



The Visibility Artist: Tavares Strachan

From making art objects to creating experiences, the Bahamian artist brings forward what has been forgotten, and unlearns what has been mistaught

by Christian Viveros-Fauné (April 27, 2022)



For those coming or going at Barclay's Center: Strachan's 'Belong/Brooklyn' (2021).
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The meanings, if not the ownership, of public artworks belong to their audiences. Nowhere in New York's five boroughs is this clearer than in how a sculpture has changed the meaning of the awkward, pie-slice-shaped half-acre of cement hard by the massive sports arena that is Brooklyn's Barclays Center. Plunked down at the busy intersection of Flatbush and Atlantic Avenues, the venue's concrete plaza—an architectural afterthought with regard to the complex's original design—was utterly transformed during the pandemic. When indoor events were canceled in 2020, the space resembled a refugee center: Free Covid-19 testing sites alternated with clothing drives and bustling food pantries for those in need.

Then, in late May, after the murder of George Floyd, the site morphed again—first into a hub of protest and then, briefly, into an arena for hand-to-hand fighting between demonstrators and police. As tempers cooled and the smoke cleared, an unlikely truce was declared: The austere plaza in front of Barclays Center became, by dint of an unspoken consensus, Brooklyn's unofficial town square.

Twenty-three months later, the transformation of Barclays Center Plaza appears complete. The site's new status has, at the very least, been aptly and gorgeously memorialized. That is thanks to *Belong/Brooklyn*, a pair of huge neon signs installed atop the entrance to the borough's busiest transit hub. Above the MTA graphics and underground network of trains, the two tractor-trailer-size signs hold forth, one reading simply "You Belong Here" in brilliant white light—an inspiring 45-by-15-foot declaration of basic human rights. The second, in hot pink, thrums in the elusive first-person plural: "We Belong Here."

The work of Bahamian-born New York artist Tavares Strachan, this double-barreled sculpture affirmatively voices an unusual kind of civic renewal that has little to do with the usual tectonic forces that shape and bedevil New York City: the thumb-on-the-scale strivings of real estate titans, eminent domain lawyers, tractable politicians, gentrifying starchitects, and ambitious captains of industry of the sort who own sports franchises, like, say, the Brooklyn Nets, which *Forbes* estimates is worth \$3.2 billion. The opposite of top-down development—which has troubled Barclays Center since it was first foisted onto the area's downtown as the Atlantic Yards Project in 2008 and is now home court for the Nets—Strachan's public sculpture channels a charge that is at once more powerful but more elusive: the groundswell resolve of a community.

"It's an affirmation, a call to action," Strachan said about the complex message animating his sculpture, on a crisp October day during its unveiling. Dressed in a navy-blue jumpsuit of his own design, he stood on an outdoor dais, beneath a large banner promoting Joseph C. and Clara Wu Tsai's Social Justice Fund—a \$50 million Brooklyn BIPOC loan scheme that these owners of the NBA's Nets and the WNBA's New York Liberty had launched just months earlier. "'You belong here' is a starting point," he told the mixed crowd beneath the building's distinctive oculus. "Who decides if we belong? Is it in the power of the individual or the group? I am trying to work this out as a member of this community myself."

The most visible artwork Strachan has produced to date in New York, *Belong/Brooklyn* (2021) constitutes a crucial introduction to his art for local audiences—a scaled-up précis for a major artist whose outsize ambition is already well known to crowds in cultural capitals such as London, Los Angeles, and Venice. Strachan is a real-life artist-explorer whose often jarring discoveries take place remotely but also in plain sight. Among other adventures, he has embarked on four separate Arctic expeditions (he is the first Bahamian to visit the North Pole), trained as a Russian cosmonaut at a military facility in Moscow, and partnered with Elon Musk's SpaceX to propel a golden bust of Robert Henry Lawrence Jr., NASA's first Black astronaut, into orbit on a Falcon 9 Rocket (the Chicago-born rocketman trainee died in a supersonic jet crash in 1967).

Inspired by, among other artist-inventors, Renaissance polymath Leonardo da Vinci, Strachan dreams big and delivers with astounding frequency. Like the Victorian-era artist-botanist Anna Atkins, the first person to publish a book illustrated with photographic images—delicate cyanotype photograms of algae and seaweed—Strachan also celebrates the important minutiae that bedevil the details of aesthetic ambition. He has been known to take on the roles of painter, draughtsman, engineer, scientist, theorist, sculptor, and architect, sometimes on the same project. At the heart of his expanding oeuvre: a line uttered by yet another artist progenitor, Marcel Duchamp—"Artmaking is making the invisible, visible."

