



## Throwing Shade

As we were wrapping up this thirteenth edition of “Black Girls Rule!” I was struggling to come up with a different angle for this editorial page. Then, one rainy Spring evening, I received a last minute invitation to attend the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council’s annual “Downtown Dinner.” The benefit dinner, which was held near the top of a high-rise building located at the infamous World Trade Center site, was memorable for the artist Rashaad Newsome’s performance of his “Shade Compositions 2009” piece. Essentially, for this performance, which Rashaad created and conducted, a group of elegantly dressed black girls from different walks of life sashayed into a line to the steady soundtrack of Soul II Soul and started “throwing shade.” For those who are not familiar with this very specific piece of African American terminology, throwing shade is a non-verbal way of communication, usually a “dis,” where one gets to express their dissatisfaction with a situation or a person. Of course, many black girls know how to throw shade with sassiness and attitude, and that is exactly what they did, high heels, coiffures and all, for “Shade Compositions 2009.”

I was so moved by the piece that I spoke with Rashaad after the performance and made an appointment to visit him in his temporary studio at 77 Water Street in lower Manhattan. Rashaad, who was born in New Orleans and has exhibited in prestigious institutions like The Kitchen in New York and the Fondation Cartier in Paris, explained that he cast the girls, pictured here facing him, based on their ability to be very expressive. Because “Shade Compositions” is a choral piece, the girls would be very limited in what they would be able to do, so expression and “an amazing sense of rhythm” would be crucial to the casting process. He contacted New York Model Management, *Craigslit* and *Backstage* magazine and ended up choosing mostly working actresses in New York City. The most important part of the casting, Rashaad told me, was that his girls represent a variety of shades - skin tones - and sizes. That very rigorous casting process would help to steer the piece away from literal interpretations of what it means to be a black girl today.

I was really impressed by Rashaad’s vision, because it so closely mirrors my own vision of what the “Black Girls Rule!” statement should be. I asked him why do black girls rule? “For a couple of reasons,” he answered. “First, our civilization cannot go on without these black women who fascinate me. These women are more emotive than many black men, who are unable to express emotion. Second, the black woman and the black man as a couple have historically been at the bottom of the socio-economic totem pole, although that is now changing.” Rashaad was obviously alluding to Michelle and Barack Obama in the White House, and at that moment I realized how much the statement had been validated since Spike Lee interviewed Michelle Obama for last year’s edition of “Black Girls Rule!” At the time of that interview, Barack was just a candidate. What a difference a year makes.

– Claude Grunitzky