



ARTIST TO WATCH

RASHAAD NEWSOME

BY AMANI OLU

Rashaad Newsome uses various mediums to archive American subcultures, explore nonverbal forms of communication, and synthesize high and low culture. In his work, Ball culture invades the museum, Carl Orff's "Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi" and "Primo Vere, Omnia Sol Temperat" receive a hip-hop makeover, and heraldry says "Good day, sir" to bling. While not limiting his work to the subject, Newsome often recontextualizes the idiosyncrasies of black American culture and other marginalized communities. His process of adding and deleting, mixing and matching, resuscitates the familiar, advancing it to a new critical position. His work is intelligent yet accessible, bold but not heavy-handed, sincere without being self-aggrandizing.

In 1990 Jenny Livingston introduced the world to a competitive dance style called voguing in her seminal documentary *Paris Is Burning*, which chronicles Ball culture in New York City during the mid- to late 1980s. Although voguing is paramount in the film and was later made popular by Madonna in her number-one song "Vogue," Newsome says it "is not archived as a significant dance in dance history." A fixture in New York City's Ball scene, he grew concerned about the dance's historical accuracy and ownership. He felt compelled to create *Five*, a performance piece that highlights the five elements of voguing or "Vogue Fem." In the piece, dancers present the five elements, "Hands," "Catwalk," "Floor Performance," "Dip Spins," and "Duck Walk." Newsome incorporates sound that mimics each

element: "Hands" and flute, "Catwalk" and violin, "Floor Performance" and electric guitar, "Dip Spins" and saxophone, and "Duck Walk" with drums. In addition to the instruments, present throughout the piece is a song titled "Flower," performed by an opera singer. The performance formally ends with a battle that represents all five elements and a newly disputed element known as "Hair," performed by a biological woman. The piece encores with a solo dancer displaying "New Way," the leading style of "Vogue Fem." Although a proper dance performance, "Five" functions as an abstract, yet formal archive of the dance, which Newsome says, "celebrates and documents its history, evolution, community, and genetic makeup."

In his video *The Conductor*, Newsome remixes "Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi" and "Primo Vere, Omnia Sol Temperat" and marries them with clips of hand gestures found in popular hip-hop music videos. "The hands," Newsome says, "are conducting the music." This six-movement piece (*The Conductor* comprises part 1 and 2) is an attempt to "synthesize high and low culture, sonically." These pairings are apt, as "Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi" and "Primo Vere, Omnia Sol Temperat" address topics such as wealth, greed, lust, rebirth, joy, and the ephemeral nature of life, themes similar to those found in hip-hop music. What Newsome teaches us here is that these themes are not ethnic or class-specific, but have been around as long, if not longer, than the *Carmina Burana*, the 254-page manuscript of

poems and dramatic texts from the 11th, 12th, and 13th century that inspired Orff's aforementioned cantatas.

Newsome is interested in history's relationship with the present which is evident in his collage series where he creates heraldry out of bling culture. The candylike collages are composed of images from discarded music magazines, the Internet, and auction catalogues. Newsome houses them in antique frames, adds carvings of bling, then repaints them in gold leaf or automotive paint that is associated with luxury cars. In the collage *Sun King*, he elevates the Notorious B.I.G. to the status of King Louis XIV of France. B.I.G.'s rule of rap music in the mid-'90s is similar to the Sun King's rule over France with an iron fist and has earned him the moniker "King of New York," which he maintains even in death. This work pays homage to B.I.G., but it is not solely about preserving his memory. The "Sun King" largely functions as a metaphor for the relationship between past and present, the conceptual merits of recontextualization, and the melding of aesthetic hierarchies.

Newsome's work is genius because it is so hip — not cool, but hip. It is fresh, informed, and sincere, which is why people can relate. It never postures, and never will.

Rashaad Newsome, *Five*, production still.
Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome Studio.



Rashaad Newsome
The Sun King
2011
Collage on paper
46 x 55 inches
Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome Studio