

VOGUE

The Cosmic Vision of Tavares Strachan

by Dodie Kazanjian (April 29, 2022)



ROCKET MAN Strachan, pictured here in his studio, once trained as an astronaut. Photographed by Don Stahl

When the Bahamas-born Tavares Strachan was a graduate art student at Yale, he cut a four-and-a-half-ton block of ice from an Alaskan river and FedExed it to his elementary school in Nassau, where it was enshrined in a glass freezer powered by solar energy. What on earth possessed him to do such a thing? “There’s obviously something a little tongue-in-cheek here,” he tells me in our first conversation—he’s in a Los Angeles hotel room for meetings at the Getty and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), and we’re on Zoom. “An African going to a cold place? Of course, growing up on an island, you fall in love with being an explorer. You want to leave.” And there was another motive. He had just discovered Matthew Henson, an African American who accompanied Robert Peary on the first successful expedition to the North Pole, and was, according to Henson’s own account, the first person to stand on the top of the world. “I’m thinking to myself, How is it possible for me not to have learned about Matthew Henson in school?” Ever since, Strachan has been finding ways to tell stories about people, usually Black people, who have been unseen, overlooked, or forgotten.

“Objects and images in Tavares’s work always beget bigger stories, but their visual uproariousness carries you along,” art critic Adrian Searle wrote in *The Guardian* in 2020, after Strachan’s impressively ambitious show at Marian Goodman’s London gallery. A work he did as a Yale grad student, *Where We Are Is Always Miles Away*, is composed of 3,000 pounds of concrete excavated from Crown Street in New Haven, including a parking meter where his car was ticketed for a parking violation. More recently, he collaborated with the Art + Technology Lab at LACMA to put into orbit a satellite carrying a 24-karat-gold portrait bust of Robert Henry Lawrence Jr., the first African American astronaut, who died in a training accident before he went into space. Oh, and let’s not forget that Strachan spent months near Moscow, training as a cosmonaut, because he wanted to build a space company in the Bahamas. “I spoke just enough Russian to get laughed at,” he says.

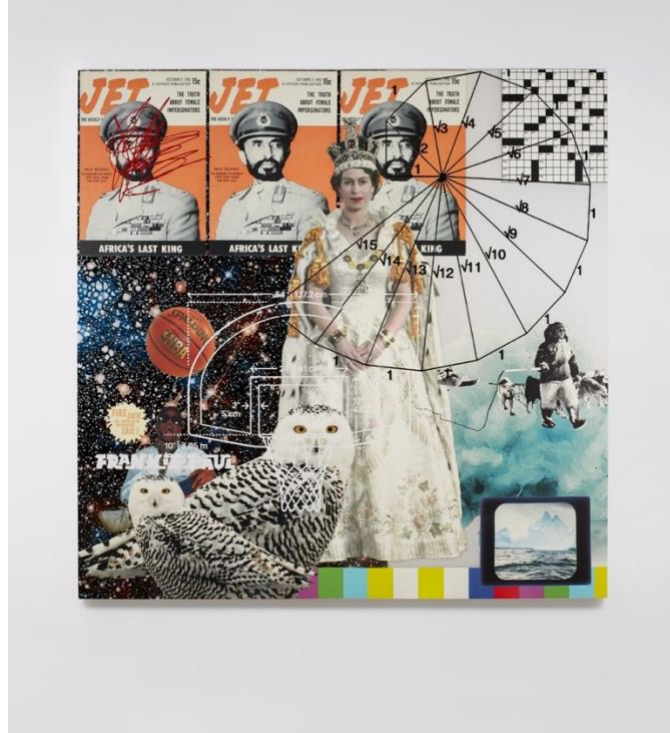
Strachan's work takes the form of paintings, sculptures, videos, installations, performances, clothes, poems, photographs, gardens, architecture, community organizing, you name it. His work reminds me of Robert Rauschenberg and his collage-like, silkscreen paintings from the 1960s—large, complex juxtapositions of seemingly unrelated images. He's an artist without borders, a polymath, a wizard who uses science as part of his palette. "In another generation, perhaps Tavares would have been a scientist or politician," says Eungie Joo, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's contemporary art curator. "He has big-picture goals. He wants all the young people of his home country to have a chance to pursue their own intellectual and creative development, and he has decided to find a way to invest in that future. This kind of thinking by an artist is humbling and inspiring."

When Strachan was nine days old, his mother took him to Junkanoo, the Bahamian version of Carnival, in Nassau. Junkanoo starts Christmas night, runs through Boxing Day, and then resumes on New Year's Day, and Strachan has never missed it. He remembers the excitement of getting out of bed in the middle of the night and joining the crowds on the streets as they filled up with hundreds of goatskin drums and brass instruments and cowbells and dancers in costumes that could be 30 feet high. "It's dance, it's performance, it's music, it's sculpture, it's painting, it's color theory, it's photography, it's fashion, it's poetry, it's community," he says. "An uncle of mine was a major costume designer for one of the Junkanoo groups. When I was five or six, I thought, I want to do that forever."

Today, he lives in New York. His projects are global, but he returns often to the Bahamas, where he's an avid "Junkanoo-er." Several of his brothers still live there, and so do his mother and father, Ella Louise and Edmund. (Tavares got his name because his disco-loving parents "fell in love with the Tavares Brothers.") "They split up when I was 12, but they've since become really close again. My dad worked as a beach warden, and my mom was a seamstress. A lot of my interest in clothing came from watching her. She worked like a savage, and she loved her process. My mom has an intuitive sensibility that's unfathomable. She can make clothing for you just by looking at you." Ella Louise is now an essential part of Strachan's Bahamas Aerospace and Sea Exploration Center (BASEC), a space-agency-slash-fashion-label that Strachan conceived after his training in Moscow. When we speak, he's wearing a hoodie from BASEC with Haile Selassie's face. He loves it when people ask him who it is, and he's able to tell them it's the emperor of Ethiopia.

