

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

ELEPHANT

Autumn 2020

It's a Kind of Magic

Tavares Strachan

“Physically, the work has a certain awe-inspiring element.” Tavares Strachan has transported a 2.5-tonne block of ice from the Arctic Circle to the Bahamas, subjected himself to 16 units of G-force, and now has plans to install a neon of monumental scale in Telluride, Colorado. The artist speaks with Isis Davis-Marks from his New York studio.

140 Encounters

NEW YORK PARIS LONDON

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COURTESY THE ARTIST, A SERIES OF GLASS ROCKETTS BUILT FROM LOCALLY PRODUCED GLASS, WERE LAUNCHED INTO THE SKY USING LOCAL SUGARCANE FUEL AS A PROPELLANT. THIS WAS ONE OF THE FIRST MISSIONS OF BASEC, THE BAHAMAS AEROSPACE AND SEA EXPLORATION CENTER

Previous pages
Portrait by Donald Stahl

This page
Blast Off, 2008–09
Glass, Bahamas sugar
fuel cell
Variable dimensions

Opposite page
*The Distance Between What
We Have and What We Want*,
2005–06
Variable dimensions

Tavares Strachan's art is not just visually stunning, it is also smart. The Bahamas-born artist, who now practises between New York City and Nassau, triggers multiple senses with his work—such as sight, sound and touch—and the viewer is often required to become completely immersed in his pieces in order to fully appreciate them. In the US art world, we frequently find ourselves staring at white pictures on white walls, and don't always think of fine art as transcendent or all-consuming. We look at placards that try to dissect the work systematically, and it is all served up on a sterile platter. In contrast, Strachan asks his viewers more complicated questions about the relationship between humans and physical space, as well as our impact on the environment, and he often uses unexpected materials to do so.

For *The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want* (2005–06), Strachan shipped a 2.5-tonne block of ice from the Arctic Circle to the Bahamas. It remained frozen because it was kept in a refrigeration unit. It is a marvel of modern technological and transportational development that a slice of the North Pole is able to exist in such a warm climate. Many of Strachan's pieces ask us to think about connections between place, science and magic in important ways.

"For me, the word is alchemical, this kind of juxtaposition between scientific rigor and magic," Strachan tells me during an interview over Zoom. He is sitting in his New York studio, and I am sitting in a basement thousands of miles away. "There are things that you can explain thoroughly, and then things that just wow you. Physically, the work has a certain awe-inspiring element. Science is luscious in that way for me."

I pause when Strachan says that word: luscious. It feels rich, tactile and mystical, which aren't things that are often associated with science. To me, it has always felt cold and sterile, but in this moment he challenges my understanding of it, underscoring the awesome nature of scientific discovery. In his work, Strachan considers people's experiences of the discipline in a physical, and more personal, way. For his project *Orthostatic Tolerance* (2010) he explored the stress experienced by astronauts and divers from changes in atmospheric pressure. He underwent medical tests and submitted himself to 16 units of G-force, recording his facial expressions as he did so.

When I ask Strachan how he initially became interested in science and the environment, he says, "I think there



COURTESY THE ARTIST. PHOTO BY CHRIS HOOVER

was a certain level of disobedience that was required. You know, when you're a kid on an island of 250,000 people, you have to stay in your lane. I wasn't really good at that," he chuckles for a second, and then continues. "I'm learning. There was this kind of rich poetry coming out of the Caribbean; all of these artists coming out of Haiti and Cuba—painters. I was just generally interested in science and nature. I was always in gardens and stuff like that as a young boy, like eight or nine. But I also felt that science had a certain authority and weight to it. I felt like scientists were modern-day preachers or something. They had this level of religiosity, in the sense that once they said something, it was the truth. I really love that."

Strachan explores his concepts in a nuanced way through both natural and technological materials, using supplies such as light. In one of his ongoing projects, *We Are in This Together* (2020), the artist uses bright-pink neon lights, spelling out the artwork's title, to convey a message about community and societal change. He plans on placing the large-scale sculpture in Telluride, Colorado. He has spent a significant amount of time there and the phrase relates to local issues. It has been evoked by many people in the public eye, especially politicians, in the recent past. He is interested in language's powerful ability to shape political discourse. It is worth noting that, although the sculpture does re-

quire some electrical power, neon is very energy efficient.

