



THE BROOKLYN RAIL

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FEATURE INTERVIEWS WITH  
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# TAVARES STRACHAN with Amanda Gluibizzi

Tavares Strachan's current exhibition at Marian Goodman's New York gallery leads its viewers through experiences that refute passive contemplation. Installed in several interlocking rooms, *The Awakening* continues Strachan's project of uncovering the lives and achievements of forgotten—in his words, “invisible”—people that Western history books regularly overlook. The major character here is Marcus Garvey, an early 20th-century orator and entrepreneur, but figures such as United States congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, and the astronaut Robert Henry Lawrence Jr. also make appearances, either directly by being represented by Strachan in paint or objects or obliquely through suggestive iconography such as depictions of the night sky.

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Marian Goodman Gallery  
Tavares Strachan: *The Awakening*  
May 6 – June 11, 2022

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Viewers travel through space and time in the installation in the company of guides and make their ways through performance, song, and heavily weighted beaded curtains. The ambient lighting from bright white to dark reminds us of the cycle of a day, as the exhibition's press release suggests, but it is also reminiscent of the connections made in our brains' synapses. Those firings hop from stimulus to stimulus, image to image, and if we don't keep them flexible—by engaging in difficult, critical thinking—they can develop ruts, the channels of habit. Strachan's project means to break us of our easy habits and comfortable conventions, to challenge us to learn and think and question why we are taught what we are. I spoke with Tavares Strachan on May 9, 2022, to uncover the fascination of Junkanoo, the intentionality of complexity, and the elegant efficacy of an underhand free-throw (as well as the aesthetic commitment that prompts us to shoot overhead). This interview is an edited and condensed version of our conversation.

**AMANDA GLUIBIZZI (RAIL):** One of the things that you suggested to me was that you were thinking a lot about learning and unlearning with this exhibition. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**TAVARES STRACHAN (T. S.):** Having grown up in Nassau, in the Bahamas, one of the things that I remember from my childhood was that so much of creative practice, and community practice, was delivered in a way that wasn't siloed. And one of the things that I learned in my high-powered, American, Western education was how to segregate between genres. In that process of segregating between genres, I kind of forgot about all the local and Indigenous knowledge that I already acquired from being a kid. One example of that is an event called Junkanoo, a real hybrid of poetry and history and storytelling and dance and food. And there's no real hierarchy. I think I've learned, in the process of being a student in America, about all these histories but in essence neglected, to some extent, this knowledge that I had learned since I was a kid.

**RAIL** When you're thinking about this hybrid practice, how does something begin for you then? Is it just a cacophony and you start pulling things out that are interesting to you? Or does it start with a single image, and then you start building from that?

T. S. Yeah, I think it's a combination of all those things, really. I think narrative is significant and important to me. And I think most of the narratives that really struck me were about history or were narratives that I received in ways that were abstract, so they were kind of nonlinear narratives that I pulled from, for example, music. You know, music was a huge inspiration to me

growing up, I grew up listening to a lot of reggae music, a lot of dancehall, dub. If you listen to that music, I think one of the things you realize is that those particular artists, those legendary artists who were making that music in the '70s and '80s, and even to some degree in the '60s, were really good at provoking you to go on your own journey with the information that they were giving you in the music. For me, one of the things about artistic practice is not about providing some solution, but instead provoking curiosity about some things that you should find on your own and not be led to.

**RAIL** I think that we can really see a visual indication of what you were just suggesting, Tavares, in an image like *Allegiance* (2022): that these are complex and layered and could suggest a narrative but don't have a linear structure to them.

T. S. I'm just riffing on Junkanoo. I think the setup here is similar maybe to costume making, in the sense that when you're creating a costume that someone has to wear or inhabit, visual balance and structural balance is really important. The doubling of images or motifs comes into effect. And in this instance, it's represented in a way that's visual, but it's also functioning as a structural balance.

