



Projects & Personalities

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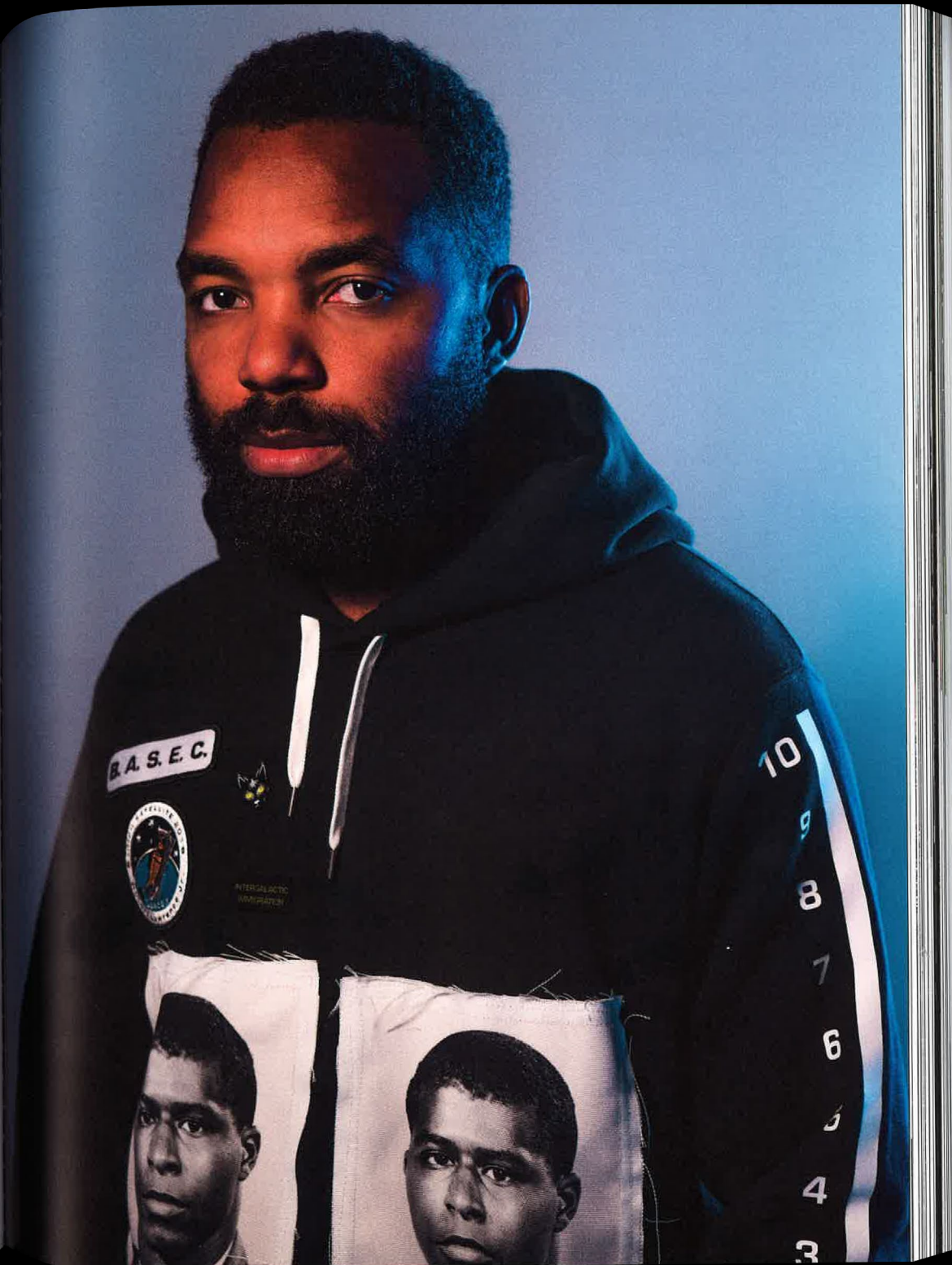
Words by Marcus Civin

## TAVARES STRACHAN: PROTESTING FOR GOODNESS' SAKE

In his artistic practice, Tavares Strachan has a tendency to synthesise multifarious points of view on the cultural dynamics of scientific knowledge. It is within his thematic remit to embrace aeronautics, astronomy, deep-sea exploration, and extreme climatology, to mention only a smattering. His rather monumental allegories recount cultural displacement, human aspiration, and mortal limitation. His lexicon reveals an effort to mobilise community and promote societal change. The essence of protest is inherent.

