

# Shadow Matter:

## The Rhythm of Structure

114 for M. Scott Johnson

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### THE STRUCTURE

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**In cities, persons are shadows cast by places, and no generation lasts as long as a street.** - John Gray

1

During the 2000 years that the Shona peoples of Zimbabwe have lived on the Southern Africa Plateau, they developed an extensive and sophisticated urban art and culture. The largest extant ancient structure in southern Africa, Great Zimbabwe (Dzimbabwe meaning “houses of stone”), was once capital of the Munhumutapa Empire, which maintained a trade network that reached as far afield as China. What remains of the palatial city are tremendous mortarless stone walls, giant circuitous passageways, towers, houses and monumentally sculpted stone eagles, which all together map a channeling of interconnections that continue to be lived in the sensibility of the Shona. However, conditions spiraled downward from the eventual abandonment of Great Zimbabwe to the arrival some centuries later of English colonizers, who declared news that these same Shona were without civilization and accordingly imposed their own.

2

Recent African incursions into Europe, Hanibal and Al-Andaluz aside, have tended to be of a more peaceable variety. The Catalan artist Pablo Picasso, for example, was totally blown away by the West African sculpture that was being imported into Paris. These transformative encounters launched many European and American artists into unanticipated vision quests of their own. Frank McEwen, a British painter who had long been swimming against the current in the company of Picasso, Brancusi, Braque, Matisse and Leger, arrived in colonial Rhodesia in the mid 1950s to head the new National Art Gallery. This was incidentally just in time for him to support and assist in the rebirth Zimbabwe was initiating in its rediscovery of sculpture.

### 3

Joram Mariga had already begun sculpting independently and had formed a studio school of his own in rural Nyanga. With the help of a well earned and healthy antipathy for Western conventionalizing, McEwen encouraged Mariga and others away from tourist market stereotypes toward explorations of their own cultural and personal aesthetics. McEwen also formed the Studio Workshop at the museum, which provided classes, tools, materials, workspace and criticism for developing artists. Some of these participants later became prominent as contributors among the founding generation of Zimbabwean sculptors, which includes along with Mariga: John Takawira, Sylvester Mubayi, Joseph Ndandarika, Henry Munyaradzi. Bernard Takawira, Boira Mteki and Nicholas Mukomberanwa. Subsequent exhibitions at the Rodin Museum, the Yorkshire Sculpture Gardens and the Museum of Modern Art brought the work into direct contact with people in Europe and North America.

### 4

Such attention and exposure not only reconfirmed the vitality and authority of current African creative work, it also highlighted once again the parochial and narcissistic limits of Western art's conventional timeline, a historical orientation that often recognizes and celebrates as serious, central or relevant only art that's rooted in deliberate progression out of the European Renaissance (and if not, is at least positioned as loyal opposition). Within this mythology, art that emerges out of other dialogues and experiential contexts, whether geographically Western or from elsewhere, is peripherally iced out of full participation in the conversation, at best granted the gracious courtesies afforded important but temporary guests, and then ever so delicately treated to Plato's prescriptions for a Socratic republic's handling of poets.

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To a great extent, this remains a vestigial habit from the centuries old European craze for an "evolutionary chain of being and culture" that pegs depth of artistic and intellectual insight to levels of technological development. But, living artists in the overdeveloped world of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century have likewise been often subjected to gatekeeper's timelines concerning their own evolutions that confuse the unforeseeable character of genuine artistic growth with the certified careerist trajectories of investment bankers, police detectives or dentists -- as if the vital confirmations could be found other than in the art itself.

6

**You can't find this style of artistic thinking in the U.S. Formal art classes are like being a rapper in the opera - for black artists, you're out of place. Over here, the artistic styles and way of thinking resonate inside you in a way that European-centered art doesn't.** - Russell Albans

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In contrast with armchair bureaucratic speculation, an artist's responsibility gravitates more often in practice toward effecting the complex syntheses of lived experience that eventually yield artistic conception and action. The apprenticeship of Detroit born sculptor M. Scott Johnson (1968) with Nicholas Mukomberanwa (1940 - 2002), one of Zimbabwe's elder statesmen, demonstrates artists' frequent disregard for such institutionalized policings of artistic value. Perhaps unsurprisingly, alongside the distances between their locations and cultural environments, their respective artistic evolutions share a meandering pattern of experiments, trials, errors and discoveries that converged in the potent and distinctive sculptural statements that they've both realized.

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**In the past some African American sculptors have used Western expression as their foundations and then tried to filter it through an African lens. I use the reverse: Africa is my foundation and I use my experiences in the West as a filter.** - M. Scott Johnson

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Migration shaped early family life for Nicholas Mukomberanwa as it did for Johnson. Mukomberanwa's parents moved from Buhera in Manicaland Province to live on an asbestos mountain in Midlands Province next to the mines in Zvishavane, not so far from Great Zimbabwe. Johnson's Grandparents relocated from Oklahoma to the Detroit area during World War II to work for captain-of-industry Henry Ford, settling in Inkster. Inkster was Ford's black company town analogue to neighboring apartheid Dearborn, site of the gigantic Rouge Plant. (The Rouge River, an area of play for the young Johnson and his friends, meanders its way through Inkster, Dearborn and Detroit en route to the Great Lakes and has been notorious for both its pollution as well as for tall tales of gigantic mutant carp.) An ambience of industrial labor and the wastes of manufacturing, with hints of the possibility of their recombination, flavored the early growth of both artists.

## 10

The Rouge Plant is, however, in no respect a Great Zimbabwe; but what is important is what that oversized edifice brought to Detroit. This historically a *pluribus unum*, “one company” boomtown (the “big three” automakers, with alternating busts) afforded a leveling, if not democratizing, opportunity for people with working class options. In the case of African Americans, work in the auto plants offered many a source of income rivaled only by the bygone of Tulsa’s Black Wall Street; and the pent up demand of deferred aspiration found some cultivation in the next generation’s access to solid public education for all. (Cass Technical High School, for example, has been justly renowned for even more than its high level music and art programs.) Detroit in many ways fulfilled its role as a northern Timbuktu for African Americans.