**RAIL** We have literal doublings here: with the image of Marcus Garvey presumably taken from a photograph, the suggestion of the African mask, the basketball hoops in profile...

T. S. And the image that looks like a photograph is actually a painting.

**RAIL** Yes, but is it drawn from a photograph?

T. S. Yeah, for sure.

**RAIL** I think what's interesting about this image is that we're also seeing the golden ratio here. Which is, of course, a way of thinking about expansion or retraction, but can also be a way of thinking about something in terms of fractalization. You can start to envision multiplication in fascinating ways.

T. S. It was also a nice excuse to talk about Marcus Garvey.

**RAIL** Okay, tell us about that.

T. S. [Laughs] I think his honorable Marcus Garvey was an inspiration to me from when I was eight, nine years old. And I think unfortunately, he's one of the folks whose story had been ... I wouldn't say erased but more or less whitewashed from the lexicon of historical leaders who existed in the past one hundred years. He was many things. He was a scholar, an orator. He was an entrepreneur, he had a publishing company, he started the Black Star Line shipping company, he was the head of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which, by 1925, had at least six million members. He was really a renaissance guy, who believed in equal rights and justice for all, ideas that, in my mind, are still more or less radical in this environment that we're living in. This work was a way for me to think about getting an audience curious about who the figure is, and to go on their own journey.

**RAIL** I was thinking, too, about the golden ratio being overlaid on top of this suggestion of the cosmos, and about the ways that long-distance satellites like Voyager were propelled beyond Jupiter. Scientists in the '70s took the trajectory around Jupiter and used it as a slingshot to move Voyager to Saturn. And what is really fascinating about that, is that their projections follow the golden ratio.





T. S. Garvey specifically was really interested in time as an element; time in relation to storytelling. And his middle name was Mosiah kind of after Moses, a Messiah. And it's funny, because one of the things that he said when he was delivering a speech in Harlem, in the mid '20s, and while he was under scrutiny by J. Edgar Hoover, who was then the director of the FBI, was, "I know my enemies are in this room, and if you try to get rid of me, if you try to kill me, you won't be successful. And if you are, I will haunt you from the grave." And I think there's a relationship between the way that Garvey thought about time travel, and time, and how narratives can exist throughout time, and that there's no way to silence these narratives. In a similar way, the ancient Egyptians thought about time, space travel, the afterlife. And I think, to your point, there are some nice relationships there.

**RAIL** Can you tell us about the overlay of the basketballs? A lot of your work also includes overlays of playing fields.

T. S. When I think of my experience as a Black boy, there's all this pressure on your body. And so much of that pressure has to do with performance and the expectation that you're going to be involved in sport in some way. That's a language that the world has framed your existence within. And I think there's a certain duality there, because obviously there's a love-hate relationship with that framing, but I also think there's something about sports that is philosophy and poetry and magic. I really love the double meaning in thinking about sports as a symbol for this kind of violent expectation for the body, and the Black body specifically, but also sports as a meeting place, as a social place for kids in the neighborhood.

I just also think of the fragility and the absurdity of life. If you think of most sports, on a given night, in the more successful ones, you can have sixty thousand people, one hundred thousand, a million people watching someone put a ball in a hoop, and celebrating with great vigor about that act, which has an absurd parallel to art making, right? If you look at Maslow's hierarchy of needs, I would say that sport and art are probably not necessarily

extremely high on that. However, I think the thing that I am interested in is the ridiculous dimension of both and having them collide as a way to talk about how lovely some of those relationships are, and how absurdity is really essential.

