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A new LACMA exhibit uses art and science to unlock hidden histories

by Tyrone Beason (October 17, 2025)



"The Day Tomorrow Began," Tavares Strachan's show at LACMA, reflects his passion for science as well as his desire to showcase inspiring figures from Africa and the Black diaspora. Here, he stands in field of rice grass next to ceramic sculptures honoring reggae singer Rita Marley, Bob Marley's widow (foreground), and Andrea Motley Crabtree (left, with diving helmet), the first Black woman deep-sea diver in the U.S. military.
(Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

- Artist Tavares Strachan's LACMA exhibit, "The Day Tomorrow Began," showcases his passions for science, exploration and the histories of marginalized people.
- For example, to honor America's first Black astronaut, Robert Henry Lawrence Jr., Strachan blasted a satellite with Lawrence's likeness on it into orbit.
- In this exhibit, he depicts Lawrence in argon trapped in electrified tubes shaped to resemble the human circulatory system.

Tavares Strachan loves to blur the lines that separate art, science and historical reckoning — as well as past, present and future.

A native of Nassau, Bahamas, he once carved out a 4.5-ton block of ice in the Alaskan Arctic, had it FedEx'ed to the island nation and displayed it in a solar-powered freezer — an extreme commentary on climate change, displacement and interconnectedness.

Strachan became the first Bahamian to visit the North Pole to understand the harsh conditions that in 1909 greeted Matthew Henson — the Black explorer who accompanied Cmdr. Robert Peary on polar expeditions and was likely the first human to ever stand on top of the world. His feat went unacknowledged for years because he was Black.



This piece from Tavares Strachan's "Inner Elder" series depicts a crowned Nina Simone as the Queen of Sheba.
(Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

In another project, Strachan honored America's first Black astronaut, Robert Henry Lawrence Jr. He died in a plane crash while training a test pilot in 1968 before he could take part in any space mission. So Strachan sent a replica of an artwork inspired by Lawrence into orbit on a SpaceX rocket. Now a collection of Strachan's work is on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art for his first museum show in the city, titled "The Day Tomorrow Began."

The multisensory exhibition showcases Strachan's ability to translate his lifelong passion for scientific inquiry and boundary-pushing adventures into pieces that make you question everything you thought you understood about human progress — all while forcing you to see how Black achievements so easily get written out of the history books.

"The pieces of this particular exhibition that I think may hit people are when they start making connections on their own — the synapses start to fire," the 45-year-old artist said during a recent tour of his show. "You start to tie in, for example, the relationships between this polar explorer Matthew Henson and Robert Henry Lawrence. And then you start to think about the earlier explorers who left the African continent and this pioneering spirit that is a part of what it means to be African that is oftentimes not articulated or discussed."

On view until March 29, "The Day Tomorrow Begins" is both whimsical and serious. There is a lot to take in: illustrations and diagrams, displays of traditional African hairstyles, mohair collages made jointly with South African weavers, commemorative ceramics, a field of rice grass whose strawlike scent is meant to pique olfactory memories.

A glassmaker, Strachan covers a wall with two neon signs that spell out quotes by James Baldwin, whose words appear upright, and Mark Twain, whose words appear upside down — in a nod both to the wonders of chemistry and the power of the pen to dissect issues of identity. In another soaring room, dramatic bronze sculptures flip the script on the triumphs of Western civilization — placing the focus on the oppressed.

One piece depicts the moon, its surface pockmarked by craters. Resting on its north pole is a bust of Henson. Protruding from the moon's south pole is an upside down bust of Peary. Fitting for an artist who once put himself through the physical rigors of cosmonaut training, the show feels like a dialogue between opposing forces — boundlessness and constraint, presence and absence.

Strachan, who lives in New York, said his fascination with science and its hidden histories started while growing up as a curious and “very stubborn” kid in Nassau.

He was about 12 when his family bought the first set of encyclopedias that he can remember. But something was off: few entries featured notable figures who looked like him.



Tavares Strachan’s show at LACMA includes a room of whimsical ceramic sculptures from his “Inner Elder” series that are positioned in a field of fragrant rice grass. (Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

“I think this was my first peek into social science,” Strachan said. “Obviously, you can’t collect all of this material without making decisions — you’re deciding what’s seen and what’s unseen. It started to get me going on these questions of visibility and invisibility.”

