

Art Rico Gatson Q&A at Exit Art: "I Like Stripes, I Like Glitter."

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Rico Gatson installation view at Exit Art.

Last night in Exit Art's basement space, Thelma Golden, director and chief curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem, led a discussion with Brooklyn-based artist Rico Gatson. The 45 year-old's retrospective, *Three Trips Around the Block* (through November 23), was installed in the gallery just upstairs.

Gatson began the evening with a virtual walk-through of the exhibition, starting with an early performance-based work like 1994's "Two Heads in a Box." Arguably his most famous piece, the video shows Gatson in black-face lip synching Al Jolson's "Let Me Sing and I'm Happy." Gatson told the audience that although he'd thought of himself primarily as an "object maker," he was inspired by Conceptualists like Adrian Piper, artists who were out intervening in the world. "It was like a whole new language," he said.

By the early 2000s, Gatson had grown tired of playing characters and returned to painting and sculpture—but don't call him a painter. Or a sculptor, either. For Gatson, the medium has always been separate from the message.

"I give myself license to use media that best conveys what I want to say," he said.

When an audience member pressed Gatson to elaborate on the role of his medium, specifically texture, he contemplated for a moment, and then shrugged.

"I like stripes, I like glitter," he laughed.

His later, minimalist-inspired works proved even more difficult for Gatson to discuss. He told the audience that he found a certain power in simple geometry, citing the time he came across a collection of Donald Judd's sculptures piled high in the basement of Pace Gallery. He described it as a "spiritual" moment, yet he couldn't, and still can't, quite pin down exactly why. Regardless, interacting with works by Judd and Dan Flavin led directly to the paired-down aesthetic of his "magic sticks," spare black-and white sculptures that he showed in *Dark Matter* at Ronald Feldman in 2009. Subtler than some of his earlier objects, they're still informed by the same preoccupations with identity that influenced his early video work. He began to delve into the influences behind the sculptures—as varying and as personal as religion and rap music—but he quickly demurred.

"When I start talking about this stuff I get self-conscious that it sounds cheesy. But it's (the influences) all in me—the Christian, the African. How can it not be?"