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The Artist Whose Medium Is Science

Tavares Strachan is known for his ambitious projects and intensive research, which have included expeditions to the North Pole and training as a cosmonaut in Russia.

by Zoë Lescaze (September 16, 2020)



Tavares Strachan in his New York City studio, photographed on June 19, 2020. Credit: Maegan Gindi

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RIGHT NOW, SEVERAL hundred miles overhead, a golden urn with the face of a forgotten man is circling Earth, a passenger on a black satellite. “Enoch,” one of Tavares Strachan’s most ambitious works of art, is a tribute to Robert Henry Lawrence Jr., the first African-American astronaut, who died in a supersonic jet crash in 1967 before he could reach space. In 2018, after five years of obsessive effort, Strachan managed to launch Lawrence’s likeness into low orbit using a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket. The project is just one expression of the artist’s dedication to honoring the unseen and the unsung. His life’s work has been a journey into the hidden machinery that determines who and what warrant remembrance.

“It’s interesting to look at this body of work — or all the work that I’ve been doing for the past two decades — as a kind of protest,” Strachan said this summer, as he surveyed several dozen large, kaleidoscopic paintings leaning against the walls of his studio, a spacious ground-floor loft on the northern border of Chelsea, in New York. To focus on subjects outside the mainstream canon, “you have to be really committed to it to keep them moving. Otherwise, they usually get swept under the rug.” Strachan’s passion for unearthing obscure trailblazers complements his own audacious feats of exploration. The artist has embarked on four separate Arctic expeditions (he is the first Bahamian to visit the North Pole) and trained as a Russian cosmonaut at a military facility in Moscow — all before turning 40 and without the support of a commercial gallery or an Amex black card.

“Tavares has always taken on science and knowledge and possibility in this almost overly ambitious way,” said Eungie Joo, a curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and an early supporter of Strachan’s work. “Like, how could you go and train as an astronaut? That’s insane! That’s not ambition for anything that has been done before you — that’s just pure curiosity. That’s a brave curiosity. There’s no one like him in that way.”

Sitting in one corner of Strachan’s studio was the work that serves as a skeleton key to Strachan’s expansive vision. Completed in 2018, “The Encyclopedia of Invisibility” is both a sculpture and a functional 2,416-page book. Bound in navy blue leather with gilt pages and an official-looking insignia on the cover, it bears a winking resemblance to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, but its 15,000 entries cover a range of subjects rarely found in traditional reference libraries. Urban legends, invented languages, B-movies, mythical creatures and at least one comic-book supervillain appear alongside entries on Haenyeo (the female deep-sea divers of South Korea), Tara Grinstead (an American high-school teacher and beauty queen who disappeared in 2005) and Galiteuthis glacialis (a large translucent squid found only in Antarctica). It’s the kind of stuff “that you would never learn when you were a kid in school,” Strachan said. “The Encyclopedia,” which anchors Strachan’s debut show with Marian Goodman at the gallery’s London branch this month, is playful — luminaries like the Cuban prima ballerina Alicia Alonso and the activist-comedian Dick Gregory brush up against Josiah the badger, one of Theodore Roosevelt’s more unusual pets — but it is also subversive.

“While you have people protesting and marching the streets, and people working on a policy level to defund the police or to abolish certain oppressive systems, it’s a necessary layer that artists, writers, creative and cultural producers are also thinking about how these structures can be challenged,” said Christine Y. Kim, a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which supported the “Enoch” satellite launch. “Tavares’s interest in unpacking, upending and revising systems and structures of knowledge and history, as he has done with ‘The Encyclopedia of Invisibility,’ represents a perpetual conceptual decolonization.”

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An in-progress bust in Strachan's studio of Queen Elizabeth morphing into Shirley Chisholm, who in 1968 became the first Black woman to be elected to Congress. The artist's work has often looked at colonialism and its long shadow. Credit: Maegan Gindi

The global protests over the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers had just erupted when I met Strachan in June. Frantic to express their solidarity with the movement, museums were pledging to analyze their roles in promoting certain narratives at the expense of others (a 2019 study led by researchers from Williams College and other universities concluded that about 85 percent of works in U.S. museum collections are by white artists). Strachan, however, was excavating marginalized characters from obscurity long before it became an obligation. The artist is now something of an authority on how to tell lost stories: Several conservation specialists from the American Museum of Natural History recently visited Strachan's studio to discuss how they might acknowledge Matthew Henson, the Black explorer who, despite having journeyed to the North Pole in 1909 with the more famous white adventurer Robert Peary, is rarely credited.