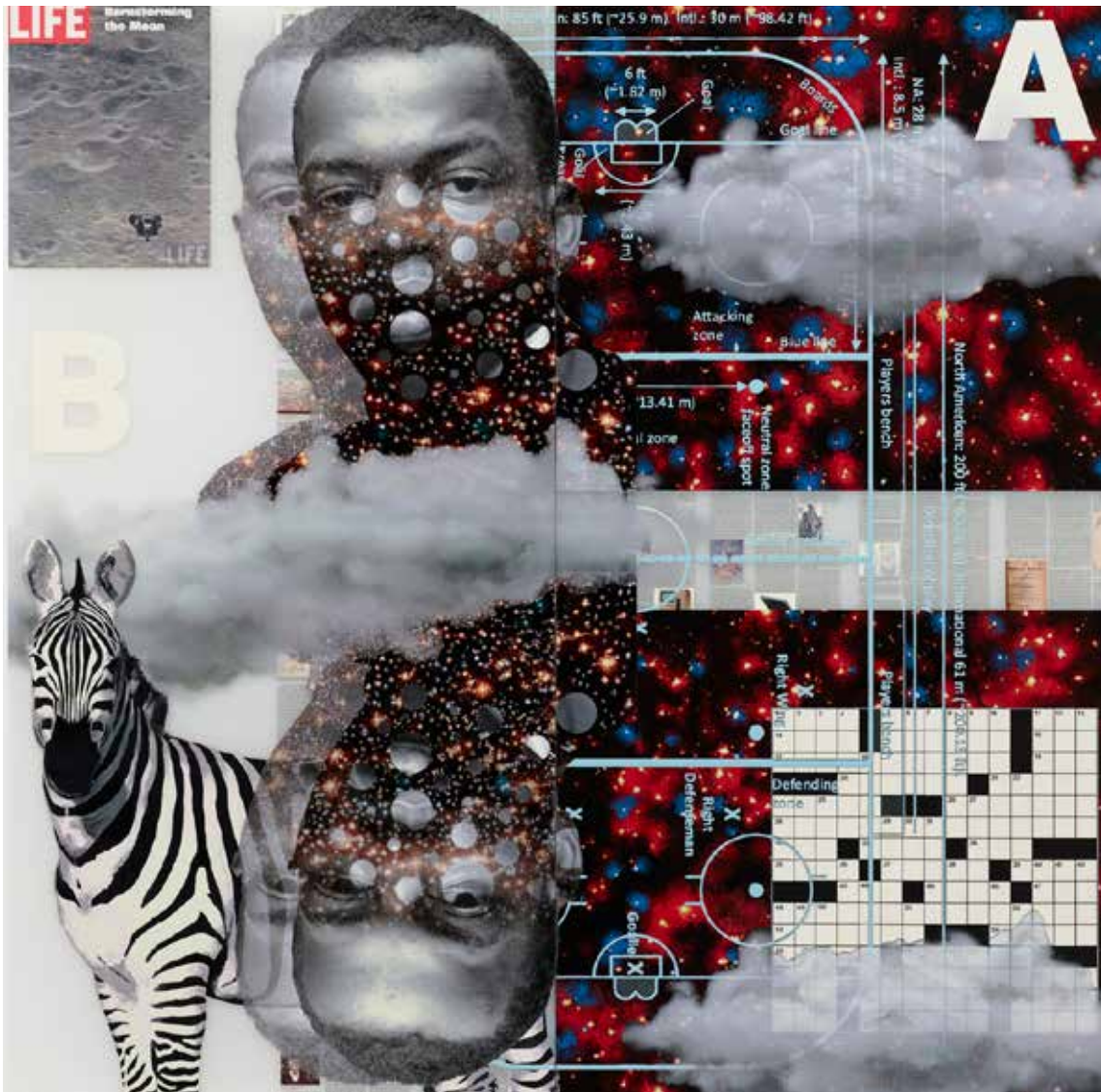
**RAIL** And how fleeting they are, as well, right? A moment of a ball in a hoop, or the moment of the ball ricocheting off the hoop, and the fleetingness of a sporting career: it can be gone in an instant. It's a way of thinking about the instantaneity of art and this idea smacking you right in the face in a moment.

T. S. Yeah, and the creativity, the fact that it's all literally just made up: all the rules that an artistic practice or an artistic subculture are made of are just some people coming up with things and agreeing. And then you have it.