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Tavares Strachan, portrait: Brooke DiDonato



Tavares Strachan

Two neon signs are suspended above the entrance to the Barclays Center subway station, which is situated on a plaza in downtown Brooklyn, the same plaza that overflowed with protestors after Minneapolis police murdered George Floyd. Last October, Bahamian-born New York-based artist Tavares Strachan installed *You belong here* and *We belong here*. The artwork is the result of three years of planning and was commissioned by Joe and Clara Tsai, who run the Barclays Arena. In these sweeping phrases, teardrop-shapes cap the “b” and the “h”. The bottom of the “g” is long and leans far forward, even as it also reaches back. This fluid script evolved from the calligraphic style that the 42-year-old artist used as a high schooler back in the Bahamas. It has an antiquated feel, recalling how a cartographer would pen names by hand, with a flourish. Yet, in the glass-fronted Barclays Center, reflections of Strachan’s neons skew and mix with the reflections of advertisements and other such evidence of a fast-gentrifying Brooklyn. They mark space in a loud, competitive, contested, and sometimes uncaring landscape.

I met with Strachan at his studio across the river in Manhattan, coincidentally very near another arena, Madison Square Garden. Strachan is wearing a sweatshirt from his clothing label Bahamas Air and Sea Exploration Center (BASEC). On the front of the sweatshirt is an image of Matthew Henson, a largely uncredited early 20th-century Black explorer. Strachan has many projects in progress, including one this coming May, a solo exhibition uptown at the Marian Goodman Gallery. Printouts are piling up around a large-scale photo printer, and paintings are in various states of drying or packing. An assistant cracks open a mould; others buzz about on the phone. But Strachan is calm and confident. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. In his time,

this artist has launched a satellite, trained as a cosmonaut, and brought 40 children to Venice to sing when he represented the Bahamas at the Venice Biennale.

**For such a long time, Black folks could be objects of study. We could be analysed, experimented on, manipulated for external purposes... but we couldn’t actually be bodies of knowledge.**

Over tea, he speaks in the riveting equivalent of vast strides. He describes how he doesn’t feel comfortable having a practice that is solely rooted in the art world, and how he wants to know more about the ways communities might thrive collectively. He talks about pan-Africanism and Black solidarity in the Caribbean. “We all came on ships from Africa,” he remarks, “the ships just landed in different places.” He also evokes Marcus Garvey. “It’s 1918,” he says, “and this radical Jamaican dude comes to you, and he’s like, ‘We’re gonna build this shipping line.’ And you’re like, ‘Excuse me?’ And he’s like, ‘Yeah, we’re gonna do this.’ Then he raises millions of dollars.” Strachan proposes that Garvey was a conceptual artist. The means he employed were speeches, parades, organisation-building, business, and demonstrations. His ideas had powerfully practical dimensions, even if he made mistakes and significant enemies, even if he didn’t always succeed.

Strachan references his massive publication project, *The Encyclopedia of Invisibility* (2018), while

directing my attention to a wall in the studio that was hung – salon style – with large paintings. The hard-bound encyclopaedia is a point of genesis and a continual source of material for Strachan. It includes thousands of entries he collected that focus on historically marginalised and overlooked individuals and events. “These are encyclopaedia paintings,” he affirms, “paintings about invisibility and the chronicling of invisibility in history to create a poem.”

The paintings often have deliberate political as well as poetic resonance. For example, a new painting titled *Barbara Jordan* (2021) shows the former Texas Senator sitting at a table with a glass of water looking displeased and poised for an argument. To her left are enlargements of two Haitian postage stamps. Behind her, a pair of Horus figures that appear to walk through an opening in a dense starscape. Overlaid on top of these falcon-headed Egyptian gods is a diagram of a contemporary lacrosse field. In the middle of the composition, a cloud that might be suggesting a rocket blast, uncertainty, a coming storm, or time travel.

In 1976, Barbara Jordan was the first Black woman to address the U.S. Democratic National Convention. What she observed then rings true today. Speaking for the citizens at large, she said to the attendees of the convention: “We are a people in a quandary about the present. We are a people in search of our future. We are a people in search of a national community.” Jordan is not exactly invisible, but she’s not a household name either. She belongs here – with us, in our thoughts, lexicons, protests, and firmaments. And we belong with her, with her soaring imagination and voice. Perhaps she is still invisible, because, despite her contributions, we don’t fully know her; we haven’t travelled with her and she has never been visible enough.

*We belong here*, 2021 / Neon installation at Barclays Center, Brooklyn, New York, courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Tavares Strachan, photo: Jurate Yezeraite