Self-generating, self-possessed, and supremely thoughtful in person, Strachan has long relied on what he has called a “lean and mean crew of handpicked co-conspirators” to muster complex projects like these and others that would make veteran Smithsonian registrars blush. Take his recent *Encyclopedia of Invisibility*, a deeply researched, elegantly written 2,500-page sculpture-as-an-alternative-Encyclopedia-Britannica containing over 15,000 entries on the deliberately forgotten and overlooked (it includes listings on translucent squid found only in the deepest realms of the Antarctic Ocean and on Matthew Henson, the still-under-recognized Black U.S. explorer who lays claim, along with the white adventurer Robert Peary, to having “discovered” the North Pole). That Strachan has kept this and other ventures on track until recently without the support of a top-tier gallery makes his latest exploits all the more impressive.

Among Strachan’s newest schemes are projects that would fill the calendars of several Hollywood production teams. They include the launch of a 50,000-square-foot art complex in his hometown of Nassau, which he has commissioned David Adjaye to design; solo museum exhibitions at LACMA, in Los Angeles, and the Hayward Gallery, in London; a long-awaited New York show at Marian Goodman Gallery (opening May 6); and two concurrent full-dress exhibitions across the Atlantic at Goodman’s Paris digs.

Though I won’t spoil the more theatrical details attendant to Strachan’s New York show, I can confidently relay the following: Few upcoming art events in the city will be as buzzed about ... or difficult to access. As much a series of time-based happenings as a conventional show of discrete artworks arrayed on the gallery’s walls and floor, Strachan’s show is structured as a Wagnerian *gesamtkunstwerk*: a single, large-scale, enveloping art experience that is part installation, part performance event. Like much great art, Strachan’s exhibition generates its own precedents. Where the artist and company have crafted their own rules, others will follow and codify.

An exhibition antecedent motivating Strachan today is his similarly structured and galvanizing September 2020 show at Marian Goodman Gallery in London. Aptly titled *In Plain Sight*, and held at the height of the Covid pandemic, the show consisted of various rooms of the artist’s thematically linked two- and three-dimensional artworks in canvas, plaster, neon, wood, perspex, and other materials. Organized around the personal and public histories of Black personages as varied as Nina Simone, Haile Selassie, and Henrietta Lacks (a true “immortal,” Lacks’s cells were illegally harvested by a white oncologist at Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1951 and live on today as model HeLa cells in scores of scientific advances), the display combined strange objects with even stranger stagecraft.

As viewers moved through the galleries, embedded performers piped up unannounced, by turns startling and mesmerizing audiences left unprepared by quarantine routines. Though familiar to theater audiences of popular productions like the immersive *Macbeth*-based *Sleep No More*, participative performances remain rare in galleries, lending an extra layer of surprise to these scant events. Responses varied, as they must. Not having been there, I want to imagine the experience as both collaborative and hallucinatory—like being accosted by talking statues of your favorite presidents at a wax museum.



Riffing on a '70s classic: 'The Spook Who Sat by the Door' (2022).
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According to Marian Goodman’s director, Phillip Kaiser, Strachan’s exhibition “took place during a time in which the pandemic and social distancing made human contact very dear.” One visitor, the English memoirist Emmett de Monterey, reacting to both the exhibition’s timing and its anti-racist themes, described it as having occurred during a period in which “[people] hadn’t had access to visual culture, we’d all been separated, we’d all been in a state of intense fear for our lives; then there was George Floyd’s murder by American law enforcement—that made the exhibition incredibly visceral.”

One result of that heightened tension, Kaiser says, was that “a lot of people cried or were totally moved” by the experience. That emotional outpouring may have accounted for the show’s unexpected popularity. To wit, *In Plain Sight* garnered an unusual five-star review from critic Adrian Searle, in the *Guardian*. In his piece, the dean of British art criticism successfully sidestepped “spoilers” while promising powerful “surprises and astonishments,” “moments of uplift, jokes and song,” “discombobulating thrills,” and at least one trip “down a rabbit hole.” Describing the experience as alternately “baffling, complex, not to say deeply complicated,” Searle sketched out the show’s basic logistics for readers (perhaps so other writers, like myself, don’t have to): “Visitors only have an hour to see it: entry is restricted to on-the-hour slots, for more reasons than just Covid. There is no way that this is time enough. There are paintings—or something like paintings—and there are sculptures. There are things unseen and things that are difficult to look at. There is a great deal of reading to do, and if you really want to get to the bottom of all the name-checks and references that keep cropping up, it would be good to have your mobile to hand—except visitors have their phones confiscated at the entrance. It is almost a surprise that they let anyone in at all.”

