



THE ART NEWSPAPER

*Tavares Strachan:
'I grew up not feeling empowered by art'*

As a new show opens at Marian Goodman Gallery in London, the Bahamian artist explains why he feels schoolchildren, and not the art world, are his natural audience

by Louisa Buck (September 8, 2020)



Tavares Strachan. Photo: Brooke DiDonato; courtesy of the artist.

The sky is not the limit for Tavares Strachan, whose work has involved launching a satellite into space, among other expansive ideas. The Bahamian artist operates at the intersections of art, science, politics and history, and his collaborators have included experts in aeronautics, astronomy, deep-sea exploration and extreme climatology. In 2018 he worked with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's (Lacma) Art + Technology Lab and Elon Musk's SpaceX company to launch a satellite containing a 24-carat-gold casket in the likeness of Robert Henry Lawrence—the first African American astronaut to be selected for any space programme—who died on a training flight in 1967.



The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want (2005), saw Tavares transport a block of ice from Alaska to the Bahamas for a work dedicated to the African American polar explorer Matthew Henson. Photo: Chris Hoover

Another forgotten historical figure was celebrated in 2006 in Strachan's breakthrough work *The Distance between What We Have and What We Want*, which referenced the achievements of the African American polar explorer Matthew Henson in a project that involved shipping a 4.5 ton cube of ice from the Alaskan Arctic to be displayed in Nassau in a solar-powered freezer chamber. Henson was also central to Strachan's multimedia installation for the first Bahamas Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2013 and the explorer went on to be one of the many entries in his *Encyclopedia of Invisibility*, begun in 2018, which includes mixed-media installations and a 2,400-page text devoted to marginalised and overlooked histories.

Henson is yet again a point of departure for Strachan's first major UK solo exhibition at Marian Goodman Gallery in London this month, which brings together past and new works in a series of site-specific installations called *In Plain Sight*.

The Art Newspaper: Your new show at Marian Goodman is billed as being immersive with characteristics of experimental theatre. What can we expect?

Tavares Strachan: I wanted to build something that was going to engulf the viewer. You will become a part of it as part of an empowerment process. Visually, I grew up not feeling empowered by looking at a lot of art and now, as a semi-grown-up, it's nice to think about prefacing the power of the audience as a part of building an experience. There are going to be many surprising directed and interactive elements: it's a new departure for me and I'm super-excited about it. But it's important to be careful about how I discuss it at this stage: my goal is not to ruin the experience for you.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



Tavares Strachan's *Every Knee Shall Bow* (2020).
Photo © Jurate Veceraite, courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

The show's point of departure is the life and work of Matthew Henson. Why does he continue to be such a rich subject for you?

Recently I made this encyclopedia, the *Encyclopedia Invisibility*, and the inspiration was sparked by Matthew Henson and his story. What became apparent to me was that there is this whole world of invisibility that was in plain sight—and that's the title of the Goodman show. The reason why it is such rich material is because it doesn't stop opening itself up. What's exciting about it for me is that it becomes metaphor—it goes from being matter of fact into a piece of poetry—and that's why I keep going back into it. I think of my creative processes as being about a kind of map-making, in the sense that if you took my existence as someone who has been transported from the African continent, maybe four, five, six generations before, and you don't tell me my story—how I ended up where I am, what are the cultural conditions by which my great-great-great-grandfather, five generations, six generations before me, lived?—then I'm kind of lost, right? So the creative process is about redrawing some of those maps.

You've talked about the influence of growing up in the Bahamas and the effect of being on an island and looking out to far horizons, which in your work has then gone on to take you as far afield as the North Pole and outer space.

Growing up I didn't feel like I belonged in a creative field that had this very Eurocentric tradition. And so a huge part of the creative process was working through the anxieties and limitations of that, working through a system that generally has struggled with being inclusive, and trying to elbow and find room within that. Working as an artist and thinking about limitation as materiality—thinking about the edges of the island as a way to process and manage creative practice—has been a very important survival skill. I think the idea that we can shift modalities of communication and language structures is a really important skill for the future. But in a moment where we're all identifying how we're different and all these inequities, it's also important for us to keep track of how we're similar



In 2018, a joint project with Lacma and SpaceX launched a satellite containing a gold casket commemorating the first African American astronaut. Courtesy of Tavares Strachan

You've worked with major organisations within the art world and beyond, including Massachusetts Institute of Technology, SpaceX and the Allen Institute. Yet you also make a point of working with schoolchildren.

