

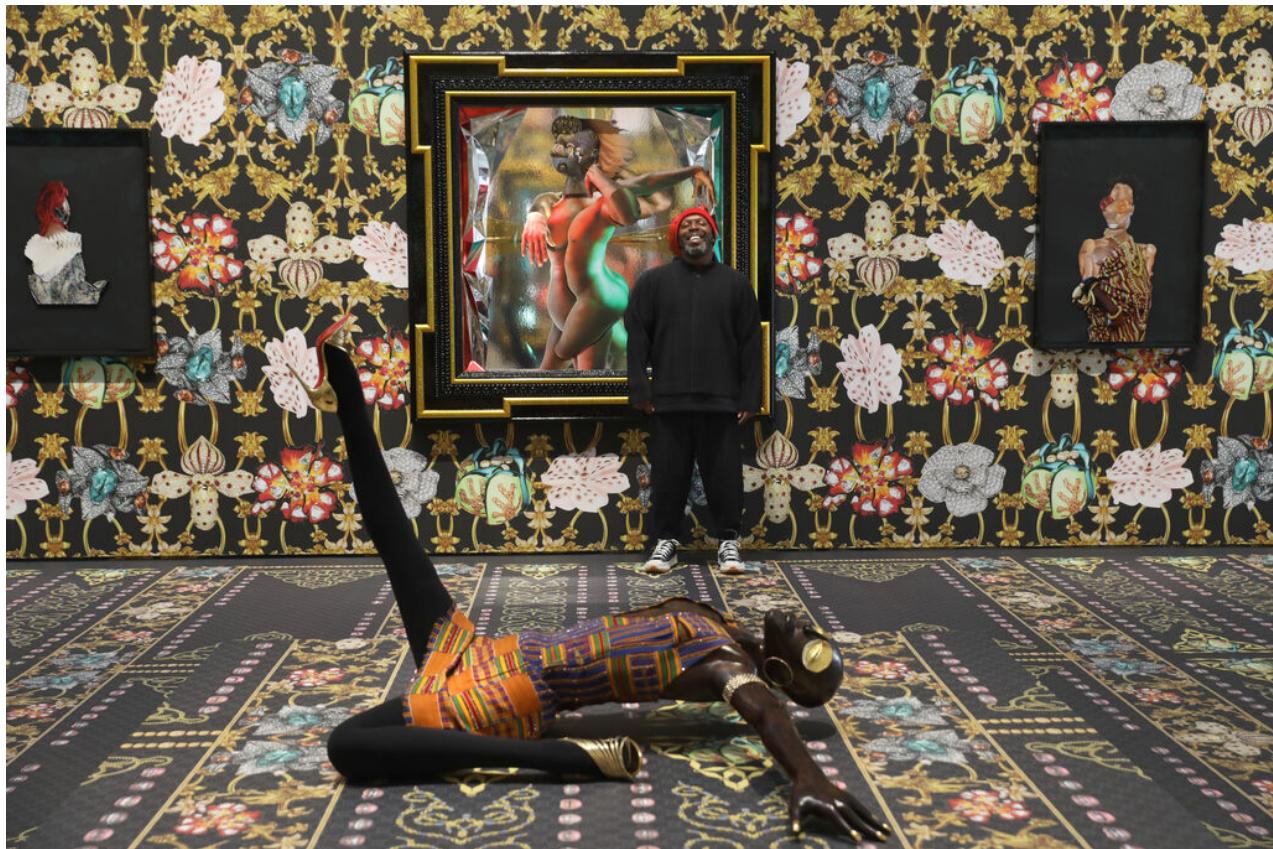
# DATEBOOK

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

"Don't ask Rshaad Newsome to explain his art. It's your job to understand it."

By Tony Bravo

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Rshaad Newsome's exhibition "To Be Real" will be at Fort Mason through Feb. 23. Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Rshaad Newsome uses the word "decolonize" several times while discussing his work in the context of the art world. How do we decolonize art from the culture of domination? How do we decolonize our expectations about who makes art and whose stories art tells?

But the questions, which are also currently being asked in areas like social justice and education, aren't just applied to the process of his own creation. Newsome challenges viewers of his art to do the same, proposing that instead of explaining every origin and defining every experience for people outside those communities, they do that work themselves.

His recent performance of "Running" on Friday and Saturday, Jan. 17-18, did precisely that. The audience entered the Fort Mason space blindfolded, removing the context of vision. When the

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blindfolds came off, performers Kyron El, Aaron Marcellus and Devin Michael were then illuminated by alternating yellow, red and green lights for an hour as they vocalized runs up and down the scale mixed with recordings of Aretha Franklin, Whitney Houston, Martin Luther King Jr. and the aftermath of the police shooting of Philando Castile.

The performance had no exposition or explanation, thrusting the audience right into the sometimes beautiful, frequently jarring experience.

Newsome, who has exhibited at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., and New York's Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial, is known for his blending of mediums like collage, sculpture, performance, film and computer technology around the subjects of race and queer identity. A New Orleans native, he found a perennial theme in the culture surrounding New York's uptown competitive ballroom scene when he moved to the city at age 22. The ball community, a mecca for African American and Latino queer and trans performers, began in the 1970s and has captured the imagination of artists like Ryan Murphy, whose TV series "Pose" currently explores the ball scene in the '80s and '90s.

Newsome says he "never really walked" or competed in balls, instead seeing his place more as artist and observer.