Lately, Strachan has been deconstructing "The Encyclopedia," using its pages as collage elements in towering works that combine text, found images, painted elements and diagrams. On one table, a photograph of two Arctic owls with orange eyes partly covers a picture of the Jamaican dance-hall artist Frankie Paul, who in turn floats above a dazzling telescopic view of the night sky. These collide with a crossword puzzle, glacial blue icebergs, a basketball and three images of Haile Selassie I, the former emperor of Ethiopia, in military garb on the cover of an October 1952 issue of Jet magazine.

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An installation view of Tavares Strachan's "The Encyclopedia of Invisibility" project: "Six Thousand Years" (2018).
Credit: Courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest. [WATCH](#)

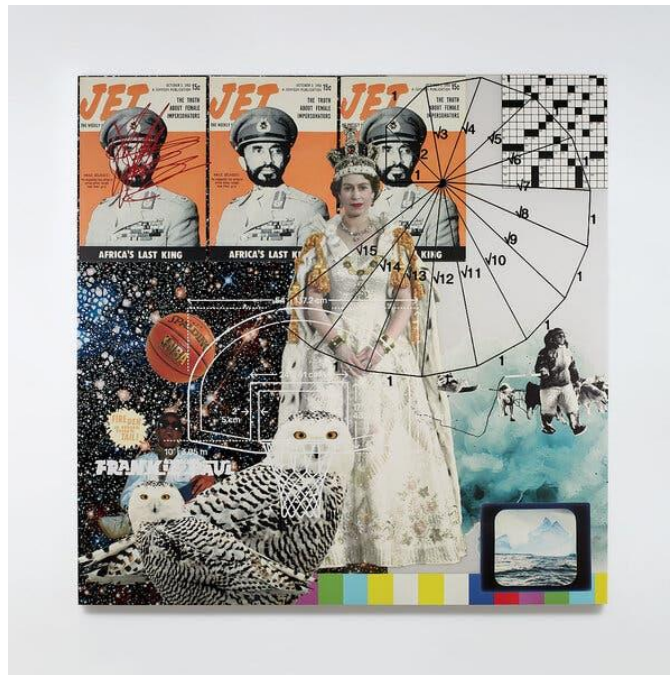
Strachan's approach to making these works partially stems from what he describes as the "gumbo-type" sampling methods of musicians he grew up listening to in the Bahamas — Jamaican dub pioneers including Lee "Scratch" Perry and King Tubby. "That kind of making always stuck with me," he said. Powerfully built, with wide-set eyes and an open face half-covered by a thick beard, Strachan (pronounced "Strawn" or "Stracken," he has no preference) wore a denim apron, black T-shirt, jeans and a cotton kerchief around his neck — a sartorial choice that predates the pandemic-era need for masks. He settled in New York in 2008, two years after completing his sculpture M.F.A. at Yale, and currently lives with his family in Harlem.

The artist tends to speak with the unflappable self-possession of an inveterate traveler, and he discusses his more ambitious exploits with a matter-of-factness that belies the complexity of the challenges he sets for himself. He has spent his life seeking out seemingly unattainable goals with the vehement defiance of someone who grew up being told there were limits to what he could achieve. Talking to him, one begins to believe that anyone who doesn't attempt the impossible suffers from a lack of imagination.

STRACHAN WAS BORN in Nassau in 1979, the second of six boys, in a house that could fit on one of his two studio balconies. His father was an officer and administrator for the police, and his mother was a seamstress and dressmaker. "We were poor, but we didn't know it," he said. "No one told us, which is awesome." The Bahamas was a stop on the narcotics route in the '80s, and drug money flowed through the islands. "I grew up around a certain amount of violence — not in my home but in the neighborhood," he said. His response was an early indication of the curiosity and self-direction that have guided his career: Around age 10, he started gardening. Tending plants was an escape, a way to feel calm. Today, Strachan maintains a garden on the roof of his building uptown, growing tomatoes, grapes, sweet potatoes, cantaloupe, corn, eucalyptus and chamomile.