**RAIL** It's true. I always think, too, about interviews when they ask the great tennis players, "How big is the ball to you?" And they say, "Oh, it looks like a basketball to me." And of course, to me, it



Tavares Stratchen, Goal Line. Photo by Tom Powel Imaging. Courtesy the artist.



learned it from a guy named Rick Barry, who played for the Golden State Warriors. But Chamberlain stopped shooting the ball underhanded because it didn't look cool, even though he averaged around seventy or eighty percent from the free throw line that season, shooting underhanded. He went back to averaging fifty percent because it didn't look cool. The dynamic of rulemaking, the intersection of style and aesthetic, all those subtleties actually matter, and one of the greatest basketball players to ever live decided that he would go with a lower shooting percentage because it mattered the way he looked from the free throw line.

**RAIL** I think that totally is understandable, frankly, as a person who loves art. Right? I mean, art is withholding. And I can completely understand that. Do you relate to that, or no?

**T. S.** So, I'm a huge Rick Barry fan. And if you talk to Rick, if you listen to any of Rick's podcasts or interviews about this story, he just thought it was ridiculous. Because Rick shot this way his entire career. And I think Rick averaged like high eighties from the free throw line. Just because of the mechanics of the body. The way that you lock your elbows, the trajectory of the shot being dead on is higher if you shoot underhand from the free throw line, versus shooting overhanded, but good luck getting any player to shoot underhanded today.

**RAIL** I'm having a hard time imagining that, I have to say. Well, speaking of style, and the way that you present yourself, we have so much here to speak about with *Conquering Lion* (2022), particularly the most magnificent hat ever, being worn by Shirley Chisholm, a truly wonderful fedora. Who else are we looking at in this image?

**T. S.** It was really about the relationship between this Ethiopian emperor named Haile Selassie and the Queen. And His Majesty Haile Selassie is the only person on record that the Queen had to bow to, because emperors outrank queens. I thought it's just a fascinating place to begin a conversation about the way that we understand history, the way that we understand power, the way that we understand these dynamics.

**RAIL** Can you tell me about when you chose to keep things in grisaille, in black and white, and when you chose to move things into color imagery?

**T. S.** For me, it's a system in my head about just balance, again, simple balance; the balance of color, the balance of black and white. These works are non-linear riffs on an idea or story that will hopefully provoke curiosity about the characters and their relationships. The idea is that you go on your own journey if you're ever so inspired to. It's one of the interesting things about Caribbean music, or even Black music in general, the blues, jazz, rap, rock, reggae: half the audience never really understands what they're really saying. Right? I mean, I remember listening to records for at least ten years of my life, and I'm just getting the lyrics today. I think that way of decompressing, decoding, and having a different experience over time with material is really important for me. And so, it's not as if I'm making something that I understand all the components of, even they reveal themselves to me over time.

**RAIL** You mentioned jazz here, and I'm thinking about the way that a musician would play something and then later on in the song might play it backwards. And then I look at these two crossword puzzles and realize that they're the reverse of each other; one is right side up, and one is upside down, but we're not exactly sure which one is which. I'm assuming

Tavares Stratchen, The Spook Who Sat by the Door. Photo by Alex Yudzon. Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.



looks like a fly because I can't do anything with it. It's a way of understanding and seeing and honing your talent.

**T. S.** It's funny, the great Wilt Chamberlain, who notoriously scored one hundred points in a game—I think he averaged fifty points that season—had adopted the granny free throw, which I don't know if you know what that is, but that's the underhanded free throw. He





they're identical, although I can't be sure because of the overlay here.

T. S. Or you can flip the picture also.

RAIL The schematic of a running track included in the painting then allows it to act like a round or a fugal structure—to keep coming back around and around, like a musical reference.

T. S. I think music was the gateway for me, especially because so many of the artists weren't really seen as real artists when they were making the work that they were making. And to think that, for example, I think it was the nineties, when Jay-Z (Shawn Carter) won his first Grammy—I don't think they were letting rappers go on stage to get the award. And that's 1999. It's not that long ago.

