

## Black Is, Black Ain't

*A new exhibit at the Renaissance Society explores blackness and transcending race*

By Yennie Lee

**THOMAS JOHNSON SITS IN THE GALLERY OF THE RENAISSANCE SOCIETY IN FRONT OF HIS WORK**, "What a Black Man Feels Like, 2004," reclining, yet severely attentive to the television screen playing the footage of his piece. Here, Johnson both exhibits and performs, ultimately interacting with himself and serving as an audience to his own work. In the footage onscreen, Johnson incants a monologue, explaining "What a Black Man Feels Like." "I'm excited because he's black. I'm so excited to break this barrier," he says in the work. "Now I'm feeling myself so I can think better. Black men make me feel a certain way." In the piece, Johnson rubs his hair in his face, moves in and out of the depth of the frame, and gestures and points toward a world outside the screen—a captive audience, which includes the exact person speaking in the first place: himself.

Outside the screen, Johnson views the work, remaining enchanted by his own insane, manic, and desperate description of an ambiguous and sexualized fantasy of touching a black man. Johnson is here every day, from opening until closing, until May 10. As he sits on the bench facing the screen, an observable interaction of the physical and the mental—a convergence of a concept and an execution of such a concept—emerges. Johnson's psychological processes are laid bare for witnesses. In any other artwork there is room for interpretation and viewers are free to project their own meanings. In "What a Black Man Feels Like," however, the artist is present, a witness to his own work. The audience to Johnson's own audience contemplates the significance of such a work, where an artist participates in a violent and self-perpetuating exchange between himself and himself. The thought and meaning of "What a Black Man Feels Like, 2004" remains immortal just as long as Johnson remains sitting in front of the work.

"What a Black Man Feels Like, 2004" serves as one of the best examples of the Renaissance Society's new exhibition, "Black Is, Black Ain't." The show undertakes—as its exhibition notes indicate—the "paradoxical task" of transcending race despite "efforts to become less race conscious [that] serve to make us more race conscious." A curated exhibition that includes the work of twenty-seven contemporary artists, "Black Is, Black Ain't" raises awareness and invites critical discussion of heavy social, cultural, and political issues surrounding race. Just as Johnson exists both inside and outside of his work, the topic of race, and more specifically the topic of "blackness," remains both inside and outside the consciousness of the human race. "Black Is, Black Ain't" manifests the duality of the manic and desperate issue of race in America.

"Blackness," described here as the "passage of race into culture, a notion that aligns itself with a Civil Rights era struggle for a group's right to self-definition under cultural auspices," is an implied and alleged cultural "extension of skin color." "Blackness"—meaning a collective black culture—functions as a socio-political tool of an inside concept for an outside audience. As a movement, "Blackness" functions much like how Johnson functions in his performance of "What a Black Man Feels Like, 2004," where the experience of the issue at hand fundamentally exists to continue its survival. While it exists to define the African-American experience, "Blackness" also confines and packages the same experience in a way that causes "a domino effect, where a socially reproducible pattern acquires an inertia resulting in a concept that becomes its own cause and effect." Within itself, the discussion of race and "Blackness" exists both violently and statically; it perpetuates itself in a strange, cyclical exchange of what it "is" and what it "ain't."

"Black Is, Black Ain't," however, does not allow the self-contained inertia of "Blackness" to defeat itself. As the outside inspection of Johnson's work exists to promote a more contemplative understanding of a particular meaning, the exhibition serves to challenge the inert state of contemporary discourse about the black experience. The seemingly impossible project of transcending race—the arbitrary category "that [has] taken on a socio-political life of its own"—is presented as an achievable conquest. The exhibition itself serves to electrocute the inert into an active state; as the Renaissance Society suggests, "we should take stock of where the discourse was sixteen years ago following the video-taped beating of Rodney King. Regardless of how you vote, you have to admit, watching history being made is better than watching it repeat itself." In essence, like Johnson must eventually do, we must leave the bench in front of the issue and break the perpetuated exchange of the social paradox at hand.

*Renaissance Society, 5811 S. Ellis Ave. Through June 8. Thomas Johnson performing through May 10. Tuesday-Friday, 10am-5pm, Saturday-Sunday, 12-5pm. [www.renaissancesociety.org](http://www.renaissancesociety.org)*