## 11

The promises of Detroit, however, have often resided under built in ceilings. The additional deferrals imposed by the automaton gruel of assembly line routine have also lubricated incentives for compensatory self medication. These object lessons, among others, galvanized for some a stimulus to do anything but ever, ever set foot inside a factory. While, this by itself might be more than enough to birth a creative community, add to this the restless scale of the city’s population, its tough industrial dynamism, its pangs of unfulfilled potential to Detroit’s autonomous distance from other urban centers, and the flavors of this specific brew begin to exude.

## 12

Detroit’s peculiar creative attitude resonates as more Eastern than Chicago but still Midwest to New York, and unlike either, is relatively exempt from the hustling imperatives of a cultural magnet. New York may revolve around marketing, but Detroit’s *raison d’être* has been production; and where Manhattan’s vertical compression may favor velocity, Detroit’s distances have stimulated acceleration. Yet, in contrast with urban transportation hubs, Detroit is not really en route to or from anywhere else. There’s a confluence of dense metropolitan vitality with a beautifully housed tree lined shade of country isolation.

## 13

Developing artists in Detroit have tended to grow less with one eye on fitting into trends than one might coming up in New York, and the prevailing industrial ethos leans more toward substantive creative production over the simple strategic effecting of appearances. A competitive, do-it-yourself attitude has instead fostered local innovation. The most obvious evidence of these Detroit tendencies shows in its prodigious vernacular music from McKinney's Cottonpickers through its impeccable beboppers, idiosyncretists such as Yusef Lateef, Roy Brooks and the Jones brothers, the entire Motown contingent, Aretha Franklin, rockers such as the MC5 and Iggy Stogge, Charles Moore's and Dan Spencer's (*et al*) rhythmic avant-garde, Farouq Z. Bey's Griot Galaxy, Parliament Funkadelic, Derrick May, Anthony Shakir and Eminem. But part of this bias favoring substance over semblance is also that there really isn't all that much to hustle after in Detroit. These limited options for expansion have driven another of this city's most important exports: its artists, who however, take this Detroit attitude with them on the road, thank you.

## 14

As with many others in Zimbabwe, along with the search for better wages, the availability of schooling (not a very high British priority) was an important motive in the Mukomberanwa family move to Zvishavane. By his late teens, Nicholas found himself studying at the unique Serima Mission, where its director, a Swiss priest and architect named Father Groeber, included wood carving among its studies. Using West African carvings as models, Groeber organized and encouraged indigenous carving of Christian imagery. Mukomberanwa remained at the mission until he was expelled for sculpture that was deviating too far from the requisite Christian subject matter.

## 15

**I still appreciate what I learned about tools at Serima Mission, but then, I began to find at Serima Mission (We) thematically were lost in the fixed imagination of Western Christianity, I didn't value fear. I needed more.**

**- Nicholas Mukomberanwa**

## 16

M. Scott Johnson's first lessons in direct carving came from the hermit living in the backyard of his Afro-Creek grandmother in Okmulgee, Oklahoma. This is also where he first discovered what he calls "the ecstasy of resistance", which is characteristic of a fundamental distinction between subtractive sculpture and the alternative procedures of casting or assemblage.

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To arrive through taking away precludes the options of appropriating from outside one's direct physical contact with the actual material. This also forgoes the luxury of abstracting a sculptural body into an afterthought of visuality or a whim of conceptual license. Proffering anything but a *tabula rasa*, wood or stone ferry personal histories and momenta to an intersubjective encounter. Carving negotiates potentially contrary wills, and the defining absences of subtractive sculpture is a body of human action. For the sculptor, however, these cavities are far from negations. These are where all knowledge must be reconstituted as dance.

18

**Nicholas had such humility that he was able to become as pliable as the medium, and then he could allow the spirit to work with him. He'd start with a chasing hammer and the tool would find the path of least resistance in the stone. He made use of a lot of "not doing" in this way and would be working on a lot of pieces simultaneously. The whole process was really open ended and unplanned.**

**- M. Scott Johnson**

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Mukomberanwa moved on to the national capital and became involved in McEwen's Studio Workshop in 1962. But, like many contemporary artists, Mukomberanwa needed some kind of day job to keep himself and his family going. There not being many alternatives, he took on employment with the British South Africa Police, one of the few steady jobs available at the time. Mukomberanwa juggled this unavoidable conflict of interest for years, sculpting even on his lunch hours the way Coltrane practiced between sets until, finally, he was fired for carving on the job in 1976. Fortunately by that time, the current of international support for Zimbabwean sculpture had risen to the point that he was able to sculpt full time for the rest of his life.

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Scott Johnson loved stones, holding them, collecting, understanding them -- a mineral affinity that prompted studies in geology alongside Dr. Warren Perry's African American anthropology courses at Western Michigan University in 1992. He began experimenting with conceptual installations, exhibiting in a space he opened and ran while still an undergraduate. But what eventually pulled his coat to where he might fly creatively was witnessing virtuoso Yoruba sculptor Lamidi Fakeye at work on a commission at the University, carving a bust while tossing Johnson an epiphany.

## 21

Ears opened to the imperative of finding and learning from an artist working at that deep a creative level, Johnson volunteered with Operation Crossroads Africa in 1994 and was stationed in the cradle of contemporary sculpture in Africa: Zimbabwe, thus initiating a back and forth shuttle between the North American art world and his studies with a number of the local carvers working off of the endless alleyways of Bulawayo: all this in response to a powerful vision of something he was feeling but still could not yet see.

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**While in Zimbabwe I did a few things to support my studies. At one time, I went to work in a chrome mine, one of the most incredible experiences I had and probably a turning point in my career. During this experience my retinas were burned and I was blinded temporarily from the light of a welding machine. I didn't know whether I would ever be able to see again. After that I had the courage to approach Nicholas with my work.**

**- M. Scott Johnson**

## 23

M. Scott Johnson had already met Nicholas Mukomberanwa at an opening at the Reece Gallery on 57<sup>th</sup> street in New York City, and Nicholas had invited him to visit. And in 1996, he arrived at Mukomberanwa's farm in Ruwa, about an hour out of Harare, hoping to be accepted as an apprentice. But first he had to respond to a direct challenge from Mukomberanwa, where Nicholas said, "I'll give you 2 weeks to prove that you have a vision. Make one piece, and I'll decide if you can stay." By this time, world class prices had already begun to catch up to the level of his sculpture; and in a country that was savoring the deficit flavors of transnational finance, market incentives for bootlegging a Mukomberanwa were becoming quite understandably legion. Nicholas wanted no seasoned imitators anywhere near his farm. Johnson stayed three years.