RAIL This is a nice segue into talking about the question you suggested about who decides what is seen and unseen. This is something that's of interest to you, particularly in your *Encyclopedia of Invisibility* (2018).

T. S. I'm sure almost everyone has probably had some interaction with an encyclopedia or some institution that is archetypal in nature and that is considered an authority. The impetus behind this work was that if everything that was included had a place to go, then could we make a place for the things that weren't included? And what does that look like and feel like? And then I think the other piece of it was, the problem for me is when you become really good at critique, you end up becoming the thing that you're criticizing. And I think that's one of the challenges of making a work like this, right? How do you not replace one idea with another? That could potentially be filled with the same trappings.

RAIL It's a Borgesian problem, right? That once you create the thing that recreates the world that we live in, it's basically then an overlay of our world, and then we can't see our world for what it is.

T. S. Yeah, and I think that's how I now value being an artist, right? I think it's different from occupying the role or responsibility of educator or scholar or statesperson, because my responsibility becomes constantly asking myself the hard question, and not being afraid of undoing the thing that I did. You know, just thinking through how imperfect we all can be at times and being able to acknowledge the fragility of that, and not have the work do the thing that I'm against, you know?

RAIL And then how do you do that? By creating the *Encyclopedia* itself, or by creating the images and the objects that overlay the *Encyclopedia*?

T. S. I think for me it's by thinking about it as a proposal. It really is a thought experiment: What happens when you take all the things that weren't included and put them in one spot? It's not necessarily a solution to a problem, but more a series of curiosities that were inspired by a problem.

RAIL When I was visiting your show on Friday, one of the things that I immediately went to was Mary Wollstonecraft and the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. This is something that's very, very much on my mind right now. I was attempting to read the text on the wall, which was a little difficult because it's slightly above my head and the type is small. I found myself getting angrier and angrier as I was standing in the room.

T. S. I'm sorry.

RAIL You shouldn't be sorry. [Laughs] It's not your fault. It was other people's fault that I was getting angry.

T. S. I think, again, it's a part of the duality, like one of the things that one of my favorite reggae singers likes to say: "equal rights and justice for all." It's one of those statements that one makes in the absence of the conditions. Because if we had equal rights and justice for all, you wouldn't have to say it, right? That phrase always stuck with me.

RAIL One of the other images that's overlaid on top of the *Encyclopedia* pages in your current exhibition is a painting of Septimius Severus. This is also something that you mentioned specifically to me, the question about who is Septimius Severus, and then also what is the role of research "in work," you said. Although I'm wondering if you meant in your work or if you meant in work in general.

T. S. I think the research is the work, really. I think about it in a more elastic, more malleable way. Can a piece of research become—or is it—the thing? And for me, I think it is, and I think the Septimius Severus piece was just a way for me again to get folks to go on their own journey. To go check out who Septimius Severus is. Because he was like a Garvey character before Garvey. Roman emperor of African descent and birth and helped build the city of London. So yeah, I think for me, it was just like, "Oh, by the way, you know, look at this guy who is pretty great." That was pretty much it. [Laughter]

RAIL Why Septimius Severus and not Africanus?

T. S. Oh, I think—wait for the next show.

RAIL Oh, okay. [Laughter] One of the things that I was really struck by looking at the show itself is that so often, your painterly figures are in three-quarter profile, and your sculptures face us. Part of it, I think at least, is that a lot of your sculptures are also referencing African sculptures, which may have been masks, so they probably were meant to fit fully on the face. But I was curious about this turning between fully facing us and slightly turning the cheek, if you will.

T. S. I'm always interested in the photograph, the idea of taking something, like taking a photograph, the digital image, and where digital and material collide. And also just that collapsing of the hierarchy. I think they both have photographic approaches—even the sculptures come from some sort of digital technology. If you have the privilege of visiting the Bahamas and you come to Junkanoo, you'll understand a lot more about some of the setups, because some of them come from the physical limitations of making something that a human being will inhabit and carry down the street for several hours. The balance piece of it is the layout, the frontal versus the profile; these are all conditions of being able to move down the street wearing an object, a piece of art.

