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Tavares Strachan Teams with SpaceX to Launch Satellite-Sculpture into Orbit

by Jori Finkel (November 13, 2018)



A digital rendering of the "Enoch" satellite. Courtesy of Tavares Strachan

Robert Henry Lawrence Jr. never made it on a space mission. The first African-American to train as an astronaut with NASA, he died in a supersonic jet crash in 1967, at the age of 32. But the artist Tavares Strachan is getting ready to send the astronaut into space in a manner, to honor his legacy.

Mr. Strachan has made an unusual satellite in the form of a 24-karat gold urn featuring a bust of the astronaut, in a high-tech black frame, to be launched from a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket currently scheduled to go up on Monday. Mr. Strachan calls his satellite "Enoch" after the biblical figure "who was able to forgo death," he said. He had the idea for making a gold urn after researching Egyptian vessels used to preserve organs of the deceased.

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Born in Nassau, in the Bahamas, and based in New York, Mr. Strachan represented the Bahamas five years ago in its first Venice Biennale pavilion with a project resurrecting another African-American pioneer: Mathew Henson. That installation featured a video recreating Henson's 1909 expedition to the North Pole.

The SpaceX collaboration came via the Art+Technology Lab at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which gives grants and makes industry introductions. A 2014 grant recipient, Mr. Strachan worked with SpaceX's president, Gwynne Shotwell.

Interested in expanding access to science and technology, he has also built educational outreach into the project. He is installing "beacons" on the tops of school buildings in different countries, designed to light up whenever the satellite passes overhead.

"I love books and working with kids in the classroom, but it's nice to give them something more experiential and visual," he said.