"There's always been this appreciation and love for materiality but also phenomenology, like watching light, playing around with light, being obsessed with it. And that's no different from being a kid on an island that is mostly light," Strachan tells me. "Specifically, when you're in the solstice months on an island, and you're near the water, and everything's reflected. There's a really deep fascination with light... The sun is a kind of undervalued resource. It's symbolic. It also has to do with understanding the ocean," he continues. "For so many artists, light is the thing that they add to the work at the end of it. For me, it is the thing that I begin with."

This connection between light, nature and island life runs deep. It speaks to something beyond materiality, to questions of spirituality and language that are unique to Caribbean culture. Black artists are often treated as a singular unit, and creative discourse tends to ignore the cultural distinctions between artists who hail from the Caribbean, the American South or the African subcontinent. Many aspects of Strachan's work pay homage to his Caribbean upbringing because his pieces are so grounded in place.

"I think one of the things that we're learning now is that not everyone can be Black in the way that everyone else wants them to be," Strachan says, explaining the role that race and culture play in his

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COURTESY THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART PHOTOGRAPH BY WING POOD

“When you’re a kid on an island of 250,000 people, you have to stay in your lane. I wasn’t really good at that”

work. “We can agree on the issues, but the methods are always up to the individuals. I was always kind of mindful of that, and precise about not being a generalist in how I was dealing with the world. There are tons of things about my experience that probably relate to yours,” he makes a gesture towards me, before continuing. “But there are tons of things that don’t. I think that that’s where the work is, it’s in between that space. For me, a huge part of this moment is not just providing opportunity for artists of colour but also decolonising the language structure in which these artists are being written and talked about. This is just as problematic as not giving opportunities. If you give someone an opportunity and say, ‘You’re just like this other [artist],’ they can say, ‘Actually, I think you are off base’. If you don’t have these conversations in a decolonised structure, the game is rigged against you, no matter what you say.”

Some of Strachan’s pieces raise explicit questions about culture and history, about what we remember and what we don’t. In *Seeing Is Forgetting the Thing That You Saw* (2015), he focused on Rosalind Franklin, a historically overlooked female scientist who contributed to the discovery of the double-helix structure of DNA. Written histories can often neglect narratives about women or people of colour, and much of Strachan’s work carefully deconstructs commonly known historical narratives.

He will continue to explore these subjects in an upcoming exhibition, *In Plain Sight*, at Marian Goodman Gallery

in London. The show is “more of an immersive experience, and it touches on this book project called the *Encyclopedia of Invisibility* as a kind of anchor point. We know what things are based on our current research systems, so encyclopedias are these knowledge-based houses,” Strachan tells me. “I was curious as to what things don’t get included: where do they go? What happens when you put them in one place and what does that mean? The exhibition is an examination of what happens when some of the things become visible that are more or less invisible, or not necessarily prioritised as a part of the zeitgeist.”