RAIL I thought about weight a lot in your exhibition: how much does the *Encyclopedia* weigh? How much does that sculptural object which was based on a mask weigh? It is a way of thinking about the material, or the materiality, of your work. I'm really curious: how much does that *Encyclopedia* weigh? Can I lift it?

T. S. Probably not alone. [Laughter] The idea of a historical ratio is heavy, right? It's heavy. If you think about, you know, women talking about equal pay for the same work, if you're talking about people saying "Black lives matter," or if you think about how curriculums are being constructed in schools, that is heavyweight stuff. And I think one of the tricks of society is that it's presented in a way that doesn't seem like it is weighted. And I think that's why the uprisings happen after so much





time and building, and people saying in their own nice and quiet way, “Hey, guys, here’s the problem. Here’s the problem.” And eventually that goes from quietly saying it to loudly saying it to, as Bob Marley would say, “Burnin’ and Lootin’.”

**RAIL** How then do you feel like you make sure that we look at certain things; how do you pull out what you pull out?

T. S. I think it’s just having faith in the ability of the creative process to inspire people to look. I think for me, I’m just trying to make my version of good music. And in that music, there are elements of humanity’s struggle in general, mixed with humanity’s joy and pleasure. And if the spirit moves you, it does, you know? I don’t think there’s any way to guarantee or ensure that it happens, but it’s in there, it’s in stride.

**RAIL** Do you see yourself as having an oral practice, then? Where you pass on stories about your installations and your work so that they can then continue your tradition once you’ve decided to stop making them or once you pass on?

T. S. I think the perspective of oral traditions, for me, is difficult because I think—I was once speaking with a historian and their position was that the version of history that we have today is a result of the written word. Therefore, if it wasn’t written, then by default, it’s not history. But I think, obviously, there are a number of challenges to that idea; specifically, that the body has an ability to withhold information on a cellular level. I mean, this is the whole study of epigenetics. But we also know that the hierarchy of oral versus written versus painting versus sculpture versus geography versus

cooking are, as we discussed earlier, all invented. So why can’t they all collide? And you end up with something that was an amalgamation of communal and cultural and social experience that does all the information exchange we need.

**RAIL** One thing you told me before we talked today, was that you were thinking a lot about the world right now, as you put it, the world in flux. And so, what is the power of craft and making? First, in terms of the compulsion to make. The insistence on making a mark, both literally and figuratively. Is it an ethical practice? And where does that take you?

T. S. So many of the artists that I looked up to growing up were very disciplined in their approach to making, in the sense that if they were an artist, they were artists, they were painters, they were sculptors. Today, there are so many artists who are artists slash community organizers slash mothers slash museum builders slash spiritualists. There are so many artists who have artists’ residency programs that they run, or foundations; they’re not just thinking about operating in a space that is in a square mile in New York City, they’re thinking about operating in the communities in which they were either birthed in or have some deep connection to and are interested in deeply giving back to those communities. And they’re considering that sense of responsibility and giving as a part of their role as an artist. And I think of that as a kind of counterpoint to the climate and political instability that we’re experiencing. I think of all of the great artists who are alive today, who could just go off to have great careers as visual artists, but who are doing important work in communities that they care deeply about. It’s a really beautiful story here that is maybe not talked about enough. These artists

who could be doing anything else with their time, they’re really being challenged to consider this community service as their work.

**RAIL** We can think about care or generosity as a medium.

T. S. Totally. But also as a part of a continuum, as part of a cycle of creativity, as a cycle of understanding: how do you balance people who are in politically or economically depressed communities, but painting? How do you balance people who don’t have food to eat with making music? How do you think about all those things simultaneously, because all those things relate to each other.

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