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As a child, the artist explored New Providence Island, a strip of land just 21 miles long and 7 miles wide, disappearing for hours at a time with his brothers. "I think the sense of isolation, for me, created this kind of imaginary universe," he said. As a teenager, he spent months at a time on open water fishing for red snapper. Dolphins would burst from the waves, and at night, miles of jellyfish would drift by the boat, glowing a radiant alien green.



"Every Knee Shall Bow" (2020), a painting featuring Queen Elizabeth II, on the cover of Jet magazine, Haile Selassie I, the former emperor of Ethiopia. Credit: Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Jurate Veceraite

As Strachan grew older, though, he came to understand the limitations of his surroundings. "You could tell that there was a ceiling," he said. "People who you knew weren't going off to do unbelievable things that would be on CNN." The only forms of success were becoming a doctor, a lawyer or an engineer. If you weren't one of those, "you were irrelevant." Nevertheless, Strachan decided to become an artist. Telling his parents, who had left school as teenagers to work, was a wrenching experience. "It's so lonely. It's not like your family's familiar with it ... so you have this moment where you're learning a language that they generally won't be able to speak moving forward," he said, but "there's a certain solace in that isolation and a certain magic and beauty in that isolation."

This personal dislocation was underscored by a gradual discovery of why he and his family were in Nassau at all. "The trans-Atlantic slave story is not really articulated well there," he said. "So you're just on an island, and you're just like, 'All right, something doesn't really add up.'" Being there, unable to trace his ancestry back more than a few generations, began to feel like being nowhere. Strachan now thinks of his projects as a form of retroactive cartography and a means of reorienting himself. "To me, they all came back to this idea of trying to understand myself, my environment, my community and also the future," he said. His wanderlust is, in part, a means of coping with this sense of disconnect. "The only way to survive is to embrace exploration, right?" he said. "To embrace being a foreigner."

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While studying painting at the University of the Bahamas, Strachan heard about the Rhode Island School of Design as a place where “you can make anything.” He sold a series of small drawings to a local collector to help cover the first installment of his tuition and a flight to Providence, R.I. Strachan chose the school’s demanding glass program because there was nothing like it at home, but also for reasons both practical (“I wanted to learn a skill that I couldn’t lose”) and roguish (“I think I learned it was the most expensive program in the school to run”).

Glass is a punishing material to master — the learning curve is steep — and Strachan remembers wondering whether he had made the biggest mistake of his life. “The story of glass is very similar to my story, in some ways,” he said. “It’s a set of paradoxes: It’s fragile, but it’s as strong as concrete under pressure. It’s super precious, but it’s ubiquitous, like it’s everywhere. It has memory built into it. So if you are working on a piece of glass and you touch it, you scar it. You can heat it up again, but that scar never really goes away.”

He worked every campus job he could, but it wasn’t enough. Eventually the provost delivered some bad news: If he couldn’t pay, he had to leave. Strachan said that wasn’t going to happen. The provost explained that the school was out of financial aid, but Strachan remained firm, and finally the provost said, “Give me a month. Let me see what I can do.” Eventually, RISD put up the money he needed to stay (Strachan now sits on the school’s board of trustees). The experience of negotiating for his education proved almost as transformative as the education itself. It “became this kind of blueprint moment for my life story, in a way,” he said. “They said no — a bunch of times — and then they said yes.”

For his senior thesis in 2003, Strachan sent a light meter to his mother’s house in Nassau, wrote software that would transmit the live readings over the internet and crafted a plexiglass light box that emitted the lumens of his childhood bedroom. “In the early 2000s, for a young artist to have that kind of poetic and conceptual rigor applied in this way was very striking — is very striking even today,” said Joo, who included Strachan in a New York gallery show that year.