While speaking before the opening of his exhibition "To Be Real" at the San Francisco Art Institute gallery at Fort Mason (on display through Feb. 23), Newsome brings up questions of decolonization when talking about the multiple facets of the project. "To Be Real," named for the 1977 queer disco anthem by Cheryl Lynn "Got to Be Real," includes an exhibition of collage and sculpture drawing from the Surrealist and Cubist movements as well as the "Running" performance. Then there's his artificial intelligence installation "Being," which acts as a tour guide for the exhibition.

The norm in art, Newsome says, is for queer people and people of color to have to work to find themselves in art and stories created by the dominant white, heterosexual culture. But what if the situation were reversed?

"What's exciting about that is it can be frustrating, but it puts you in a space where you develop a strong sense of empathy," Newsome says. "My way around it is, maybe I don't need to do it at all. Maybe I need to draw attention from the onset that there's pressure to do that and make people realize they're putting that pressure on me."

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Rashaad Newsome's works in his exhibition "To Be Real" at Fort Mason are presented against a background of baroque wallpaper and floor covering. Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Stepping into the San Francisco Art Institute gallery housing "To Be Real" is an immediate immersion into Newsome's world. In addition to the elaborately framed collages, the work is presented against a background of baroque wallpaper and floor covering featuring repeated images of jeweled floral brooches. The installation is dizzying in its excess, but feels like a natural setting for work like "It Do Take Nerve 2" a collage with raised chrome figures, light-reflecting gel filters and striking nude bodies.

At the center of the installation lies the sculpture "Ansista" a femme form on its back in a dramatic ballroom dance dip. Frank Smigiel, the curator of "To Be Real," says that the collage work chosen is meant to evoke the bodies of ball dancers in motion and in the fierce poses associated with that world. For the curator, the place to start when trying to understand Newsome's work is to go back to the ballroom.

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"It all comes from performance," Smigiel says. "That's where the type of imagery he's drawn to comes from. This installation is unapologetic bling on bling on bling, which is part of the vocabulary of that world."

"Ansista" is one of the more literal elements of ball culture in the gallery. The upper body of the figure was carved from mahogany by an artisan in Ghana. It wears a handmade kente cloth dress studded with Swarovski crystal, nodding both to African tradition and the glittering aesthetic of drag. The lower half of the form is the body of a sex doll, allowing it the flexibility to extend one leg in the air and another bent behind it, while also adding an additional layer of metaphor, Newsome says, about the commodification of black female bodies.

"It says something that you can buy just the lower half of a sex doll," he says. "When I got it, it didn't match the proportions of the upper body, the shoulders," Newsome says. He added drag queen hip pads to the lower half of the form, which he says gives it even more relationship to the queer community.

In a separate space, the AI installation "Being" is both an exhibition aid and a deeper rumination about the state of being that black bodies have occupied in the history. The AI's programming has been populated with the works of radical authors like Paulo Freire, Michel Foucault and bell hooks, which he says allows the technology to more deeply explore questions of "how certain beings or groups have historically been kept outside the realm of humanity" in their subjugation.

"When we came here (enslaved), we were the technology, the robots," Newsome says.

It's a interesting moment for Newsome to be exploring many of the themes and communities that are present in "To Be Real," especially with ballroom being in popular conversation again because of "Pose." Performances like Newsome's "Shade Compositions" and "Five" and video installations "Stop Playing in My Face!" and "Icon," currently on display at the Museum of African Diaspora, freely mash up ballroom aesthetics with technology and social conscious.

Newsome's work engages with ball culture — in movements, fashion and gender displays — but he's quick to point out it is also critical of the scene. Part of the decolonization of the ballroom, he says, is to move beyond that world's reliance on presentations of masculine and feminine binary and materialism. Constructs of assimilative "realness" are also problematic because of their emphasis on being able to pass as belonging to parts of consumerist white culture.

"As someone who believes the whole ideas of masculinity and femininity are constructs, it makes me ask (ballroom) what are we doing here?" Newsome says. "I'm trying to use ballroom as a kind of university to teach art theory, art production, art history in a more democratized way."

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Rashaad Newsome puts the onus on viewers to understand his works. Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

For San Francisco artist Jean Franco, one of the performers in Newsome's "Shade Compositions" at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2016, these themes are what make the work relevant beyond any one community.

"Until Rashaad's work I rarely saw artists that looked or sounded like me in at SFMOMA," says Franco. "I was exhausted by the lack of portrayal of my experience. I believe Rashaad's work filled a gap that has long existed."

Newsome calls the melding of performance, exhibition and AI as "a way to have an interdisciplinary conversation with my audience over all my work."

In addition to the exhibition at the art institute, he's also working on a documentary exploring the ball scene's proliferation throughout the world in recent years. He calls the greater spread of ball culture "complicated."

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"Culture lacks fixed boundaries," Newsome says. "I think it has to grow, but how does culture grow in a capitalist, imperialist, white supremacist patriarchy? Creators of culture have to maintain some agency over the culture they create. The film will explore that."

Ultimately, Newsome says that the work of decolonization in any area is an ongoing process, not a destination. His art, and ballroom, can be vehicles in that process.

"Rashaad is not making artworks for the white art world to consume," Smigiel says. If white audiences follow along, great, but the artist's starting point is not that consciousness. "The decolonizing is how you keep that conversation going."

**Rashaad Newsome: "To Be Real"** Presented by Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture and San Francisco Art Institute. Through Feb. 23. 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Wednesday- Sunday. Free. SFAI Gallery at Fort Mason, 2 Marina Blvd. Fort Mason, S.F. 415-345-7500 <https://fortmason.org/>

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