## 24

With Nicholas Mukomberanwa, M. Scott Johnson was able to witness directly the skill, speed and deftness with which a master engineer, a master craftsman of balance, composition and weight could make his own way through any sculptural challenge and not confine himself in any way to a signature style. As Johnson was adopted into his mentor's household, he also encountered firsthand the high stakes machinations of the art business and was further able to observe a living model for integrating creative work with family.

## 25

“Why do you dig into the stone and dig into the stone?” Nicholas once asked his American apprentice. M. Scott Johnson may carve right up to the edge of cracking the marble, pushing exaggeration out into extremes. Reflecting on this, he contrasts a diasporan hybrid African American attitude with what he noted as more grounded, more integrated and confident continental African self conceptions. In America, where no single tradition, no inheritance can be so secure, identity has to be continually reinvented and even forcefully reasserted.

## 26

Freaking it is an American thing, a forte of tall tale provocateurs like John Henry and Alfred Bulltop Stormalong, which might be heard concretely in the excesses of Coltrane’s collapsing of massive pitches into a telescoped phrase’s single gesture, or sartorially executed in a cut of red pants against alligator shoes. Going further -- and going still further: to edge the brink is to unambiguously stamp one's work as one's own while simultaneously signifying to elders a strength and capacity to carry on the mantle. And in Johnson’s case, there’s inevitably just sheer, Detroit style, take no prisoners competitiveness – a competition as much with himself as with any and all comers.

## 27

From immigrants to confidence men to race traitors to The Artist Formerly Known as Prince, America (Vespucci’s ersatz real estate moniker for Turtle Island) abounds with masks and reinvented lives and identities. And for those subjected to the one drop rule, continual hyper-accentuated redifferentiation is both application of a Pan-African aesthetic that activates the invisible and unheard through striking contrasts and an effulgent creative resilience that frustrates the pathological compulsion of those donning whiteface to erase them.



## THE SHADOWS

**28**

**The highest achievement for an artist is to bring the darkness, the unknown, the unconceived into the light of the known. The truth of a sculpture is located in the shadows** - Nicholas Mukomberanwa

**29**

Without shadow, experience flattens. Past the cooling gifts of shade, shadow identifies the face of whatever's active beyond the horizons of the immediate scope of attention. And, if only in consideration of its scale, shadow is not trivial.

**30**

**Consciousness is a variable, not a constant, and its fluctuations are indispensable to our survival. ... As organisms active in the world, we process perhaps 14 million bits of information per second. The band of consciousness is around eighteen bits. This means we have conscious access to about a millionth of the information we daily use to survive. ... By far the greater part we receive through subliminal perception. What surfaces in consciousness are fading shadows of things we know already.**  
- John Gray

**31**

Attention and consciousness, radically marginal, barely limn the shadows in which we actually live. Patched networks of metaphorical associations, images, symbols, extend this fluctuating and elusive sliver of alertness, condensing, objectifying, coding raw sensation into portably memorable, manipulable bundles of compressed energy. Hinging these bridges of the imagined is the can opener of language, interruption powerful enough to leverage vantage amid seamless flows of sensation. But verbal language also casts shadow at the limits of its capacities, and as compensation, may seduce a hubris intoxicated by the abstractions it facilitates.

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Word dealers and technicians of art -- historians, critics, philosophers, educators, publicists -- understandably tend to cleave in favor of the vivid and more manageable simplicities of symbolic isolates, of signs and their formal patterns. Yet, one notoriously famous sign, a urinal, cleverly and subversively dubbed "art", continues to be outrageously funny because it inadvertently punctures a conceit that art can be no more than an illustrative adjunct to a verbal idea, concept, narrative or discourse.

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The slippery slope inclines where this contention waxes more prescriptive than alternative, in an assumption that no meaningful conception can be articulated outside the domain of the linguistic, if not the quantifiable, thereby orphaning other imaginative and sensuous apprehension to the shadows of the irretrievably elusive, the reputedly primitive, mystical, romantic, unintelligent, deluded, if not non-existent.

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**The rhythm is more important than the meaning of the words. Our gods respond to rhythm above all else. When the rhythm changes, their behavior changes accordingly. - Maria-José, Macumba Priestess, Brazil**

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The mystic ideal of the disembodied concept booms in the anonymous pharynx of a god of imposed authority; but the impalpable thought *sans penseur* smells less like the opus of nobody than the urgent conjure of an Oz behind a curtain. There are real motives in the Hellenic pantheon's intense longings to be human. There's motive for Ogun, patron of artist and blacksmith, to cut his way through an impenetrable void so that, at last, the deities of the Yoruba, aching in their incompleteness, could once again reunite themselves with humanity. Central in these motives is the garden that is the human body.

36

**The essence of feeling may not be an elusive mental quality attached to an object, but rather the direct perception of a specific landscape: that of the body. -- Antonio Damasio**

37

The perceptual field saturates in somatosensory input: sensations of weight, pressure, pain, humidity, temperature – proprioceptive relations among muscle, joint, bone and balance – interoceptive sensations of the viscera and internal organs -- chemical and hormonal flows. All together this articulates a flash image of a quicksilver body state that's responding as readily to mentally generated imagery as to external phenomena. Interdependent, body and brain cooperate in a neurochemical feedback relationship, where the brain draws on the shifts among body states as a reality check, as an index of the actual qualitative feelings that substantiate value and meaning.

38

**The senses of plants are sophisticated; some can detect the lightest touch (better than the activity of human fingertips), and they all have a sense of vision. The oldest and simplest microbial life forms have senses that resemble those of humans. Halobacteria date back to the beginnings of life on earth. They are organisms which can detect and respond to light by virtue of a compound called rhodospin -- the same compound, present as pigment in human eyes, that enables us to see. We look at the world through the eyes of ancient mud.**

- John Gray

39

Antonio Damasio points out that this reservoir of emotion played out in the theatre of the body is indispensable to the reasoning process, that without these recurring prompts, a person would be left unable to focus or distinguish between what is and isn't important at any given moment. Damasio considers "when the brain is producing not just images of an object, not just images of organism responses to an object, but a third kind of image, that of an organism in the act of perceiving and responding to an object." He continues:

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This basic neural device does not require language. The metasef construction I envision is purely nonverbal, a schematic view of the main protagonists from a perspective external to both. In effect, the third-party view constitutes, moment-by-moment, a nonverbal narrative document of what is happening to these protagonists. This narrative can be accomplished without language, using the elementary representational tools of the sensory and motor systems in space and time.