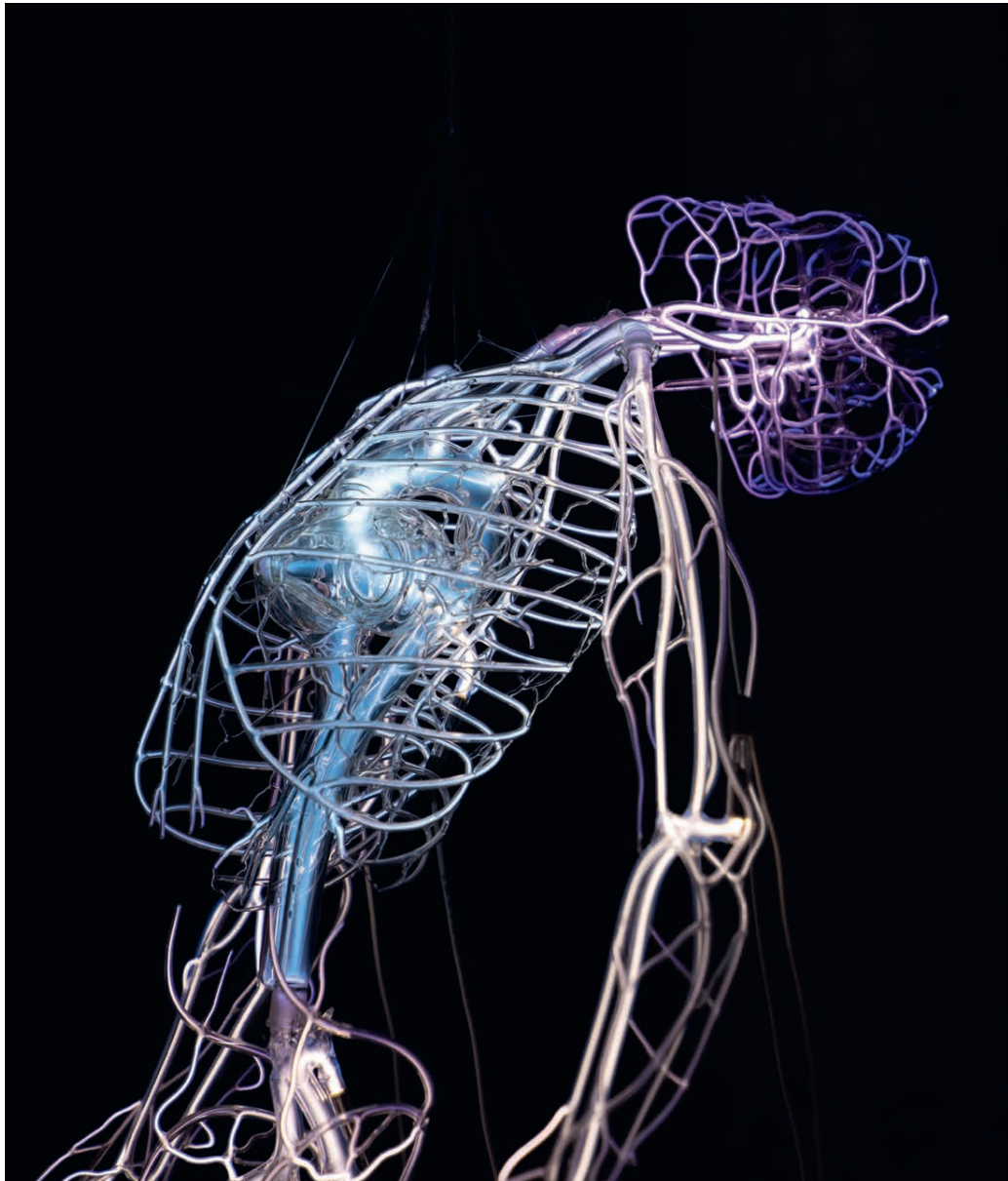
“In Plain Sight” runs until 24 October at Marian Goodman Gallery, London

Previous pages
In Broad Daylight, 2018
1,160.8 x 309.9 x 1.2 cm
Orange neon, transformers

Opposite page
Robert, 2018
Blue neon, purple neon,
Pyrex, transformers, MDF box,
Dimensions variable,
58th International Art
Exhibition – La Biennale di
Venezia, *May You Live in
Interesting Times*

Following pages, left
Every Knee Shall Bow, 2020
Oil, enamel and pigment
on acrylic
Two panels, each panel
122.9 x 243.8 x 5.8 cm
Total Dimensions:
243.8 x 243.8 x 5.8 cm

Following pages, right
Touch the Stars, 2020
Oil, enamel and pigment
on acrylic
Two panels, each panel
122.9 x 243.8 x 5.8 cm
Total Dimensions:
243.8 x 243.8 x 5.8 cm



COURTESY THE ARTIST PHOTO AND VIDEO BY ANDREA DALCÔE NEONLAURO

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