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Signs of the Times

A new collaboration between Liz Swig and Rashid Johnson channels our era of anxiety into an artful and provocative line of jewelry.

When the art collector Liz Swig approached the American artist and filmmaker Rashid Johnson in January about a jewelry collaboration, she could little imagine that by summer, Johnson's frenzied *Anxious Men* drawings—on which she's based a collection of cuffs, ring bands, signet rings, and military tags, available this month—would become a startlingly effective shorthand for the national mood. Since 2014, Swig has partnered with the likes of Kara Walker and Cindy Sherman to offer porcelain tableware, cameo jewelry, and other objets d'art through her creative platform, LizWorks, and after asking seven women artists (including Mickalene Thomas and Rachel Feinstein) to reimagine the charm bracelet in 2016, "I wanted to explore male energy in the realm of jewelry," Swig says.

She found a good way in through *Anxious Men*, a rare experiment in figuration for Johnson. (Since emerging from the Art Institute of Chicago in 2005, the artist has maintained a largely conceptual practice combining photography, film, and sculpture.) Reconciling themes of mental health, Black identity, and contemporary urban life, his sketchlike portraits—originally made from black soap and wax on tile and displayed at the Drawing Center in New York in 2015—were "complex enough and approachable enough at the same time," says Swig. For his own part, Johnson liked the idea of miniaturizing and mobilizing his typically oversize compositions. "Some of the things that my work speaks to essentially travel with you, quite literally on your person, like issues of anxiety and fear," Johnson says, "and some of the works function as illustrations of those concepts and, in some ways, as cathartic objects.

CODE RED

ABOVE: Rashid Johnson's *Untitled Anxious Red Painting*, 2020. RIGHT: A titanium military tag from the collection; available at lizworks.net.

So to make them wearable reminders—that was something I was interested in." (Johnson's proceeds from the collaboration will be split between the Black Mental Health Alliance and Prep for Prep, a program that helps to place students of color in northeastern independent schools.)

With nods to his personal taste in jewelry—"I've always been influenced by hip-hop and the historical employment of jewelry by some of my heroes," Johnson says, noting the heavy gold chains of Isaac Hayes

and Mr. T—the ultimately genderless collection is subtle and substantial, pretty and provocative. Where there's a dialogue between the modern and antique in Swig's cameos, there exists in this series an intriguing tension between the feverish energy of Johnson's motif and the luxurious permanence of the materials. All signed and numbered, the pieces come in nine-karat gold and gleaming titanium, some punctuated with diamonds or rubies. The scarlet enamel on a ring and a military tag matches the vivid coloring of Johnson's *Untitled Anxious Red Drawings*, which he exhibited online in April through Hauser & Wirth.

To wear the collection, Swig says, requires a certain boldness: The person she sees in it "has a point of view that fills the space."

Its debut amid a raging pandemic and resurging Black Lives Matter movement couldn't have been planned, but Johnson and

Swig are proud of both the collection's timeliness and its potential to transcend the particular moment. "When I first started making this body of work, there were issues around police brutality and violence that I was quite conscious of," Johnson says. "I was also thinking about my own struggles with anxiety. But as the coronavirus crept into our lives, [the work] pivoted to kind of consume that space, and with the more recent reckoning around race, it pivoted to kind of capture that as well." He's been pleased to discover the nimbleness of *Anxious Men*: "It's able to be present for the environment and the place and the time that it occupies." —MARLEY MARIUS