## 41

He goes on to observe that this foundation also supports the development of more refined second order narrative practices such as verbal expression, but what's of most interest here is what this insightful delineation of another deep rooted shadow capacity has to say about the arts and, in particular, about M. Scott Johnson's sculpture.

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For one thing, this points out the actual physical realities of what might otherwise seem to be vaguely formulated allusions, such as vibe, feel, soul, spirit, ambience, attitude, intuition. That these terms often designate blocks of information too densely complex for the more rarefied precisions of verbalization, in no way eliminates that body state knowledge both precedes and informs what language achieves.

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In some ways, this is a contrast between digital and analogue formulations. As David McNeill has put it, verbal language has the effect of segmentizing and linearizing conceptions of experience; an instantaneous thought is necessarily divided up hierarchically and strung out unidimensionally through time, even though meanings are multidimensional. In contrast with this, gesture -- which is both conceptual mode and means of realization in the direct carving that Johnson practices -- is instantaneously multidimensional, global, synthetic and acting outside of systematic codes. These are complementary, differently coordinated, at times irreconcilable modes of conception, and it shouldn't seem anomalous that a sculpture would engage differently than would a sentence, nor that they would ever perfectly reconcile themselves with each other.

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Most importantly, this underscores the viability, even the ubiquity and necessity, of conceptualizing and imagining in terms of the rich universe of body generated information, what are often called gut feelings, and what Damasio refers to as somatic markers, which include vicariously generated "as if" images of these body states. Internal body state imagery may be one of our deepest and most intimate resources of active understanding. While Damasio's model may example an instance of cutting edge science's arriving at unprecedented details that finally manage to catch up with longtime common folk and artistic conceptions, this also calls attention to how often both technocrats and academic intelligentsia abandon both baby and bathwater to the streets.

**45**

From a perspective of incorporating presence, of engaging a complex awareness that doesn't neglect to address the arena of corporeal experience, new mechanical and electronic media, while clearly opportune expansions, are not necessarily such profound improvements to the extent that chronologically anterior media such as stone sculpture have since been rendered so obsolete and irrelevant as to be incapable of relevant participation in contemporary experience.

**46**

Convenient and plentiful temptations to bypass the complications of palpable sensibility show in contemporary visual art that runs to be read (and often so literally as to actually be words) rather than felt, whereas in some performance visual art, "body" may be posed as an avowed topic, but is clinically literalized as mere object or sign. Another popular recourse continues in outsourcing through mechanically reproducible, disembodied simulacra, a procedure highly treasured in much postmodernist apologia. The safest and most time honored is a much older, more respectable and mild mannered strategy, which is simply to opt for dispassionate execution of predetermined systems, whatever the media.

**47**

**I found a lot of the work being done around me in the U.S. to be just too mechanical, which is what it's like working from a maquette. It wasn't intuitive enough for me, but then I wasn't going after "primitivism" either.**

**- M. Scott Johnson**

**48**

These orientations share a tendency to impair, if not to rupture and disavow, the intimate dialogue between artist and art entity, a dialogue during which both are mutually transformed, and out of which the dynamics of these interchanges come to be embodied in the art entity. To do so demands a courageous humility (and humor) that partakes of Ogun's risks in crossing the thresholds of transition.

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This has to do with the quality, even the depth, of knowledge and experience being engaged and presented. A wealth of formal education and technology may have made it easier than ever to replicate what formerly could only be achieved through Ogunian transformation, but these opportunities also amplify the ethical choices an artist negotiates. Is the goal of an art process the production of artifacts, in which case outsourced mechanical dispatch and efficiency would proffer an unqualified boon; or does an art entity concentrate an intensified nexus within a web of relationships?

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Is the site and occasion of artistic attention and activity, i.e. the “artwork” a dumb object of an artist’s subjection, or is there mutual recognition and exchange between artist and art entity? On the artist’s part, a mutual recognition would entail adopting the character of the art entity and reconstituting that within one’s own specific topography and voice. The artist thereby comes to know the character of a work from the insides of its evolution, a perspective informed very differently from that of a casual spectator looking from the outside in.

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How the artist engages the work, and is thus informed, shapes the artwork a witness encounters; and aesthetic choice networks evolved out of first hand experience will differ significantly from a matrix of choices grown out of second hand conceptions. Meaning may indeed be constructed, even idiosyncratically, by any witness, and Rorschach reactions may be potential in any encounter; but these are part of a witness’ creativity. What the artist brings to the occasion remains the artist’s responsibility.

## 52

To articulately navigate the intricate palette of body states (which is not, by the way, a ward of the psychologist’s subconscious) is always over one’s head. One is immersing oneself in an informational density that’s stretching past the capacity of direct, denotative consciousness, and this therefore necessitates an active and deliberate thinking in shadows. This is also what the English poet John Keats referred to as negative capability: “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Well informed intuition emerges as the most intelligent and practical methodology for negotiating these ambiguous thresholds.

## 53

It's ironic that what most in visual art speaks to corporeal sensibilities is routinely referred to as "abstract" in the modern West, a conundrum faced by the Abstract Expressionists, whose work, in terms of material presence and scale, has been possibly some of the most palpably arresting of all geographically Western art. It's even more ironic still that it took the angelic pinhead advocacy of writers such as Clement Greenberg (who later played a leading role in Tom Wolfe's facile parody, brilliantly entitled "The Painted Word") for their iconoclastic and unfamiliar work to even be looked at seriously.

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But, as Cecil Taylor put it, "To feel is perhaps the most terrifying thing in this society." Feeling in a socially atomized consumer culture, where privatized sensations may free-float unsounded, decontextualized and unaffirmed, is vulnerable to profound doubt. The body as a field of experience may shed credibility as a confirmative resource of truth, and instead may be rendered abstract, with conscientious attention to feeling being regarded as a potential exercise in solipsistic sentimentality, as simply one consumer choice option among others. This social disjuncture may run deeper than what any single art may be able to resolve, but at the same time this doesn't justify pretending that the body field isn't really here or abandoning the challenge or responsibility to engage with possible ways of being more fully human -- which is what art often aspires to when it's more than propaganda, decoration or casual diversion.

