

Forbes

The Phrase ‘We Are In This Together’ Takes On Subversive Meaning In Tavares Strachan’s Art

By Brienne Walsh (April 28, 2020)



Rendering of "Together" 2020 Neon, transformers, steel, concrete, tube supports, rich-lite
Variable dimensions Courtesy of the Artist

“We are in this together” is something you say to someone in America right now as a platitude. But watch out, the phrase might make them really, really angry.

Because if six weeks of quarantine has taught us anything as a nation, it’s that some of us have beautiful renovated farmhouses with manicured lawns, and some of us live in public housing with broken elevators, vermin and no outdoor space to speak of, and the idea that we’re all in this together might just be what corporations want you to believe so that you’ll stay calm enough to buy their products.

The artist Tavares Strachan was not thinking about the COVID-19 pandemic when he created “We Are In This Together,” a large-scale site-specific neon sculpture that will be unveiled on the slope beneath the Telluride/Mountain Village gondola in Colorado this summer (pandemic allowing). The sculpture, fifty feet at its widest point, will be raised ten feet off the ground, and will glow with different shades of pink that will lighten and darken as the day passes. Site specific and fabricated in Strachan’s studio, the sculpture is slated to remain on the mountain for 18 months, and will be open year-round. It is part of a larger community outreach project entitled TOGETHER, which Strachan is launching with the Telluride Foundation in collaboration with the Ah Haa School for the Arts and the town of Mountain Village. The programming schedule for TOGETHER has yet to be announced, but likely will include collaborations with local schoolchildren and a podcast.

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Strachan first envisioned the sculpture while he was riding the Telluride/Mountain Village gondola on July 4, 2017. He had spent quite a bit of time in Telluride since first visiting in 2015, and was interested in collaborating with the town on an art initiative. “It was actually kind of magical,” he says of the moment when the idea for the sculpture came to him. “The gondola is an egalitarian space. There is a class divide in Telluride like there is in most places. But the gondola is free, and it connects two neighboring towns — Telluride and Mountain Village. I wanted to work with the gondola as a kind of vehicle, and with this line underneath it.” Strachan’s sculpture is far more subversive than its color and anodyne humanist message might suggest. “I’m from the Bahamas, where you don’t have a lot of access to opportunities,” Strachan told me. “It forces you to think about how different powers are shaped. If you have to say, ‘we’re in this together,’ then I don’t know, are we?”

Strachan has thought deeply about the audience his work will reach. In the towns of Mountain Village and Telluride, the most pressing political issue is affordable housing for workers and year-round residents. Where there are tensions between the two towns, they are local, over the way land was divided historically, and how it is managed. To locals, the message might read as a reminder that their differences are minute. But the locals aren’t the only audience for the piece. In fact, Strachan’s hopes that the sculpture will have global reach, and compel many people to take action on impossibly large, Earth-sized problems such as climate change, food shortages and social justice.

“If we’re in this together, and you agree that actions speak louder than words, then the question is, ‘What are we going to do?’” Strachan told me.

You can laugh at the enormous scope of his aim — can art solve world hunger? —but Strachan’s entire career as an artist has revolved around making the impossible possible. His first gained acclaim for *The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want* (2006), a sculpture that consisted of a 4.5 ton piece of ice from an Arctic glacier, which Strachan built a solar-powered freezer for, and installed in the courtyard of his elementary school in the Bahamas. In 2011, he got the funding to stage “*Seen/Unseen*,” an exhibition in New York City that he did not allow anyone to go see. And in 2018 he launched “*ENOCH*,” a 24-karat canopic jar with the bust of Robert Henry Lawrence Jr., the first African American astronaut selected for a national space program, into the Earth’s orbit on a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket—it’s still up there today, if you have a good telescope.

A monumental neon pink land sculpture in the shape of an aphorism might not seem like it could solve much — one could easily see how it could morph from a social justice project into a backdrop for wedding parties and Instagram influencers. (If we don’t eat the influencers during the upcoming famines.) But the work does uniquely speak to the moment. Maybe seeing it will make people weep. Maybe it will make them homicidal. Or maybe it will be a hot pink curiosity that will foment a hashtag. In the 21st century, making art that can both reach people and actually mean something is a gamble.

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“People rely on artists for all kinds of things, whether it’s revealing something about the world that’s invisible, or providing joy or relief, or for introspection,” he told me. “This work probably needs to go out now for all those reasons.”

Strachan hopes to unveil the sculpture in early July — he notes that viewing the work from the gondola allows for social distancing. If nothing else, a press release for the project suggests that you if have cash to spare, you consider donating it to FEEDING COLORADO, which coordinates food relief programs in Colorado. Like all fifty states in the United States, Colorado is struggling economically right now. In that way, at least, we are all in this together.

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