“The show is a culmination of research I’ve been doing over the past 10 years that has to do with invisibility.” That’s Tavares Strachan—artist of the unseen. He is decidedly present, sitting alongside his longtime studio manager, Mariko Tanaka, inside the narrow balcony of a mezzanine overlooking his bustling midtown studio. A densely bearded, perennially fit, 40-something creator in jeans and a dark cotton hoodie, Strachan sips Evian water while fingering the edge of a glass table just feet away from overflowing racks of B.A.S.E.C. gear—bomber jackets, hoodies, tees, and jumpsuits his mother Ella helps design and sew together back home. B.A.S.E.C. stands for Bahamas Air and Sea Exploration Center. Conceived in 2008 as the artist’s “answer to NASA for the Bahamas,” his local-ingenuity-meets-aeronautics project for the island’s youth was designed in part to grow his hometown’s scarce access to science training through laboratory experiments, beachside rocket launches (the projectiles are powered by sugarcane), and a program of visiting scientists.

“The jackets are reversible,” Strachan says, indicating them with a hand gesture. “The idea is that people will wear one thing in many ways, as opposed to many things in one way.” His mother, he explains, convinced him that the best way to get the attention of young people was “through fly gear.” A quick look through the racks reveals drip glazed with honey, no vinegar. Additionally, the apparel, which retails for between \$650 and \$2,000, comes emblazoned with patches featuring portraits of Strachan’s forgotten sheroes and heroes, with all proceeds going to educational programs in The Bahamas.

“There’s a lot going on,” Strachan says, spreading his arms wide before dimming the lights to run a video of his 2020 London show. About his upcoming New York engagement, he says, he is feeling inspired. He has titled the exhibition *The Awakening*. “There’s been two years of production that no one’s seen,” he reveals, sounding like an Apple engineer on the verge of an NDA breach. “That work,” he says, smiling broadly, “will drop this year and the next, which is exciting.” In keeping with Kaiser’s description of Strachan as an artist who “thinks in bigger iterations,” he and Tanaka explain that the May show is part of a trilogy; it is to be followed by thematically related exhibitions in Paris that Strachan has provisionally called *In Broad Daylight* and *In Total Darkness*. (The exhibitions are “still changing,” Kaiser informs me a few days after our meeting, “so I’m a little hesitant to talk about them too much.”)

Displayed on an extra-large flat-screen, the video footage includes installation views of *In Plain Sight*, as well as exit interviews with performers and members of the public. One viewer suggests that Covid restrictions constituted “an important part of the experience”; a second cites the “sense of great anticipation” accompanying the gallery’s “huge queues”; a third describes the installations as replete with “hidden histories.” A fourth interview subject, the Black composer, vocalist, and performer Liz Gre, assays the rookie dramaturge: “If you know Tavares, if you have just a little bit of information about the type of work he’s done, you know that there is no other place for him to go other than up, literally, and far.” (In London, Gre embodied “HeLa,” a character “based on the idea of Henrietta Lacks.”) When the lights return, Strachan informs me that everything—the shows in New York, Paris, and London; the *Encyclopedia of Invisibility*; the Bahamas museum, which he has called Oku after the Igbo word for “light”; the Barclays Center sculpture, and more—is “interconnected.” “They’re all of a piece,” he says with unwavering composure. As I consider an XL idea that appears to expand by the minute, he smiles and exclaims: “The London show was booked solid!”

“I’d like to believe that what happened did so exclusively because the show was great,” he continues. “But there was also Adrian Searle’s review. He was very clever—he wrote it in a way that didn’t give anything important away.” While I ponder this none-too-subtle suggestion that I manage similar circumspection in these pages, Strachan moves our conversation toward a crucial recent artwork: the wide-ranging compendium of alternate knowledge that serves as a skeleton key for so many of his exhibitions today. “*In Plain Sight* was centered around *The Encyclopedia of Invisibility*,” he explains, “which is an eight-year research project that has to do with people, places, and things that have been left out of history. I thought it would be fitting to use the *Encyclopedia* as a kind of groundwork for thinking about other ways in which to include these missing entries. Once I considered the idea of the *Encyclopedia* as an exhibition, the different rooms became an alternate way of thinking about those missing people and things.”