## 55

When art fully engages a person as bodily presence, it can be inhabited, and in the corresponding shifts of one's own body states, in the modulating feelings of that engagement, the art entity reciprocally inhabits its witnesses (not to mention its artists). The structure of this interchange, which in no way ostracizes reflective thought or conversation, perhaps not all that coincidentally, parallels that of spirit possession, which is cohabitation with a spiritual entity, a transformative, specifically physical feeling that Robert Farris Thomson has described as "one of the formal goals of Central and West African religions" and one that inflects the entire Black Atlantic world.

**56**

**The body as metaphor is an all-important concept in the art south of the Sahara. Combine that metaphor with metaphors of motion and, in the words of an African-American rap group of the 1980s, one “steps into the cipher.” We enter, in other words, a code, a stylized form of consciousness, involving all in deep and primary vitality.**

**- Robert Farris Thompson**

**57**

When Antonio Damasio proposes that “the self is a repeatedly reconstructed biological state,” he’s collaterally referring to rhythmicized, and therefore stylized motion -- but at neurochemical velocities.

**58**

If thought can be understood as stylized motion, if interaction with one’s environment excites patterned internal movement, then coherent images of self, social and world conceptions can be acted out as ways of doing, as embodied attitudes, in concurrence with other imagistic constellations.

**59**

Attitude carves dispositions toward potential states of motion that can be socially realized as gesture, stance, gait, dance, music, speech. These motion structures are mimetically transferable patterns of relationship -- interactively imagistic, discursive, somatosensory and interpersonal, but their meaning, and even their existence, depends on their being embodied in performance. They are not abstractions.

**60**

Motion related African aesthetic practices tend to favor embodying knowledge in direct participation rather than in archival reservoirs. Motion codes are less content specific than they are adaptable to multitudinous circumstances. Huge swaths of a lived worldview may be reconstituted in another context out of a dispersed cluster of prolific core attitudes. The forms and materials of articulation may radically differ in the new environment, but the style of relating these elements, their overall feel, the quality of thought, may at times concur surprisingly with ancestral precedents.



## 61

Two striking instances of this potential at work emerge in Zimbabwe and in the Americas. There were no parallels with ancient lineages of griot families in the case of sculpture in Zimbabwe, where whatever continuous threads there may have been were disrupted by British interference. While the Zimbabwean renaissance didn't evolve in a vacuum (there was access to both Pan-African and Pan-European resources) originating sculptors have arrived at a very Shona-specific art that can stand with the best work in stone being accomplished globally, and with no compromise in identity. Shona conceptions, Shona ways that persisted as motion codes distributed among other activities reasserted themselves anew in the context of sculpture.

## 62

Even more dramatic are the creolized innovations of the Americas. In the English colonies and the later United States, where the systematic and collateral alienation of Africans from their material cultures, languages and social practices was the most brutal, the infectious *Jus Grew* phenomena converted the US into one of the principal distribution hubs of global Africanization. The notorious colonial English prohibition of the drum after the 1739 Stono Rebellion in South Carolina spurred a migration of drumming into the four limbed body percussion of Kongolese *Zuba* (*Juba* in the Americas), which later reconstituted itself in the 20<sup>th</sup> century trap set. Progeny of the African diaspora transformed the archival resource of the turntable into a performer's instrument. And no one should be confused about who was in charge in the case of Ellington's or Parker's appropriation of European harmonic devices into the service of a radically different musical worldview, all sonic homonyms aside.

## 63

**After I make the initial statement impression based on the geography or shape of the stone, then like a conversation it slowly begins to reveal itself. I hear its secrets and I share my secrets with it. It calls me and I call it, that's when the relationship begins. The stone talks: "touch me here ... touch me there."**  
- M. Scott Johnson

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M. Scott Johnson's call and response sculpting flies live under the radar, the chisel reaching beyond mundane consciousness into the penumbral somatosensory, articulately carving the shapes of felt experience, and thus translating unseen perception into affective motion. Where the majority of what's going to happen persists as yet to be known and still indefinable, maintaining contact within such flux becomes a matter of feeling one's way along, of working outward from within the relationship, perception by perception, move by move, insight by insight: the practical conditions of enlightened improvisation.

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***Improvisation is the ultimate human (i.e. heroic) endowment. It is, indeed; and even as flexibility or the ability to swing (or to perform with grace under pressure) is the key to that unique confidence which generates the self-reliance and thus the charisma of the hero, and even as infinite alertness-become-dexterity is the functional source of the magic of all master craftsmen, so may skill in the art of improvisation be that which both will enable contemporary man to be at home with his sometimes tolerable but never quite certain condition of *not* being at home in the world and will also dispose him to regard his obstacles and frustrations as well as his achievements in terms of adventure and romance. - Albert Murray***

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He was the hope bringer. He was the laughter bringer. High John the Conqueror came from Africa, some say. When, under slavery in the South, the work would become just too much to take, High John would hear the people's wishes to be anyplace else but there. He'd go off and find an enormous black crow big enough to fly himself and everyone else away onto wonderful adventures; and none on the ground would ever know the difference.

67

**It takes 3 days of working 10 to 12 hours a day before I get to the stage of really carving and the flow is up. Stone carving is physically demanding. It causes small states of delirium or exaggerated reality. - M. Scott Johnson**

68

High John the Conqueror is the portal within the elevated delirium of that flow, the quiet space that circulates among the heat of the hammer, the easy slip into the marvelous as the carving goes on, on and goes on.

## 69

After emancipation, High John wasn't seen so much as before. He'd found a new home in the roots of a weed called johnny the conqueror. Some people would carry the root as a lucky charm or keep it in a secret place, there to help people overcome what they could not beat otherwise and to bring them the laugh of the day. With the joy John would bring them, they could laugh and sing that "things are bound to come out right tomorrow."

## 70

An *inyanga*, a Shona spirit medium, once visited a party of Operations Crossroads Africa volunteers at work in Zimbabwe, where a three stone turquoise ring on one of M. Scott Johnson's fingers caught her attention. She talked for a while and eventually came to the topic of shadows, in particular that the creator expresses itself in 3 shadows on the physical plane, and if one looks at anything closely enough, one can always discern the play of these 3 shadows at work.

