

**Tavares STRACHAN**

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*How cosmic vision and lost histories collide in Tavares Strachan's art*

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## INTERVIEW | How cosmic vision and lost histories collide in Tavares Strachan's art



Installation view of Tavares Strachan's solo exhibition, "Do and Be," at Perrotin Seoul / Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

By Park Han-sol

Entering Tavares Strachan's first solo exhibition in Asia at Perrotin Seoul is like a cosmic experience.

The ethereal galactic constellations gracing the gallery's walls hint at the Bahamas-born artist's long-standing fascination with the cosmos.

And Strachan has certainly done more than just stargazing to satisfy his curiosity.

He once spent months being trained as a cosmonaut in Russia's Star City. In 2018, he even launched his artwork – a golden bust bearing the likeness of Robert Henry Lawrence Jr., the first African American astronaut who died in a plane crash before undertaking his mission – into outer space.

To the artist, stars suggest "boundlessness" – an idea that mesmerized him since at a young age as he grew up with an acute awareness of the geographical and cultural limitations of his hometown in the Bahamas.

But in his art, they are also windows – or gleaming peepholes – to the subjects marginalized or obscured within historically canonized narratives.

"So much of culture in the world is operating with a visible and an invisible world. And the invisible world, all these things that are unseen, is incredibly important to the fabric of society," he told The Korea Times at his solo show, titled "Do and Be."



Bahamas-born conceptual artist Tavares Strachan / Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin



Installation view of Tavares Strachan's solo exhibition, "Do and Be," at Perrotin Seoul / Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

"I think there's a certain beauty in revealing particular truths about the world, because it unearths your sense of reality. Once you know about these invisible histories, it's hard to operate in a world where you pretend you don't know them."

He was a graduate art student at Yale when he discovered Matthew Henson, a Black Arctic explorer who, despite having successfully reached the North Pole in 1909 with Robert Peary, has largely fallen into obscurity.

"As a child, I never knew that one of the first people to make it to the North Pole was a Black man. And it just blew my mind. I thought to myself, 'What else is out there that's like that?'"

Strachan paid tribute to the forgotten trailblazer in the most striking way possible in 2005.

He embarked on a series of expeditions to the Arctic – becoming the first Bahamian to journey to the North Pole. During a voyage to Alaska, he excavated a 4.5-ton block of ice and shipped the monolithic mass in its entirety to his elementary school in the Bahamian capital of Nassau. Entitled "The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want," the sculpture was exhibited in the school's courtyard in a solar-powered freezer chamber as a delightful surprise to students who had never seen such ice.



Installation view of Tavares Strachan's solo exhibition, "Do and Be," at Perrotin Seoul / Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin



The project marked the beginning of his audacious, extensively researched exploits that continue to this day. What anchors his latest works of collages, kaleidoscopic paintings and sculptures is "The Encyclopedia of Invisibility," a 2,400-page compendium with over 17,000 entries that detail legacies of the under-recognized and the obscure based on the layout of Encyclopedia Britannica.

Below is an excerpt from the interview with the artist on his solo exhibition at Perrotin Seoul, running through Oct. 7. It has been edited for clarity and readability.

**Q. Your drive to unearth the unseen narratives and characters that lie outside of the mainstream canon is at the core of your oeuvre. How would you describe your yearslong journey of reimagining the traditional systems of knowledge?**

A. Imagine putting a giant rock in a room, and then someone asking you to push it from one side of the room to the other. Getting people to pay attention to these hidden histories is like pushing a giant boulder across a room. It's not meant to be easy by definition. I think you have to accept that. You may not be able to move it in the end, but you should still try.

**Q. The idea of visibility is central to your work, including the iconic "The Encyclopedia of Invisibility." The project is all about gathering knowledge that has fallen into obscurity, but it's interesting that the audience can never actually access the entirety of the book itself. Similarly, your kaleidoscopic paintings and collages on view at the gallery only reveal fragments of the source material and historical, cultural references. Could you explain the reason behind this intentional concealment?**

A. I guess another way of asking that is, do you have to know all the lyrics to your favorite song to like it? I think it's interesting that even though you don't know all the information, you're still moving your head to the beat. It's not about learning all the lyrics and reciting every word, but about the energy of the music. It's the same with my art.



Tavares Strachan's "Self Portrait: Loyalty to the Past (Blue Guro Mask)" (2023) / Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

**Q. You have journeyed to the Arctic and have been trained as a cosmonaut. Are these ambitious experiences influenced by your conscious decision to transfer them into art?**

A. I think the more experiences you have, to a certain extent, the more compelling the ideas that you're bringing into the world might be. So it's not like a one-to-one thing, as in I do the space training and then I make art. It's more like thinking about what gives me a more rounded worldview, and then somehow that converts itself into a work.

**Q. It is at this exhibition, "Do and Be," that you are unveiling a new body of ceramic works. Could you describe them in more detail?**

A. These would be my first official self-portraits in ceramics. I was working with experts from NASA and at the same time was in Kenya doing some research, and I was really re-inspired by the Martian landscape, the red earth and being able to build from the basic elements.

I'm thinking about the relationship between really sophisticated technology and really ancient ways of making. Spaceships' rocket motors are made of ceramic. I love the idea that the material is really elemental but incredibly complex at the same time, because you can use that same dirt to launch something in space.

All four of them (a youngster in a baseball helmet, a man in an astronaut helmet, a lion and a polar bear) are self-portraits, or meditations on various experiences that I've had. I think the idea that you could be encapsulated in one photo or painting is absurd. So I'm curious about the location and the dislocation of the self.



Tavares Strachan's "Self Portrait (Space Helmet)" (2023) / Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

**Q. Many of your unconventional, research-based projects have taken years to complete. What has motivated you to keep going?**

A. I fall in love with things that take a long time to make. I think human beings are very human-centric in terms of how they understand time. So much of how we operate is based on the fact that we live for 80 years or whatever the time stamp is. So we're sometimes incapable of thinking about things beyond that limitation. I've become more and more fascinated with things that take long periods of time. "Enoch" (a golden bust launched into space) probably took five years from the beginning to the end, and "The Encyclopedia of Invisibility" took 16 years. They are projects that I love because there are some things that can only be achieved with a very significant time commitment. I like being able to approach the world in a way that is maybe counter to the speed at which we're living and operating in current society.

**Q. You once said that you consider your primary audience of your work to be schoolchildren in the Bahamas. Such a vision also led you to establish the Bahamas Aerospace and Sea Exploration Center as well as the OKU, a nonprofit art community project. Why does this remain an important mission for you?**

A. I think any professional is prioritizing their childhood self as their main audience. So you're making the kinds of things that you would have wanted as a child. Most of us are trying to deeply talk to our childhood self.