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In Plain Sight review – Tavares Strachan's baffling, thrilling, uplifting visions

by Adrian Searle (September 8, 2020)



When Elizabeth knelt ... detail from *Every Knee Shall Bow* by Tavares Strachan.
Photograph: Brian Forrest/Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

Marian Goodman Gallery, London

You only get an hour to explore the Bahamian's strange and astonishing worlds, populated by everyone from James Baldwin to Haile Selassie and the Queen. It's not nearly enough.

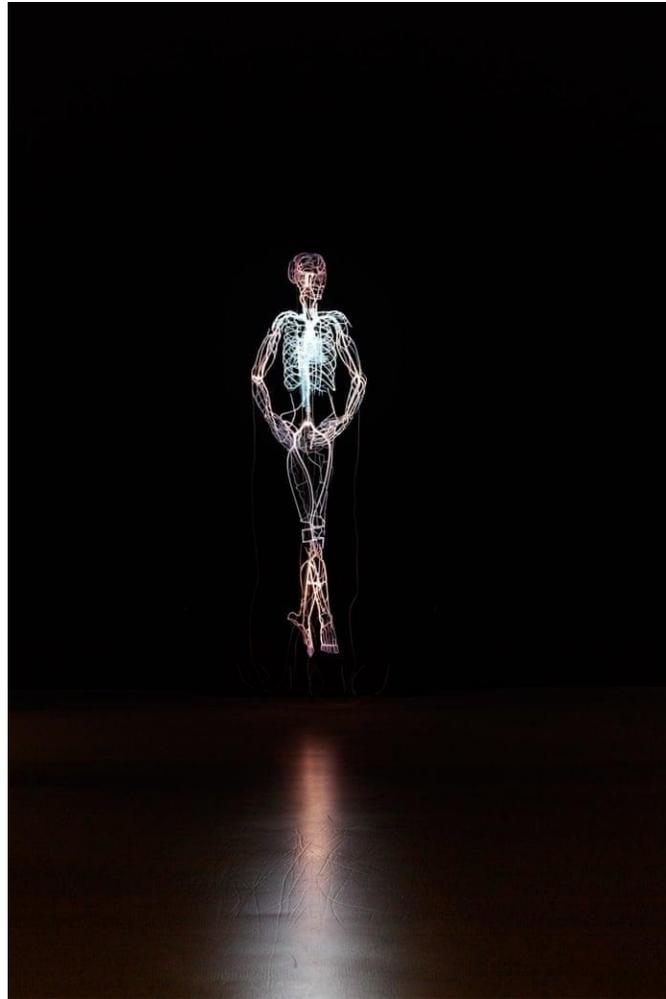
Plunged into darkness, the first thing you see is the shimmering, near-skeletal figure of Cuban prima ballerina Alicia Alonso glowing in the distance. As she became partially blind, Alonso had to retrain herself to dance, and to cue her spatial awareness to her fellow performers on stage. In this dark space, and with social distancing in place, we have to do the same. Alonso's story is fascinating enough in itself, but it also serves as a metaphor for some of the difficulties of *In Plain Sight*, a baffling, complex, not to say deeply complicated exhibition by Bahamian artist Tavares Strachan.

Visitors only have an hour to see it: entry is restricted to on-the-hour slots, for more reasons than just Covid. There is no way that this is time enough. There are paintings – or something like paintings – and there are sculptures. There are things unseen and things that are difficult to look at. There is a great deal

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of reading to do, and if you really want to get to the bottom of all the name-checks and references that keep cropping up, it would be good to have your mobile to hand – except visitors have their phones confiscated at the entrance. It is almost a surprise that they let anyone in at all.

As it is, I had to promise no spoilers in my review, which I am glad to do, as I would like everyone else to experience that sudden, discombobulating thrill I felt when the world suddenly opened up and sucked me down a rabbit hole. There are surprises and astonishments here – moments of uplift, jokes and song. In Plain Sight implies that something is hiding right before our eyes.