## 71

Observing the sun in the rotating shadows it casts, M. Scott Johnson begins to learn a stone's harmonies. The spectrum of shifting solar declinations mutate and transform a stone's proportions in the modulations of shadow that teach him how, and where, to enter into a stone. The truths of a stone emerge in concert with these shadows, as the flash of his direct carving traverses the shadow regions of feeling, imagination and perception.

## THE RHYTHM

72

**Entrainment is the term coined by William Condon for the process that occurs when two or more people become engaged in each other's rhythms. ....music is a highly specialized releaser of rhythms already in the individual....Music can also be viewed as a rather remarkable extension of the rhythms generated in human beings.... The definition of the self is deeply embedded in the rhythmic synchronic process. This is because rhythm is inherent in organization, and therefore has a basic design function in the organization of the personality. Rhythm cannot be separated from process and structure; in fact one can question whether there is such a thing as an eventless rhythm. Rhythmic patterns may turn out to be one of the most important basic personality traits that differentiate one human being from the next. All human rhythms begin in the center of the self, that is, with self-synchrony. Even brain rhythms are reliable indicators associated with practically everything that people do....**

**- Edward T. Hall**

73

A state of motion's identity announces itself as rhythm. In its looping of attention, rhythm thus cools the entropic linearity of technical time. And the Cartesian grids employed for such measurements are merely regulatory click tracks, simply one more superimposed beat, however square that beat may be, amid an ocean of much more subtle and variegated beat relations. And besides, there isn't really any arhythmic zero-state vacuum into which a rhythm later enters as incidental ornament. Every rhythm is a cross rhythm in relation with some other rhythm that's already in motion. This is because rhythms themselves are actively constituting and constructing what's going on. No rhythm, no life, no body, no consciousness, no action. Rhythm spins the coherence of motion.

74

**When I hit the stone, it causes a vibration. And then in that vibration, molecules begin to move in other parts of the stone; and with the molecules, the more that they move, the softer the stone gets, the more it allows me to be able to carve it. And so I think that rhythm in a way affects the way that these molecules resonate.**

**- M. Scott Johnson**

## 75

Beats are relatives. Rhythm is relational -- neither visible (for the most part) nor a subset of music. Beats call rhythm down. Beats (and in alternate personae as marks, gestures or resemblances) expose a rhythm's vertices, but globally, the rhythm is singing in the relationships among the beats. Rhythm is adaptive motion code, able to actualize in innumerably disparate contexts, material and media, saturating an omnipresence that corresponds with many applications of the word "spirit".

## 76

William S. Condon spent a year and a half, 4 to 5 hours a day, in the 1950s studying 4½ seconds of film shot by Gregory Bateson of a family eating dinner together. In this process, he was able to quantifiably demonstrate that human beings synchronize rhythmically at very high velocities (often in sync with the tempos of alpha, beta and gamma brain wave frequencies) via microgestures: immensely subtle, practically indiscernible, facial and body gestures that are also inseparable from any speech act. He calls this interactional synchrony.

## 77

Subatomic particles light years apart match each other's moves. Spiral DNA *claves* multiply their rhythmic resemblances. Rhythms are communicable memes. The self is a repeatedly reconstructed. A repeatedly reconstructed biological state. The self is repeatedly reconstructed. A rhythmic construction. The self rhythmically flashes film frames so as to project a stable image. In Afrological musics, polyrhythmic repetition curves the image of time from the one to the three dimensional, opening up to human scale experience insights into the interlocked cosmologically scaled multidimensional repetition that conjures the hologram we experience as space.

## 78

**Each beat, like a person, has insides. Those insides allow for multiple conditions of being. Those conditions are simultaneous events.**

- David Pleasant

79

It's been more common for Western artists, and for Western visual artists in particular, to gravitate toward the metaphor of the stable object than to rhythm knowledge. Giotto rendered tactilely persuasive illusions of objects in his storytelling, while the majority of Dutch painters catalogued inventories of the tangible property of the well off in their portraits and still lifes; and the exaggerated literalness of the art object has also been a central tenet of much minimalist art. This is a tactilely valid organizational field of reference, but only one of multiple alternatives.

80

Rhythm information, however, in being a pattern of relationship rather than an element literally embedded in a particular object, requires therefore different techniques, techniques that are no less astute or discerning than those focused around point to point correspondence. In rhythmic thought, the pattern of corresponding supercedes the literal points at hand, transposable dance codes that filter through internal body state imagery as feel, residing as repository attitudes that may liquefy alternately in a turn of phrase, perhaps in a sculpture, possibly in a quilt, a hat's angle, a carved spoon or a mambo.

81

**There's nothing like being around 13 or 14 sculptors and hearing the rhythm of the hammer 14 hours a day, 7 days a week. That sound opens up doors of consciousness.**  
- M. Scott Johnson.

82

That rhythm has been an area neglected into a secondary, even decorative, status (and an often pejoratively racialized one at that) in Western art practices, quite often as no more than a means of measuring and proportioning "things", shows in the relative paucity of serious rhythmic thought to be encountered in much Western visual art -- a lack of cultivation that is, among other sources, a likely heritage of the combined monotheistic and rationalistic distrust of incarnation. Upon entering a typical, well schooled, contemporary artist studio, one is still more likely to hear Johann Bach or Phillip Glass than Ornette Coleman or Dou Dou Njaye Rose; and this value system as regards rhythmic engagement and awareness, more often than not, shows in the art being done. It would make sense then that music, the most sensitive purveyor of rhythmic memes, would be an almost more important resource for M. Scott Johnson than much of the visual work of his contemporaries

## 83

"We find it creolized but acceptable." Congolese musician Sam Mangwana replied with regal self assurance to a question posed during an audience discussion as part of a concert at the Museum for African Art about the Congolese embrace of Cuban rumba. And further south, after sculptors in colonial Rhodesia had already been reasserting a Shona worldview in the plastic arts for over a decade, Thomas Mapfumo, a musician who, like many other continental Africans, had been assimilating diaspora sounds (in his case, North American R&B and rock), began to evolve a synthesis of electric guitars and trap kit with traditional Shona mbira music that, with Shona lyrics, became in the 1970s the revolutionary sound of Chimurenga (Shona for "struggle") music. A serious traverse of the cascading loops, curves and angles of concurrent four with three polyrhythms in either traditional Shona or Chimurenga music and dance help to map out some of the conceptual universe, postural attitudes and worldview and out of which Zimbabwean sculpture has also evolved, where these extensive formative rhythmic dispositions had also stamped themselves on the sculptors' eyes.