"When you go to school in an ex-colony, you spend most of your time learning how to feel bad about yourself," he explains. "You just don't learn about anybody who looks like you. I can wax philosophical about Napoleon and King Henry VIII, but I couldn't tell you about the Nile River or about Ghana or Sierra Leone." Strachan's *Encyclopedia of Invisibility*, an ongoing project he's been working on for several years, was in part motivated by all the histories that he didn't have access to when he was growing up. A huge tome bound in dark-blue goatskin leather, part book and part sculpture, it's a compendium of information about marginal, forgotten, or unknown men and women. "I've made nine versions of it so far," he tells me. "Each one adds new information, so they're all unique. They're artworks to me, thought experiments."

When Strachan was 12, he had an art teacher who gave his life a new direction. "Her name was Elizabeth Darling, and she was a godsend," he says, "a white lady from England. She was tall, six foot three, and it was through her classes that I realized I was good at something." He already knew he had some kind of talent, through Junkanoo, "but to have that affirmation in school was great." She persuaded him to submit a drawing to a local competition, and he won a \$1,500 award, which could only be used for "this thing called college. What is that? No one in my family had ever gone. That award invented the future in my mind."



Tavares Strachan, *Every Knee Shall Bow*, 2020, 2 panels; oil, enamel, and pigment on acrylic, 96 x 48 x 2 in. (243.8 x 121.9 x 5.1 cm) (each), 96 x 96 x 2 in. 243.8 x 243.8 x 5.1 cm (overall).
Photography: Jurate Veceraite/Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Fast-forward to the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), which had been described to him as “the place you can make anything you want, from a pair of sneakers to a rocket ship.” He majored in glass because he already knew how to draw and paint and he was looking for a skill he could use to earn a living. “I was still half pragmatic,” he says, “and worried about how to take care of my family back home.” He also loved glass because it was versatile, both traditional and nontraditional. He took every job on campus that he could find, slept on sofas, but at a certain point he ran out of money. He went to the provost and said, “I can’t afford to stay here, but I can’t afford to go.” “A couple of months later they somehow found the money to keep me at RISD, and now I’m on the board there.”

The Yale School of Art came next, where he broke boundaries with his four-and-a-half-ton block of Alaskan ice and the excavated parking meter. Richard Benson, the graduate art school’s charismatic dean, was “a huge supporter” and also “a calming influence,” Strachan tells me, tearing up as he does so. Strachan made three more trips to the Arctic, in 2006, 2009, and 2013, visiting small villages, talking with the Inuit people, trekking to the North Pole, and doing research, which culminated in an exhibition in the newly commissioned Bahamas National Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale. It was quite a show. He brought 40 Bahamian children to Venice, where they sang an Inuit hunting song that Strachan and others had spent three months teaching them. The show also included spectacular videos, hanging sculptures, drawings and collages, and a block of ice he had retrieved from the North Pole. “I remember the beautiful feeling of coming home to ice and horizon in his work,” says the Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson, who got to know Strachan at the Biennale. “He’s a brilliant, hard-core romantic artist, with a twist. He makes Sehnsucht political.”

When we next speak, Strachan is in the mountains in Jamaica, where he's interviewing the reggae superstar Capleton at his house. He calls me during a break between interviews. "I'm shooting some film for a project about Marcus Garvey," he tells me, on Zoom. (Marcus Garvey is a prominent part of Strachan's debut show this month with Marian Goodman Gallery in New York.) "I'm talking to giant reggae artists, asking how they came to know about Marcus Garvey. I wouldn't know who Marcus Garvey was if I hadn't listened to Burning Spear. Art is always the thing that slips through the cracks. Somehow it makes it through."

Like a number of successful Black artists who have started foundations in their hometown communities—Mark Bradford's Art + Practice in South Los Angeles, Derrick Adams's the Last Resort Artist Retreat in Baltimore—Strachan has also felt the call to give back to his community in Nassau. He calls his foundation Oku, an Igbo word that means "light." "Your people are there, your families, your cousins. A lot of them are struggling and you're doing well." Strachan remembers when as a young child he slept in a cot with three of his brothers, and brings up the saying "A man cannot rise above his people." Everything Strachan is interested in has to do in some way with storytelling, and Oku is no different. "This is the West African in me," he explains. "How do we tell stories? Most of the people in the Bahamas are West African in origin, and I wanted to use a name that reflected the people there, the majority." An Oku artist-residency program that includes a mix of local artists and scholars from around the world is scheduled to be up and running by the end of the year. Oku will also serve a variety of community needs, raising money for low-income students and starting food-assistance programs. Based in downtown Nassau, the foundation will involve visiting scholars and ongoing discussions about how to "unlearn the stuff you learned in school" and how to bring the Bahamas into the worldwide art conversation. A sculpture garden will be installed later at a yet to be determined site. He's signed up the high-profile architect David Adjaye to design one of Oku's buildings. "To me, architecture is a collision between indoor and outdoor space," Strachan says. "In the Caribbean, you shouldn't be able to tell the difference between whether you're inside or outside. I really want to blur that line."

He's leaving Jamaica in the morning for a quick trip to Europe—Switzerland, Amsterdam, London. One more question: Does he sometimes think about how far that little boy sharing a cot with his three brothers has come? "I really don't," he says. "But I think a lot about talking to that boy. I feel like I'm making work for my childhood self."