

Projects & Personalities
92
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.



92 DAMN* - Marcus Civin

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 could be objects artwork is the result of three years of planning and was commissioned by Joe and Clara Tsai, who run the be analysed. 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 fying 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, cochan 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 large-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, 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 of study. We could experimented on. manipulated for external purposes... but we couldn't actually be bodies of knowledge.

Over tea, he speaks in the riveting

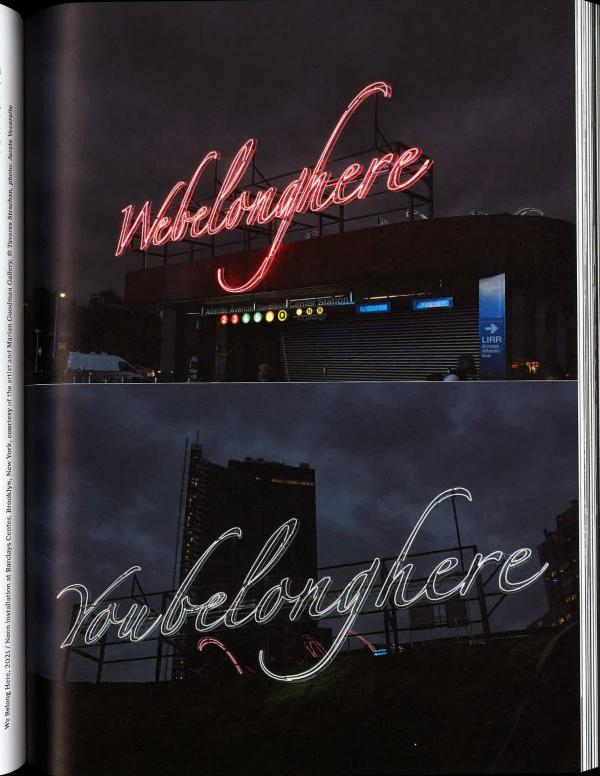
equivalent of vast strides. He describes how he doesn't feel comfortable having a practice that is solely rooted in the art world, and how he other such evidence of a fast-gentri- wants to know more about the ways communities might thrive collectively. He talks about pan-Africanism and Black solidarity in the Caribbean. "We all came on ships from Africa," he remarks, "the ships just landed in different places." He also incidentally very near another are- evokes Marcus Garvey. "It's 1918," na, Madison Square Garden. Stra- 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 ly uncredited early 20th-century 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 paintings are in various states 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.



94 DAMN° - Marcus Civin

Strachan points to works involving so much pouring of paint that it obscures the encyclopaedic imagery: "This work here is a new body of work. It is what I call The Galaxy Series, based on the idea of stargazing. There is a lot of paint over the historical narratives and characters. For me, these are a reference to my experience as a kid on the island, looking at the stars and imagining what is real behind the stars."

Strachan talks about the images and figures in his paintings like old friends - African art, the archival JET magazine covers, galactic-minded musicians, former Haitian Emperor Haile Selassie, flamingos from the Bahamas, and diagrams for games. About the games, he explains, "We're not gonna solve any of the issues of the world without getting playful." And then he tells me he doesn't want to reveal too much about the upcoming Marian Goodman show, but that it will include these collaged paintings, as well as installation, sculpture, and performance. It will be about: music, Marcus Garvey, his court trials, court trials in general (as performances), and Roman Emperor Septimius Severus, who was Black. "The whole premise of the exhibition is: awakening," Strachan reveals. "It is also a reflection of the George Floyd murder, which awakened everyone, to a certain extent. It was the murder that changed the world."

In a public discussion with Strachan at Atlanta's Nasher Sculpture Center last November, poet Alysia Nicole Harris observed: "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." Strachan embodies knowledge. He writes history, proposing possibilities and establishing signposts that might sustain any protest about dehumanisation and the lack of imagination. In his

96 DAMN° - Marcus Civin

Field of Play 10 YDS. END mariangoodman.com isolatedlabs.com

wide field of vision, he submits that the past is in our bones and that protest involves puzzling together and questioning declarations of historical certainty and identity. You belong here and We belong here, as expressed in Strachan's Brooklyn neons, are open and abstract statements. They're welcoming and inviting, likely even inspiring. But Strachan means for them to be troubling too. "Why do we have to affirm 'belonging'? Why do we need to convince people of who and where we are? I might not belong. You might not belong. Everything might not fit together nicely. Some things are unmappable."

While speaking with Strachan, I suddenly become nervous. What if we write history with good intentions, with curiosity, but are sceptical of established narratives, fueled by what feels right and the desire to include what was excluded, but still make mistakes? Strachan assures me that mistakes are OK. "It's important for us to think about history as malleable. You just write it. Wrong is a part of it. It's like losing in sports. So, you missed a shot. OK. Try again."

Thinking about the future, then, and letting my eyes and mind linger among Strachan's many celestial images, I ask: "Do you think, at some point, human beings will only live in space or will space just be a part of the equation?" To which Strachan responds: "I think space will just be a part of the equation. We have to figure out how to talk to each other on Earth." And then he asks: "Are we going to take the same arguments to space?" <

res in it. it. ing. it. it. is. it. is

Marcus Civin - DAMN° 97