## 84

Ten years later, across the Black Atlantic, near intersecting vectors 23 and 96 in the orbital regions of Detroit, the Belleville Three -- Juan Atkins, Kevin Saunderson, and Derrick May -- were listening. As May put it, in a classic expression of high Detroit aesthetics: "We perceived the music differently than you would if you encountered it in dance clubs. We'd sit back with the lights off and listen to records by Bootsy and Yellow Magic Orchestra. We never took it as just entertainment. We took it as a serious philosophy."

## 85

Parallel with earlier jazz community initiatives such as the Stata Concert Gallery and the Ibo Cultural Center from almost two decades before, Detroit Techno nurtured itself in its own house: The Music Institute, outside the loop of liquor licenses, selling no alcohol and thus enforcing no age barriers, was a space for more than passive consumption. It fostered communal creativity. Djembes were available at the door. Dance was part of the deal. M. Scott Johnson was a regular, and well ahead of his seminal encounter with Lamidi Fakaye, music fostered Johnson's first serious instruction in sculpture.

86

Anthony Shakir initiated Johnson into the structural anatomy of musical processes, literally deconstructing Derrick May's *Strings of Life* for him, razor blade to tape, component cell by component cell. Every night at the Music Institute and elsewhere Johnson could hear the organization of musical thought processes spontaneously forming themselves layer by layer. He could listen to and observe the hearing that was discovering the relationships being revealed. Johnson learned how deep spatial structures of multi-voiced musical gesture could be mapped onto the peeled, layering subtractions of carving. He learned how treble and bass punctuated comprehensions of mass, space, fluid and solid.

87

**As the hammer and chisel are driving through the rock itself, oftentimes I am able to understand and dialogue based on the tones that the hammer and chisel make: different densities in the stone. I'm able to migrate or travel throughout the rock because I'm listening to how it responds to the steel. When I'm listening, I've got my headphones on. I'm listening to a wonderful track. Oftentimes, I'm playing along with the musician. I just find out where my instrument fits in the whole composition.**

**- M. Scott Johnson**

88

Anthony Shakir, Larry Heard, Derrick May, Ron Hardy, Jeff Mills. Alton Miller, Brett Dancer, Jay Denim, Fanon Flowers, Kevin Saunderson, Juan Atkins, Blake Baxter, Tony Humphries, Kenny Dixon Jr., Kenny Larkin, Eddie Fowlkes, Chez Damier, Theo Parrish, Frankie Knuckles, Ken Collier.



## THE MATTER

**89**

**At times we think we know ourselves in time when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of a being's stability... Memory doesn't record concrete duration... . Space contains compressed time.**

**- Gaston Bachelard**

**90**

Stone longs a millennially broad rhythm stretched toward immobility upon the presence of the human. But within stone's experience, human brevity endures less than instantly blinked past. Imagine then, the blindsiding velocity of stone's sudden metamorphosis into sculpture. And further still, imagine how that speed demonstrates the potential quantum acuity of human insight into stone's internal trajectories.

**91**

But, even the most ordinary of rocks, casually relaxed at home, not even dressed up to go out, skim the uncanny. Stones defy continually their customary assignment to a regard as inert objects. Weighing, persisting, they stay -- bodies like ours with evident memories and obscure teleologies, haunting in their inaudible longevity. Left alone to their own devices, stones are already difficult enough to dismiss.

**92**

**Nicholas wasn't an *inyanga* or anything, but he did pay homage to the natural environment. He'd talk to the snakes about the babies on the farm. I'd never seen anyone speak so seriously like that. Nicholas' approach to carving was more animist. He didn't want to disrupt the natural character of the stone. It was more a matter of navigating each stone, of seeing the pattern and veins in the stone and following that.**

**- M. Scott Johnson**

**93**

The enigmatic numinosity of stone, when humanly inhabited as sculpture imbues itself with the curvatures and indentations of a carver's own life force. Voraciously consuming and retaining active time, stone graphically recounts the rhythms of its transformative scarifications, and touched in this way, it entrains with the human: there can be no question that somebody has been here.

**94**

**Images are created through a cooperation of the real and the unreal. ...An image is not memory but something that emerges new. ...(and) stands out with as much surprise as life -- so that life cannot explain it. ...In art important successes happen independently of skill. - Gaston Bachelard**

**95**

Life is recognized less through its regularities than its divergences. Sound resonates as rich, full and alive to the human ear only when a significant proportion of chaos and disorder is frequenting its constituent wave patterns. To synchronize with another's rhythms is also inseparably to engage dialogues embedded in mutual unpredictability. Personal identity likewise emerges more out of distinct limitations and deviations than through any achievements of homogeneity.

**96**

Each self generates specific topography -- particular convergences of unique experience, disposition, wisdom and skill effected in signature conglomerations of rhythms. While generic human intervention with stone may be as clearly marked by an engineer's 180 degree cut as by the most unimaginative and conventional of carving, what arrests in subtractive sculpture traces the situating peculiarities of an irreplicable individual. The individual artist, the performing locus of feeling and shadow perception, contributes to an art entity its complex human irregularity, the cross rhythms that indicate living activity and invite participative empathy.

**97**

The individual has been contested as an "ideological mirage" in some Western critiques of its Enlightenment models of the rational subject and the Romantic point to point conduit metaphor of self expression. A common default recourse in the arts has settled into the anonymities of convention, as in Andy Warhol's influential collapsing of the personal into branding logo. But African Americans have also gleaned an inside perspective on individual effacement in their having been treated to the cutting edge of Enlightenment modernism as disposable property. And besides, there are already multiple interbreeding conceptions of individual personhood active in the North American meme pool, Indigenous, African, European and more. The ethics of African pluralism undergird the symbiotic interchange of individual and community as enacted in the ring shout, the jazz ensemble, or on the dance floor or basketball court.

