Johnson took the title of his auspicious New York solo debut from a 1964 book of poems by LeRoi Jones, now Amiri Baraka, that he produced during a transitional phase in his career, between his associations with the Beat movement and black nationalism. Mr. Johnson's show, which generates its own poetry, suggests a transitional phase in art right now, a time when art can be about racial themes, but also be removed from them, free to play with contradictions.

At Klagsbrun, Mr. Johnson has created a fictional hall of fame for a secret society of African-American intellectuals, touched by "Brother From Another Planet" zaniness. Photographic portraits of unidentified African-American men, their faces wrapped in mist or smoke, hang in the gallery. On a shelf a broadband radio setup is accompanied by a portrait titled "Prince of Mathematicians." On another wall is an altar equipped

with black soap, shea butter, candles and a mystical picture of a light-giving hand.

Coded references to contemporary art abound: to Joseph Beuys (a sled); Sam Gilliam (a swag painting called "The Grand Galactic Cape"); David Hammons (an oblique take on race); and, I would guess, to Mr. Johnson's slightly older contemporary Edgar Arceneaux, who has a similarly funky, visionary way with pop culture and art.

The show's mostly black objects look particularly striking — mysterious and light-absorbent — in Klagsbrun's dead-white cube of a space. And we are invited to view them through a large open circle of a sculpture called "Black Steel in Hour of Chaos" — it suggests both cross hairs and a compass, apt symbols for an important transitional moment in "black" art and its politics.

HOLLAND COTTER