In March 2005, the artist (who by this time was at Yale) went to northern Alaska and cut a 4.5-ton block of ice out of a frozen river. He shipped it to the Bahamas, titling the sculpture “The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want,” and installed it in a solar-powered freezer in the courtyard of his elementary school. Christopher Hoover, an acquaintance with a background in film production, helped secure funding, a ground crew and discounts from shippers. “It didn’t come off as ridiculous,” said Hoover, who became a friend and frequent collaborator, recalling the moment Strachan pitched him the almost absurdly daunting project. “I could tell he was someone who wanted to follow through on those ambitions.” The piece was at once monolithic and mercurial. Delicate fissures would form in the ice and vanish again with subtle fluctuations in temperature. The translucency would change, and so would the luminous shades of blue and green. The students at the school were as stunned by the work as they were delighted — most of them didn’t know that ice formed in nature. It might as well have been a spaceship.

It was the response Strachan had hoped for. He wanted to confront the children with something alien to show “that otherness is OK,” and to inspire a curiosity about the world beyond. “I think being an artist, to me, always had to do with disrupting some system or another, and just putting that piece of ice there ... was the most disruptive thing I thought I could have done,” he said. It was the opening salvo in what became a long crusade to expose young people in the Bahamas (and elsewhere) to the forms of knowledge he wishes he had encountered as a child.

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To that end, Strachan later established the Bahamas Air and Sea Exploration Center (B.A.S.E.C.), a community organization where children can perform experiments, conduct research and meet visiting artists and scientists. “With a collapsing educational system and the distraction of tourism, a focus on developing an agency that allows its citizens to expand beyond its waters seems appropriate,” Strachan wrote about B.A.S.E.C. “This project, though difficult for me to summarize, comes down to the belief in the possibilities of what art can do and where it may take us.” In 2011, Strachan launched B.A.S.E.C., which supports teaching programs in the Bahamas with a clothing line exclusively made by locals in collaboration with his mother.



“You Belong Here” (2014), a neon installation on a barge that sailed down the Mississippi River in New Orleans during “Prospect.3: Notes for Now,” a citywide exhibition there in 2014. Credit: Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Joe Vincent Gray

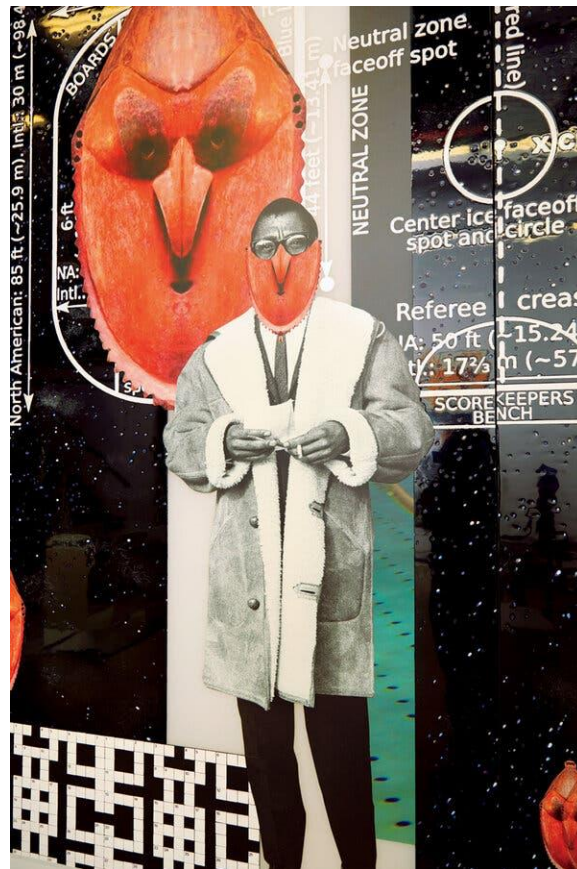
That project is tied to Strachan’s training as a cosmonaut at Star City, a complex of Brutalist buildings about an hour east of Moscow. Being there was essential for Strachan, for whom the usual academic definitions of research are insufficient. “I needed to go and experience it versus reading about it,” he said. Every part of the trip was a challenge, from the stomach-churning effects of being strapped in a chair and spun upside down, to the more intangible ones: “It’s hairy being a Black man in Russia,” he said. But physical and mental discomfort “parallels nicely with the project of being an artist.”