**98**

**From an African perspective, once you have brought a structure to bear on your involvements, and made your peace with it, the distinctive gestures and deviant idiosyncrasies of personality can stand out with clarity.**

**- John Miller Chernoff**

**99**

The aged, resistant structures of stone tutor insight and patience, cooling the mind into modes of awareness proper to the nature of stone's breadth and perspective. Dialogical, call and response working methods designate that there really is no way to excise a carver's distinct performing topography from the interchange. In art, what's called "self" is not really so much expressed as incidentally exposed as a part of the process; and the extent to which a carver absents oneself would also be the degree to which a sculpture's potential compassion for the human depletes.

**100**

All of this just begins to circle around why M. Scott Johnson's sculptures are so able to get under one's skin with such staying power. They're human scaled toward conversant accessibility, often at the dimension of a bust, compatible with the intimacy of a family circle. They're scaled at a proportion congenial to empathic body to body matching, to imaginative projection of the vocabulary of one's own body sense into the place of the sculptural body, to trying on a sculptural body-double for size.

**101**

The range of surface textures, the radical, highly charged negative spaces, the shape shifting plays of shadow, and the proprioceptive recalibrations of balance, weight and tendency together articulate a dynamic of internal body states. The sculptures are inhabitable portraits of what's going on under the skin.

**102**

This lucidity and eloquence in the "elementary representational tools of the sensory and motor systems" leverage what's customarily, and dubiously, referred to as the "abstract" in visual art. The visually non-representational in art deflects attention away from the instinctive cognitive reflex to formulate whatever's seen as denotative imagery into the invisible, somatosensory arenas of feeling; but facile distinctions between visually "abstract" and "representational" are not quite so simple.

## 103

Upon hearing a quip declaring that it's impossible to paint a face in today's world, Willem de Kooning once responded, "That's right. And it's impossible not to." Many of M. Scott Johnson's sculptures careen in, out and between the non-objective and the figurative, and many directly address the archetypal motif of the human face. But there's something else going on beyond depiction, distortion or abstraction of a feature's appearance.

## 104

From inside one's own face, face is experienced as more than the visual image observed by other people. It resonates as a fluctuating tactile field of emotionally informed proprioceptive tensions. This experienced template of face, in being mapped across the gravitational displacements of the sculptural body, enriches and intensifies the asymmetries and correspondences vibrating in such works as *The Mind of Benjamin Banneker* or *High John (The Conqueror)*, where the facial motif pivots a reference wave among the multiple rhythmic interference waves of Johnson's virtuoso carving.

## 105

It's notable that an artist of Johnson's generation, more than eight decades younger than the last important carvers in the West would gravitate to one of the oldest of art forms. His adoption of subtractive sculpture is neither Luddite nor a withering retrenchment into traditionalism, but a choice fully informed by the current prevailing tendencies and conditions in contemporary art.

## 106

And what are significant are the concerns that motivate such a focus. They suggest that, concurrent with a starry eyed cyborgian lunge toward an imagined posthuman, there's a wealth of unfinished business and open possibilities yet to be navigated within the actually present, untranscended human. It's intriguing that, while technocrats long to tether conceptions of human mind and sensibility to models of high speed, mechanized computation, the most advanced cognitive science is finding the most abstract and sophisticated of mental accomplishments to be metaphorical extensions of the most basic of body experiences.

## 107

It's tempting for a superficial viewer to mistake an African American's deliberate incorporation of continental African conceptions (and Johnson's actual palette of influences are as global as anybody's) as merely "ethnic", if not neo-primitive. At the same time, it's rare that de Kooning's putative blondes, Jasper Johns' flags, or Tintoretto portrayals of a swarthy, Hebraic Jesus as a handsome northern Italian are cited as "ethnic". Anything presently available as "past", all shifts in context aside, hasn't really passed, but persists as a current resource; All and any art unavoidably acknowledges while transforming where it comes from.

## 108

There are always boundary crossers, and aesthetics fail to neatly match ethnicity. Cultural memes travel farther and faster, recombining and mutating in ways that people can't even consider. A person born into a particular aesthetic and social context still has to earn it in order to live it. There are plenty of black people who feel no affinity at all for Pan-African conceptualizations and sense no obligation to feel otherwise, while many of Asian or European parentage can neither live nor maintain their identities without them. The reciprocals of any of these possible combinations are equally active. Sometimes the spirit finds you. Sometimes affinities lead a person far from one's point of origin, as Johnson memorably learned in Zimbabwe.

## 109

Aesthetic profiling imposes issues of political dominance and uneven access to resources over the actual fertility of artistic concepts involved. The point is that among the rich and deep cultural constellations available to any artist, the vital tipping points are not hierarchical status, but distinctness and appropriateness to one's values, preoccupations and visions. M. Scott Johnson, a contemporary 21st century American sculptor, simply acknowledges explicitly the persistent relevance of Afrological conceptual possibilities within a much more intricate and unpredictably evolving worldscape.

## 110

But, to take it a step further, a peruse of continental African sculpture best exposes just how unlike this referential field Johnson's sculpture actually is. However, it's not really necessary to travel all that far. The extremes of invention within a single sculpture, such as *The Tao of Physics*, or an assessment of the variety among the sculptures in this book should themselves testify to the recurring freshness of Johnson's engagement and imagination.

## 111

M. Scott Johnson's formal and procedural choices derive far less from art about art concerns than in working out the implications of an evolving life conception. In a highly accelerated, information dense cultural environment, Johnson considers resilient alternatives to fragmentation and egoistic nihilism by allying himself with the pluralistic Pan-African disposition toward integrated, polymundial interface. Multiple rhythm -- and with that, dance, feeling and somatosensory resources -- persists as a vehicle coherent and supple enough to achieve a working congruence amid disparity.

## 112

Out of a willingness to incorporate the complications of thinking and acting in terms of wholes, M. Scott Johnson enacts an intelligence that minimizes the potential violences of intellectual abstraction, and his reciprocal relationship with the unique intelligence of each stone affords him exacting technique without an imposition of command and control attitudes and methodologies. His art succeeds both as imaginative, powerfully engaging sculpture and as an affirmation of a potential way of being. In this way and more, M. Scott Johnson's sculptures demonstrate the possibility of harmonizing with all the beats.

## 113

In physics, by the way, shadow matter names what stuffs an implied concurrent, interpenetrating, invisible universe, parallel in correspondence with the one we think we're in.

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