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Wallpaper*

Tavares Strachan's call for unity is written in neon

*The Bahamian artist reflects on unity and belonging
as he unveils plans for a public sculpture in Telluride, Colorado*

by TF Chan (May 29, 2020)



A rendering of Tavares Strachan's *We are in this together*, due to be installed in Telluride, Colorado later this year. 'I like my art to be a call to action for people to think about their neighbours and their community at large,' says the artist. *Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery*

The town of Telluride, Colorado (population 2,479), nestled in a lush canyon and surrounded by snowy peaks, is best known as a skiing destination. But when Tavares Strachan first visited five years ago, he found himself drawn to the people just as much as the slopes. 'I like small-town America, where community is really the organising principle. I felt very welcomed and inspired by the place, and their values,' he recalls.

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The Bahamian artist, who splits his time between New York City and Nassau, has since returned repeatedly to Telluride, so much that he refers to his sojourns as ‘an informal artist’s residency’. Now, alongside local philanthropic and cultural organisation, the Telluride Foundation, he has revealed plans for a community engagement project, titled ‘Together’, with a text-based neon sculpture at its heart.



Tavares Strachan, *We are in this together*. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

Slated for later this year, the artwork will be installed in the landscape, along a gondola route that connects Telluride to the neighbouring town of Mountain Village. Its text will read ‘We are in this together’. While a catchphrase of the Covid-19 era, used by governments and businesses alike to reassure an anxious public and justify exceptional measures, Strachan had in fact settled on the phrase five years ago. ‘I’m interested in the organisation of human effort,’ he explains to Wallpaper*. ‘I think Telluride is a microcosm for the rest of the world. All the problems we have – hunger, joblessness, illness, natural disaster – they are here too. And people rise to the occasion and try to take care of each other.’

‘If we are truly in this together, my question is, why is the phrase necessary?’

Of the phrase’s contemporary relevance, Strachan points out that it is not so much a description of the state of things, but rather an appeal to the reader – to identify with fellow humans and extend a hand to those in need. He’s well aware that the phrase is often steeped in hypocrisy. ‘If we are truly in this together, my question is, why is the phrase necessary?’ he asks. ‘The artwork is to get us to think about the meaning of it, which might be separate from the rhetoric.’

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The positioning of the artwork – under a free gondola system that is used by both tourists and locals – is very much in line with its message, as is its warm pink glow, which envelopes the rider and contrasts with the tree-lined route in all seasons. For Strachan, who had once lit up a stretch of Mississippi River, in New Orleans, with a floating neon piece that read ‘You belong here’, there is power in putting declarative statements in the public realm: ‘It occupies a similar vernacular to advertising. It takes on the ethos of the people viewing it, and they take ownership of it. And so, it’s one way of making an artwork that ends up belonging to the people.’ §

INFORMATION

The ‘Together’ project is a collaboration between Tavares Strachan and The Telluride Foundation, in partnership with the Ah Haa school in Colorado. A selection of neons and silkscreen prints relating to *We are in this together* is available through Marian Goodman Gallery’s online viewing room. mariangoodman.com