DURING THE EARLY stages of Strachan’s career, each piece became a strategic means of funding the next one. “If he sold an artwork ... it’s not like he bought himself some shoes or whatever,” said Hoover, who noted that he was impressed that Strachan didn’t just want to “do expensive things, but [that] he wanted to do these expensive things to invest in himself.” In the case of the cosmonaut training, Strachan convinced Grand Arts, an erstwhile project space in Kansas City, Mo., founded by Margaret Silva (a Hallmark heiress), to underwrite the experience. The negotiation process felt familiar. “Rewind back to RISD, rewind back to the meeting with the provost,” he said. “You ask 16 times, and the 17th time, you get it.”

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Strachan's refusal to take no for an answer is inextricably tied to the life he left behind in the Bahamas. Seeking hard-to-reach places with no guarantee of success is what motivates him, and the uphill process of blasting through invisible barriers is as important to him as the physical objects that might result. "I do imagine that these actions add up to something, but I think for me the joy of it is the pursuit," he said. "And there's a certain pain-to-pleasure ratio in that pursuit, because it's a super risky enterprise, it's a risky set of problems that you're creating and inventing for yourself — and it's why I think most artists do what they do."

Most artists, though, do not train as astronauts to make work about space travel. Strachan sees artists like Titus Kaphar and Tala Madani — painters who engage, in markedly different ways, with issues of representation and the Western canon — as his immediate peers, but his scientific experiments, adventures to remote destinations and pure ambition set him apart. For Strachan, science is not just a subject but a medium, one that allows him to aim a floodlight at the shadowy reality that knowledge and truth do not just exist in the world but are actively created by society. Science is widely held to be an objective, authoritative discipline, but Strachan's work reminds us that it is also a subjective, interpretive practice that exists within larger systems of control. "A huge part of scientific narrative has to do with power," he said. Biology was for centuries used to legitimize racist eugenic theories and colonial oppression, and even now, science remains part of a capitalist structure, one that determines which types of research get funding and support.



A detail from Tavares Strachan's "Before the Fire" (2020).
Credit: Maegan Gindi

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On a more personal level, though, creating artworks that double as scientific experiments or feats of engineering is a way for Strachan to navigate the definitions of success that shaped his childhood. “Co-opting that language [of science] became a kind of defense mechanism,” he said. “I always felt like it gave me a kind of authority.” Science and medicine have, traditionally, been avenues for immigrants and marginalized people to enter the academy and gain status and power in the West. Strachan did not become a doctor or scientist in the typical sense, but he has used the authoritative trappings of these disciplines to make people pay attention to his art. “That’s how I managed that question about expectation in a colony where the value of success is placed on law and medicine and science and engineering,” he said. “If you weren’t one of those things, no one really paid attention.” But, he added, “It’s hard to dismiss four tons of ice in a M.I.T.-built freezer system.”

“He’s not exactly an artist who works with science or scientists — he’s kind of an artist who is also a scientist,” said Joo, who compared Strachan’s fluency in various disciplines to that of Leonardo da Vinci. “He’s not behaving the way an artist should behave.”

IN 2013, STRACHAN’S delight in thwarting expectations culminated at the Venice Biennale, the world’s oldest and most prestigious recurrent art exhibition, where he helmed the first national pavilion for the Bahamas. “The very idea to have a pavilion would in some ways seem absurd,” said Christophe Thompson, a childhood friend and longtime collaborator, citing the country’s tiny population (just under 390,000 people spread across 700 islands) and total remove from the Biennale. But the idea of representing a place that the art world tends to treat as invisible on its grandest stage appealed to Strachan precisely because it didn’t make sense. It was a means, too, of working through his own conflicted relationship to his homeland. “Thinking about home, for me, it always has a pretty huge air of melancholy, and I find that’s true for a lot of people,” said Strachan. “It’s really hard to talk about. When you’re an artist from the Caribbean and you move to the West, or you move to the States, or you move to any kind of center, you’re self-conscious of the smallness of the place from which you’ve come.”