Alicia Alonso by Tavares Strachan. Photograph: Lewis Ronald/
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery New York, Paris and London

An insouciant black guy in a felt hat wanders in, hands in pockets, takes turns around the show and sings and rails to himself. I think someone might hustle him out. If he's a guide, he doesn't seem to know much more than we do, but he has his own story to tell. An elegant woman from the 1950s joins him, and a bratty, sassy kid who is all energy and knowingness. Increasingly soulful, operatic, balletic, off-kilter and strange, the three lead us to strange places, other times, other stories.

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Meanwhile, the hi-tech paintings in this darkened gallery blare and roar from the walls. Haile Selassie and Queen Elizabeth look on from one large work called Every Knee Shall Bow (referencing the story that the Queen took the knee when she met the Emperor of Ethiopia, emperors being of a higher rank than mere royalty). Selassie graces the cover of a 1952 edition of Jet magazine, which bears the headline "Africa's Last King", and also flags a very different article called "The Truth about Female Impersonators", which may or may not have something to do with queens. A basketball floats towards the net and a couple of owls upstage Her Majesty.

Strachan clearly loves density, richness, contextual collisions and contaminations. In a nearby work, the US writer James Baldwin stands in the street, with his ever-present cigarette, his face half-masked with a tribal mask in a work titled Before the Fire (referencing his 1963 book The Fire Next Time). This gloriously complex group of images also features footballer Viv Anderson (the first black footballer to play for England), Paul Robeson, Lady Diana, jazz pianist Ahmad Jamal and black polar explorer Matthew Henson, the first man to reach the geographic North Pole in Robert Peary's 1908-9 expedition (though it seems their geography was off, and they missed the pole itself by a few miles).

As well as many other famous and often overlooked black figures, all these personages are conflated by images of star-fields, crossword puzzles and labyrinths, classical statuary, covers of Life magazine, schematics of soccer fields and basketball courts, rockets taking off and much besides. Tavares described this welter of post-pop visual sampling to me as a kind of visual equivalent of dub music. It all erupts in a dark room that has in its centre a mysterious translucent perspex block, in whose murky interior an almost imperceptible figure looms. The title tells us that this is Katherine Johnson, one of the first African American women to work as a Nasa scientist, and whose orbital calculations enabled crewed spaceflights. Attaining her role entailed ignoring the racial and gender barriers that stood in her way.

Objects and images in Tavares work always beget bigger stories, but their visual uproariousness carries you along. The artist's polymathic approach continues in a second, light-filled gallery whose walls are lined with pages from his Encyclopedia of Invisibility, whose 15,000 entries are lifted from the Encyclopedia Britannica, and all of which detail people and places, phenomena and concepts that are either difficult to quantify or to ascertain, or which have in other ways largely fallen by the intellectual and historical wayside.

As much as Strachan strives to illuminate and preserve forgotten or arcane histories, he also collages and graffiti certain passages, or frustrates our reading by superimposing out-of-scale diagrams and images. Just as you begin to read about ghost armies or delve into the life of Azaria Chamberlain, the Australian baby killed by a dingo at Ayers Rock, Strachan snatches you away. This entire room, with the huge bound tome of Strachan's adulterated encyclopedia imprisoned and unreadable under glass at its centre, is a kind of maelstrom. If only there was some quiet place to escape to.

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Distant Relatives ... installation from In Plain Sight. Photograph: Lewis Ronald/
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery New York, Paris and London

Upstairs, some of the characters we have encountered before return, in a series of life-sized plaster portrait busts, called Distant Relatives. Here's Baldwin again, and Viv Anderson, Matthew Henson and Mary Seacole, Nina Simone, Rosetta Tharpe, Robert Smalls and Henrietta Lacks. Each of these dozen white plaster busts face forward, but you can't meet their eyes. Each bust has a tribal mask, from different regions of Africa and from Papua New Guinea, placed before it, a superimposed otherness set between ourselves and their gaze. Along the way, we meet abducted Inuit children and the African American woman whose immortalised cancer cells have been vital to cancer research and unravelling DNA.

Far more than a history lesson, In Plain Sight is filled with strange encounters, unnerving juxtapositions, soulful laments. Daunting as well as uplifting, risky and theatrical, the work is filled with tremors and discontents, and things I promised not to tell.

Tavares Strachan's In Plain Sight is at the Marian Goodman gallery in London until 24 October.