Mask exposing the face: 2020's 'Distant Relatives (Mary J. Seacole).'
COPYRIGHT: TAVARES STRACHAN / PHOTO: TOM POWEL IMAGING

A lushly illustrated and pitch-perfect “inverse of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*” that functions as both imposing sculpture and rectified history, Strachan’s *Encyclopedia* reaches back into the artist’s own past—to the sunny days and starry nights spent pouring over volumes of the *Britannica* as a child in his parents’ modest Nassau home. It also, evidently, serves the artist and others as an evolving process of knowledge formation amended by inclusiveness, curiosity, and humor. I am unsurprised to hear, after my visit, that the American Museum of Natural History has contacted the artist about at least one *Encyclopedia* entry.

“When you grow up Black in the Caribbean,” Strachan explains, “one of the things that happens is that history is passed on to you as a post-Columbian idea—as in, your history began with Columbus. The series ‘Distant Relatives’ [a set of plaster busts of figures such as Lacks and Henson that the artist has hidden behind African tribal masks] was a way to think about this history prior to the arrival of Columbus. It’s not Columbus-centric, but instead has to do with the diaspora and the relationship Black folks in the West have to Africa. It’s a way to have a conversation between these cultural icons, people who have done significant things in culture, and specific [African] tribes—connections that are rarely ever made.”

“But how does the *Encyclopedia*, updated and expanded since 2018, specifically inform the New York show?” I ask. One unexpected way, Strachan answers, is through the “gumbo-type” sampling of Reggae. He admits that he has only recently discovered the influence of music on his own psyche: “*The Awakening* is about my coming online with a lot of ideas that came to me through music. I’m talking about Lee Scratch Perry and King Tubby—those guys and others. Reggae was never prioritized as scholarship, because most urban music is not. But the fact is that most of what I know about most of the people that *I want to know about* is through music. Take Marcus Garvey, for instance....” Visibly animated, Strachan swivels back and forth in his chair. He appears to have mentally dialed back to early adolescence—the years he spent living with his policeman father, seamstress mother, and five brothers in Nassau. In the 1980s, the Caribbean capital was a colorful place to come of age, but also a preferred route for drug smuggling into the U.S.

“I lived in the hood, with drug dealers across the street. They’re bustin’ out this Reggae music. So I’m like: who’s this guy Marcus Garvey, who’s Haile Selassie? I wasn’t learning about them at school! It dawned on me recently that I would never have learned about Garvey and the others without the music. I started researching Garvey at the Getty [Strachan was a Scholar in Residence at the Getty Research Institute in 2019–20], and the studio took a deep dive on him about eight months ago. One of the most impressive things about Garvey was his organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, which had six million members! There’s his beef with W.E.B. Du Bois [the two giants of pan-Africanism despised each other; Garvey focused on emancipating everyday Blacks, Du Bois on the “Talented Tenth”], and then there’s the Black Star Line, which we purchased 12 months ago....”

Before I stammer-ask after the century-old steamship line that Garvey, once the most feared Black man in 1920s America, chartered with a view to repatriating the descendants of Africans back to the continent, Strachan laughs and informs me that the studio has acquired the company outright. (Though the controversial “Back-to-Africa” movement also had white racist supporters, Garvey’s pro-Black militancy placed him at the top of J. Edgar Hoover’s enemies list; he was eventually indicted on trumped-up charges of mail fraud in 1922, served a five-year prison term, and was deported to Jamaica in 1927.)

“We own the Black Star Line,” Strachan says mischievously. “We brought it back to life with the idea of realizing Garvey’s dream, because none of his ships ever made it to Africa. All the boats were defunct—one is in Lima, Peru, another in Hudson [New York]. We’re currently refurbishing a new line of ships, all of them built in East Africa. Our first ship, the *Miss Sophia*, is in Kenya. We’re sailing it across the Atlantic next year. We’re not really talking about *The Awakening* now, but at least you know how much I care about Garvey....”

According to Strachan, Garvey will be a major force in *The Awakening*, alongside other Black dramatic personae. These will include forgotten figures such as Lucius Septimius Severus, the first African Emperor of Rome (“There were four other African Emperors of Rome,” the artist says, “Septimius Severus, Clodius Albinus, Marcus Macrinus, and Aemilianus”); an as-yet-unnamed African American trial lawyer; and a character Strachan calls “the Spook by the door.” He cagily describes the latter as both “a random Black dude” and the exhibition’s “ostensible protagonist, who activates the entire experience.” (*The Spook Who Sat by the Door* is a singular work of American literary and film fiction; it features a token Black CIA agent, Dan Freeman, who becomes a Black liberation leader. Written by Sam Greenlee and published in 1969, the novel was made into a 1973 feature film by Ivan Dixon, of *Hogan’s Heroes* fame, and subsequently pulled from theaters by its producer, United Artists.)



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?*” ❖