No matter where in the world Strachan’s projects lead him, they are always rooted in his experience of being from a former colony — a place that has, historically, been the object, not the agent, of discovery. His drive to explore remote places and see them for himself upends the old expectation that growing up on the margins means always being the observed and never the observer. The figures he celebrates in his work are people who, like him, have defied the narrow roles they were given and struck out into uncharted territory.

Strachan dedicated the pavilion in Venice to Henson, the Black Arctic explorer, who planted a flag at what he and Peary believed was the North Pole. Going to the North Pole in 1909 was not unlike going to the moon in the minds of Western adventurers — it was an astounding place for anyone to have successfully ventured, particularly an African-American man who began his career as a deckhand. Naturally, Strachan had to retrace Henson’s journey. The expedition represented a form of research, but Strachan also sensed he might discover a strange affinity between the tropical island on which he was raised and the frozen top of the globe.



An installation view of Strachan's "Polar Eclipse" exhibition representing the Bahamas at the 2013 Venice Biennale.
Credit: Courtesy of the Artist. Video by Tom Powel Imaging

The North Pole is more of an idea than a real place. The mathematical point might exist, but the spot where all lines of longitude converge occurs on a shifting ice cap that is constantly splitting, melting and reforming itself. Planting a flag at the Pole was a dream that consumed countless explorers who did not account for the fact that by the time they got one upright, it would be in the wrong spot. Just standing at the pole for any amount of time is an unattainable quest — which is partly why Strachan wanted to try. "It's the truth about most epic pursuits: At the root of it is absurdity," he said. The collision of human ambition and elusive gratification that the pole represents "is central to everything that I'm thinking about."

The resulting installation included panoramic photos of Strachan carrying his personal flag (a banner modeled on Peary's, reimagined in Bahamian gold, black and blue) across a vast expanse of white, along with hunks of polar ice, anatomical renderings of Henson and phrases written in white neon. The voices of 40 Bahamian children singing a welcome song in Inupiat, a Native language of northern Alaska, echoed throughout the space, linking Strachan's island home, the North Pole and a European capital in a web of obvious contrast and unlikely kinship: Rising sea levels may consume both the Bahamas and Venice, while colonial forces have ransacked Inuit land and traditions. Strachan effectively asked viewers to consider improbable cultural affinities in the context of an exhibition born of old, nationalist concepts of identity.

Later this month, Strachan will unveil a new installation in Colorado, where colossal neon pink letters will spell out "We Are in This Together" on the slope below a gondola connecting neighboring ski towns. Another neon piece, one of his most visible to date, reading "You Belong Here," is already emblazoned on the facade of Compound, a new exhibition space in Los Angeles.

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The seemingly anodyne expressions are meant to provoke a certain amount of skepticism in the viewer. If neon is the language of advertising and storefront seduction, what are these works selling? Lately, amid the protests, Strachan imagines the sentiments might strike some perpetually disenfranchised people as ludicrous. “It’s a seemingly friendly gesture kind of couched in an array of really tough questions,” he said of the piece in Los Angeles. “Like, who’s the you? How are we defining ‘here’? And who gets to belong?”

Belonging lies at the heart of Strachan’s most poignant projects, the works that honor pioneers on the margins of the remembrance. Who belongs on the cover of a high-school history book or on a plinth in a public square? Who makes these decisions? Among the entries in “The Encyclopedia of Invisibility” is Mary J. Bonnin, the first female master diver in the U.S. Navy, who enlisted at a time when there were few women in the military and faced resistance from male servicemen. An expert in both air and gas diving, Bonnin graduated at the top of her class and trained over 1,000 other divers over the course of her tour. In 2010, Strachan completed “What Will Be Remembered in the Face of All That Is Forgotten (I),” a life-size blown-glass diver submerged in a tank filled with mineral oil. “I had no idea that he even knew who I was, so it was kind of a shock,” said Bonnin, who retired in 1996 and now owns a UPS store in Panama City, Fla. “But it made me feel really good that someone would actually take a piece and dedicate it to me. That was kind of fantastic.” At first glance, the vitrine might seem empty — because glass has a similar refraction index as oil, it disappears when submerged. But a change in perspective reveals the delicate human form. Like Strachan’s other unseen subjects, the diver suddenly becomes visible, and her greatness comes into view.

Photo assistant: Curts D’Amour.