Strachan started to ponder his place in the ecosystem — and the universe beyond.

Tired of wearing the clothes that his seamstress mother made for him, Strachan raised money for shopping by working on a fishing boat, spending weeks at a time at sea.

At night, far from shore, more stars flickered than he’d ever noticed, and he was awestruck by the way phosphorescent creatures set the waves aglow.

Strachan learned to navigate by tracking the movements of celestial bodies and hunt fish by reading the currents, building on the ancient knowledge his elders handed down.

Up until then, his 700-island archipelago had felt like the center of the world. Now his curiosity was a universe of possibilities.

But while his mind raced across the heavens, Strachan couldn’t stop thinking about the voids that made written accounts of pioneering feats and extraordinary voyages on Earth seem incomplete.

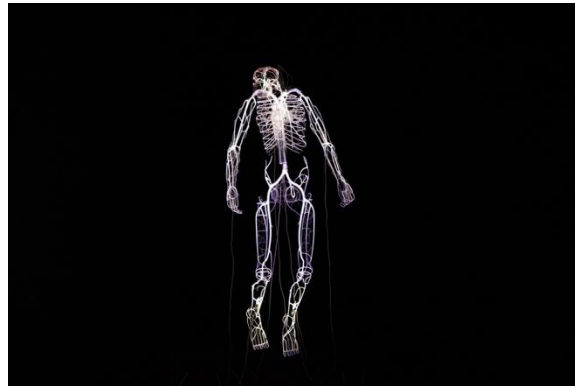
Charles Darwin is a household name, but how many people know that the world’s most famous naturalist learned taxidermy from John Edmonstone, a formerly enslaved Black Briton who owned a bird-stuffing shop in Edinburgh, Scotland?

Strachan was in his 20s when he stumbled upon Henson’s achievement.

“Science — that’s the place where knowledge is produced, and meaning,” exhibition curator Diana Nawi said. “How do we know what we know? I think that’s fundamentally what [Strachan]’s asking.”

Nawi said Strachan’s projects resist the “calcification of history,” which she describes as the process in which a dominant group reinforces narratives that glorify themselves while ignoring or actively erasing the contributions of others.

“Histories are tools of power,” Nawi said. “How do you take that power for different people and different ideas, but also, how do you undo the singular concept of that power?”



In Tavares Strachan’s LACMA show, stories of racial uplift and groundbreaking achievements take center stage. This illuminated piece uses glass, argon and electrodes to evoke the spirit of America’s first Black astronaut, Robert Henry Lawrence Jr., who died in a plane crash before he could take part in a space mission. (Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

“In 2020 ... it was the toppling of monuments, for instance,” Nawi said, referring to the decommissioning of statues that celebrate the Confederacy in the wake of George Floyd’s murder.

“History is ripe for the retelling and the retaking,” Nawi said.

That sentiment has many meanings in the current moment.

Some of those removed monuments have been transformed into new artworks that will be on view in the show “Monuments,” at MOCA Geffen and the Brick from Oct. 23 to May 3. At the same time, the Trump administration has attacked public displays of factual but less-flattering aspects of U.S. history as too “woke.”

Strachan’s work also suggests there is power in acts of poetic justice.

Inside one darkened room in the show, a life-size, glass “portrait” of the astronaut Lawrence appears to be levitating as if free from gravitational forces. His frame is lit from within, head-to-toe, by argon trapped in electrified tubes shaped to resemble the human circulatory system, making his soul visible.

America’s first Black astronaut never got to transcend Earth’s atmosphere.



Tavares Strachan poses with his installation "Six Thousand Years," which is made up of 2,000 panels from his "Encyclopedia of Invisibility." The leather-bound tome contains 17,000 entries that the artist wrote to bring attention to little-known facts and Black trailblazers.
(Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

By fashioning this portrait of Lawrence to capture his spirit, and by shooting a satellite honoring Lawrence into orbit, Strachan wanted to metaphorically help him achieve that goal.

"For me it's important to ensure that when someone has done something incredible, that the level of storytelling is aligned with the nature of the act, hence the audacity of putting an object into space and trying to get his energy back into the cosmos," Strachan said.

"But also, it's about having a 10-year-old walk in and be just amazed by the technical feat of creating this glass object."