



The artist in his own fashion: Tavares Strachan.
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When I ask how he manages to keep all the threads together, Strachan holds out a hand to indicate steady nerves, but also, I believe, an expanded attitude toward participative exhibition-making that counts among its precursors major art happenings such as Marina Abramović's *The Artist Is Present* (2010) and David Hammons's *Concerto in Black and Blue* (2002)—one that strays far from the modernist-minimalist dogma of buttoned-down, polite, white-cube presentations and unemotional anti-narrative fare. "The whole point of these shows," he says, "is to deconstruct hierarchy: hierarchy in viewing, hierarchy in learning, the hierarchies of audiences—of art, architecture, of how people think about painting versus sculpture and performance. In Africa and the Caribbean, there is no hierarchy—when you're at an event, they are all important gestures."

Clara Wu Tsai is not an easy interview ask. She is a prominent businesswoman, an investor, a philanthropist, an operator of Barclays Center (which is owned and leased by the State of New York), and the cofounder of the Joe and Clara Tsai Foundation, which commissioned Strachan's massive neon work, *Belong/Brooklyn*. Tsai is also the very active half of the Social Justice Fund, a \$50 million pledge to improve the post-pandemic fortunes of Brooklyn's BIPOC communities, an effort she describes as "a hyper-local, place-based approach to economic mobility." (To date, she says, the fund has disbursed two-thirds of its loans "to Black female business owners," turning "preconceived notions of what a good business risk is on their head.")

Instead of asking what possessed her to stand on contemporary art's third rail—public art—I enquire about commissioning challenging artworks at a time when ordinary meanings, like facts, are often bitterly contested. "I met Tavares years ago," she begins tentatively, "and was initially fascinated by the idea that he was working at this intersection of art and science. At some point, I thought that we would commission him to do something relating to invisible heroes in Brooklyn—there are so many. When he presented his ideas for the signs, I liked them. But it wasn't until after the murder of George Floyd that I knew his sculpture was meant to be here. We wanted to honor the fact that Barclays has become the unofficial town square. When people drive by and see Tavares's sculpture today—I've heard this from people who were very active in the protests—it honors their efforts and those of others. Which is exactly what I hoped it would do."

When I ask how *Belong/Brooklyn* might have changed the plaza, I am reminded again that, in art, unlike jurisprudence, possession is far from nine-tenths of the law—where meaning is concerned. “There’s great magnetism in the sculpture and what it stands for,” Tsai answers, after taking a pause. “At this point, I’m personally rethinking what Barclays stands for, what it means. I think it’s a place where you see professional basketball and professional entertainers, but it’s also a space that can be turned into something else, by and for the area’s residents.” (Named “Champion of Justice” by John Jay College in 2021, Wu Tsai has garnered support from prominent Black figures such as Van Jones, of the REFORM Alliance; Darren Walker, of the Ford Foundation; and Black Lives Matter activist DeRay Mckesson. According to Mckesson, Wu Tsai is unlike other philanthropists in that “[She is] focused on solutions.”)

“My project has always been about finding ways to unlearn,” Strachan says, as we move through the studio’s main production floor. It contains a number of works in various stages of completion—large photo-based paintings collaged with text and newsprint elements, plaster sculptures, neon signs, a copy of the *Encyclopedia* that is the size of a cinder block—many of them intended for his upcoming exhibition. “It’s about offloading bad habits picked up as legacies of miseducation, colonialism, shit I learned from being an artist, from hanging around a bourgeois crowd. With this exhibition, I want people to feel like they understand all of the pieces even when they can’t intellectually put them together. I want them to understand emotion: to understand when a Black performer asks an audience member why they are afraid of them in the middle of a gallery. I want them to have to confront that person and their beautiful singing voice while they are being confronted.”

Because I have admired Strachan’s two- and three-dimensional work for years, I wonder aloud about the epiphany that pushed him from making objects to time-based experiences. *What happened?*

“A lot of people don’t want to acknowledge that George Floyd’s death changed the world. It changed the way people who thought they were woke think, and it brought a lot of people online who weren’t online at all. Everyone changed after that. I know filmmakers who hire differently now, construction workers who think differently about what they do and whom it benefits. People are simply thinking about things in deeper ways now. As an artist, I want to meet that level of more profound thinking and awareness. Not tomorrow, but today. *Does that make sense?*” ❖