For all people in any creative process, the question is equally tricky: who is your audience? I think the way I answer the question is that my audience are these schoolchildren because a) I think they're me and I'm them; and b) I think how I define an audience has more to do with the activity of the group of people that I'm having a conversation with, which in most people's imaginations is a big group. But it could be a classroom, it could be five people. And then that conversation becomes the artwork, and everybody else gets to participate in that; they watch the conversation happen. So my audience can be really small—the idea that you need to have this massive, massive audience is, I think, a misnomer. You can make work for your grandfather, right? That's your audience. And then the rest of the consuming world can watch that conversation happen and you can be really precise about what you're trying to say to the world. This, for me, is a very important distinction.

You also work within the upper levels of the art world. You've shown in the most important biennials, and in major international institutions and museums. You're not just doing projects with kids in elementary school.

I'm not making it for that audience. They just happened to be watching me have that conversation with kids.

So would you say that your main aim is to communicate with younger generations and non-art audiences?

Yes. It's a conversation that I'm having that hopefully the art world can participate in, but it's not who I'm making it for. I am obviously buttressing the kind of qualification and language structures with that of the art world, and those histories of image-making or picture-making, or the traditions of photography or film or painting. So I'm using those languages but to communicate specifically with this very targeted audience. And then when you see these words in these international locations, you're watching that conversation. You're not watching me trying to talk to you; you're peeking in on a private conversation.

How do you feel about your long-standing concerns being thrown into sharp relief by the recent protests that followed the death of George Floyd?

If you ask the average person who is familiar with police brutality about this, their response will probably be that there's just as much as there was before. It's just that people are seeing it now. And so for me, for whatever reason, people are now just recognising the subjects that I have been interested in over a 20- or 30-year project, and there are advantages and disadvantages to that.



Tavares Strachan's *I am* (2017). Courtesy of the artist and Desert X

Three key works

The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want (2006)

The work that first put Strachan on the international art world map involved transporting a 4.5 ton block of ice via FedEx from the Alaskan Arctic to the Bahamas. Here it was displayed in a solar-powered freezer in the courtyard of Tavares's former elementary school in Nassau. This logistical and technical feat referenced notions of displacement and interdependency, both environmental and cultural, as well as drawing attention to the story of the overlooked African American polar explorer Matthew Henson. It also marked a personal as well as a professional turning point for Strachan. "I was struggling with my own anxiety about who I was and for a long time I felt insecure about the things that I was naturally interested in because they didn't fit within the popular narrative about what artists from my region or of African American descent should be interested in and making," he says. "So for me it was a little bit like a coming-out party: this is who I am and this is how I'm going to think about the world and make things happen."

ENOCH (2018)

ENOCH was created in collaboration with Lacma's Art + Technology Lab and centred around the development and launch into space of a satellite containing a 24-carat-gold bust dedicated to Robert Henry Lawrence Jr, the first African American astronaut to be selected for any national space program, who died in a supersonic jet crash before ever going to space. The satellite was launched on a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket and will continue to circle the Earth for seven years. "It is one of the more introspective emotional works because it talks about the value of time and the value of ideas. It's a homage to the human spirit," says Strachan, who sees Lawrence as "a hero character who has gone so far unseen and unrecognised." By launching Lawrence's image into space Tavares aims "to try and reclaim his narrative and construct it in a way which is about positive motion – to put him in space tells the story of how history is not sealed."

I am (2017)

A neon installation created by inserting neon tubes along the inside of the perimeters of 290 variously shaped craters dug into a 100 000 square feet area of desert outside Palm Springs, California. From the ground the arrangement of these variously shaped craters and their internal lights appears abstract but from the air they can be seen to spell out the exploded phrase, "I am". At the time, Strachan stated that the work "explores the relationship between human beings and their environment. Borrowing from Vedic Philosophy, the phrase 'I am' is to identify oneself with the universe and/or ultimate reality". But now he feels the reality of Covid 19 gives *I am* a new retrospective meaning. "In the context of the new social order and the new reality of being distant I think it's interesting to think about that work as a commentary on or embodiment of the individual versus the group, and the importance of this relationship at this particular moment."

Represented by: Marian Goodman Gallery, London and New York

Tavares Strachan, IN PLAIN SIGHT, Marian Goodman Gallery, London, 8 September-24 October