



Rashawn Griffin, dumpling, 2012, Mixed media, 87.5 x 107.5 x 84", Courtesy of the Artist.



Rashawn Griffin, *a hole-in-the-wall country*, installation view.

Rashawn Griffin Makes His Own Rules for Open Exhibition Architecture

**Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art  
Johnson County Community College  
12345 College Boulevard  
913-469-3000  
Overland Park  
Rashawn Griffin, *a hole-in-the-wall country*  
January 13-April 1, 2012**

**By BLAIR SCHULMAN**

"At home in the best homes" is a pithy phrase uttered by dulcet voices that still linger in the Social Register. Meant to be a compliment, you're supposed to say "thank you," the phrase erects a wall between those on the inside and those who decidedly are not. Rashawn Griffin's exhibition at the Nerman Museum presents this ideology that lays bare the clique with a perspective that meanders through childhood and adolescence.

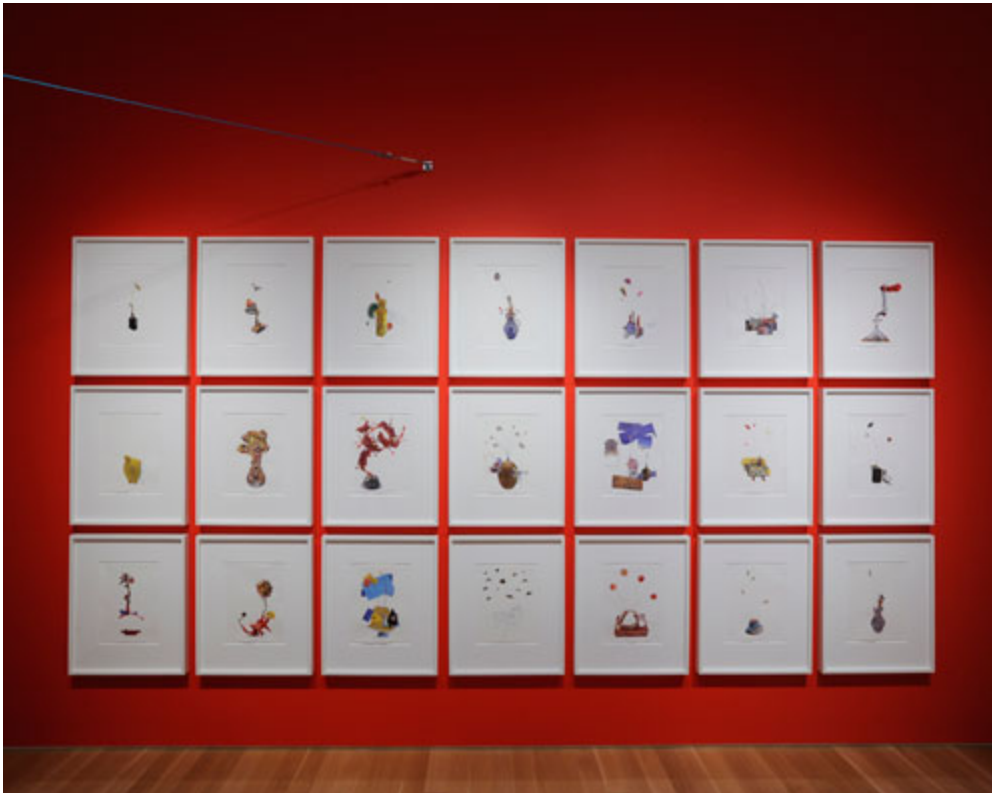
The title, *a hole-in-the-wall country* at first seems misleading. Viewers might be expecting cowboy portraits and expositional imagery of race relations in the 19th Century Middle West. The exhibit's title, says a press statement, "derives from the post Civil War autobiography of African American cowboy Nat Love." Instead of real and imagined narrative, Griffin discloses to his audience developmental relations between peers and self, including its disconnections.

The work is reflective of the space's physicality and in its entirety the exhibition feels laconic, with a persistent sense of conceptual indulgence. Through reflection and not reaction, this message becomes clear. Griffin sees an individual's need for belonging and membership in a community, the roots of which are formed early on in life.

Greeting visitors as they climb the stairs to where the exhibition takes place, a 40-foot long pennant bearing the legend *Griffin, KS* (felt, fabric, wood, 2012) is suspended above. Griffin is not the name of an actual town in Kansas, although for the artist it was a reaction to seeing a similar, albeit smaller pennant, of Volin, South Dakota, a town founded by ancestors of a friend.

If visitors look around carefully and stop to think about it, they will observe a Peter Pan Syndrome in effect. One example, *Kashi* (mixed media, 2012) is a small, resin coated cutout of cartoon creatures with roofs over their head that seem to fly in space. These cutouts, adolescent in both message and execution, carry the weight of the picture of a childlike appeal of not having one's feet planted on the ground, while reaching for the stars. The works' allegories are numerous. In *Untitled*, (acrylic, ink, water soluble oil on panel, fabric, wood, 2012) swiftly rendered children, helmets and tulips seem to be closely modeled on 1950s-era children's books.

The small sukkah-like anteroom, *dumpling* (mixed media, 2012), covered in dizzying argyle fabric, which could be construed as the exhibitions' central focus, presents viewers with a personal childlike refuge. On its own, the meaning of this site-specific installation would be difficult to construe. When a similar construction was shown at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2006, critic Holland



Rashawn Griffin, *a hole-in-the-wall country*, installation view.





Rashawn Griffin, *untitled*, 2012, Water soluble oil, ink, acrylic on panel, 77 x 65", Courtesy of the Artist.

Cotter of the *New York Times* noted "the work doesn't seem to have a particular center, but maybe that's the point." At the Nerman, however, surrounded by other works to allow for a pattern to emerge, it takes root.

To withstand the mostly enclosed rooms' harsh lighting and intense patterning requires some stamina. The immediate energy sucks you dry and with its tree-house feel, it's easy to imagine needing a secret password to gain entry. Finding the stuffed animals that are cleverly secreted, it's like the discovery of a child's long-forgotten favorites under a bed. This piece most strongly manifests Griffin's concerns for acknowledgement and belonging.

An artist with international recognition, Griffin has returned home, so to speak to present a *hole-in-the-wall country*. Born in Los Angeles in 1980 and raised in Olathe, Kansas, he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland and a Masters of Fine Arts from Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. He was an artist in residence at The Studio Museum of Harlem in New York in 2006. After returning to Kansas a few years ago, he splits his time between Kansas City and New York City.

His work is included most notably in The Saatchi Collection, London; the Norton Collection, Los Angeles; The Studio Museum of Harlem in New York; the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland Park, as well as several private and public collections.

In a separate gallery, is what Griffin called in his opening night artists talk, "Frankenstein compositions." Creating 21 individual pieces, collage elements (thread, sewing needles, graphite, hot glue) are combined with images cut from the Nerman's 2009 and 2011 *Beyond Bounds* catalogues. The original art found in the catalogues is donated by local artists and sold at auction to financially support the museum. Griffin says of these pieces in the same talk, he is "stealing the life that goes on around me."

This brings to mind the attitudes about artists reusing imagery, its fair use resulting in adding value (or not) to the original.

For Griffin, reworking images of artists firmly entrenched in a community might be seen as an individual's intent on belonging to a community. Although flat-out mimicry is something a young person would do to ingratiate himself with his peers, I see it as unnecessary in light of everything else he brings to the galleries. Griffin asked his friend Volin to title each piece for him because he "wanted the language in the work to reflect the same method of construction I was using for the images; so as there was a limited "palette" I could use in regards to the collages, there too was a limitation in terms of language I could use to describe the images." Volin sent him an online anagram generator. Entering the titles of works to the generator, it would give him back a list of word combinations used to compose new titles.

Of the reuse concept, Griffin said in another email, "It is an interesting conversation. This stuff gets tricky for me ... for example, in more than a few museum catalogues and the like, the images of my work (photographed by) institutions are ones that I cannot re-use for reproduction, only because the photographer or the museum have rights to the image as it is in their catalogue for sale to promote the show, despite the fact it is my art."

This series is either an act of community enrichment or a superfluous artistic process, depending on your attitude about reuse. Some artists feel images in the public realm are simply material ripe for the taking. For others, it's a violation of individual creation. As a big fan of Pop Art and its roots in appropriation, I enjoy seeing familiar ideas draw new breath. In this setting, however, it feels awkward.

In its desire to express a unifying theme for *a hole-in-the-wall country*, there is a crisis of economy. This show wants to be spare, but cannot. The support of different paintings, pennants and other ephemera fills the space and creates an experience that drives home this point. How to pare it down, leaving us to arrive at Griffins' intentions much sooner, is tricky. I think it can be done if the reworked catalogue images are left for a separate show entirely. Without that obstacle, the idealistic qualities Griffin expresses throughout would feel much clearer in context and intent. In his world of bright colors, patterns, banners, and rooms without doors, Griffin shows us the strict and unwritten rules that need to be observed if trust and entry is to be gained.



Rashawn Griffin, *a hole-in-the-wall country*, installation view.





Rashawn Griffin, dumpling, 2012, Mixed media, 87.5 x 107.5 x 84", Courtesy of the Artist.