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Tavares STRACHAN

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📍 'Who is not Judas?' ... The First Supper will be unveiled in the Royal Academy's courtyard as part of Entangled Pasts. Photograph: Jonty Wilde/Courtesy of the artist and Courtesy of Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland

He replaced Christ with Haile Selassie and took Judas's place himself. The Bahamian's epic artistic revisions, from space to the Arctic, hit Britain in 2024 - and the Royals are in his sights

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In 2006, Tavares Strachan FedExed a 4.5-ton block of ice from Alaska to his childhood primary school in Nassau, capital of the Bahamas. It was displayed there in all its frosted glory in a solar-powered glass-panelled freezer. This was a trophy of sorts, from a series of Arctic expeditions the artist had embarked on. Yet his achievement was less a

triumph over physical hardships than a challenge to imaginative ones. Strachan was the first Bahamian ever to visit the North Pole. Making a leftfield career move into art hadn't exactly been the norm in the Caribbean country either.

And then he made his next giant leap: training to be a cosmonaut at Star City in Moscow. It was the beginning of a multifaceted body of work that is proving audacious by any standard: exploring, in every sense imaginable, the forces that shape recognition and erasure. The words "We belong here", rendered in neon, recur in his art.

▲▲ *Like with most things, you soon realise there's another story*

"The most important medium for me is storytelling," he says from his New York studio, where he's preparing two major London projects. One is part of Entangled Pasts, the Royal Academy's decolonial exhibition; the other is Awakening, a career-spanning blockbuster for the

Hayward taking in collage, ceramics, neon, performance and sculpture. "Space training and visiting the North Pole are a way for me to unpack moments in history that are presented in totally one way. Like with most things, you soon realise there's another story."



📷 No limits ... Strachan in the Arctic. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist, photo by Christopher Hoover.

His greatest discovery in the frozen north concerned an African American explorer called Matthew Henson, who accompanied Robert Peary on his Arctic expeditions. Peary is credited with conquering the North Pole, but Henson claimed to have actually been the first in the party to the spot. Overlooked by history, Henson has been a fascination for Strachan, notably in 2013, when the latter became the first artist to represent the Bahamas at the Venice Biennale. *Polar Eclipse*, his pointedly titled exhibition, included a glass sculpture of the explorer floating and near-invisible in mineral oil, and a choir of Bahamian children singing Inuit songs.

Strachan remembers when he first saw a picture of Henson. "He looked like me," he says. "It was a Eureka! moment. I thought, 'Why hadn't anyone mentioned this to me when I was a child?'" In Nassau, Strachan had attended an English school that followed an English syllabus. His father bought prized leather-bound volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* that told a similarly blinkered version of significant events.

Strachan set about creating his own *Encyclopaedia of Invisibility*, rooting out the hidden or ignored - everyone from Zheng Yi Sao, the Chinese female pirate, to Rosalind Franklin, the scientist whose work was crucial to the understanding of DNA. "A Pandora's box opened up," he says. "We have way more than what's been recorded." In exhibitions, the work is presented as a huge book, bound in blue leather and displayed under glass.



‘Nowhere has shaped the Caribbean like England’ ... Every Tongue Shall Confess, 2019. Photograph: Miho Suzuki/Courtesy of the artist, photo by Miho Suzuki.

Many of the people documented within its pages are found in his collage-like paintings, embellished with diagrams and formulas that add to the sense of obscure knowledge. In 2018, Strachan made a memorial to one of its entries: Robert Henry Lawrence Jr, the first African American astronaut. This took the form of a golden urn-cum-satellite that was blasted into space via a SpaceX rocket. It now orbits Earth. Visitors to his 2020 London show at Marian Goodman gallery were startled by performers in their midst playing Henson and his son, who sang about the complexities of history.

At the Royal Academy in February, Strachan will present a huge bronze sculpture riffing on Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. A print of the Renaissance masterpiece hung at his grandmother's house, above all the family photos. "I always thought, 'Why are all these Europeans hanging over a family of people from west Africa in the

Caribbean?'" His own version explores the transatlantic slave trade via a diverse new lineup of diners, from American abolitionist Harriet Tubman to [Sister Rosetta Tharpe](#), the queer black "godmother of rock'n'roll". Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia, is Christ and Strachan himself is Judas. Naturally, he takes issue with history's cut and dried verdict on the biblical betrayer. "All of us make mistakes," he says. "Who is not Judas?"

Strachan's attacks on established narratives have a particular urgency in the UK, given that its own colonial history is still excluded from the essential school syllabus. New works at the Hayward will include a "coronation hut", exploring the British royal family and housing a "deep dive" into the history of such ceremonies, reaching right back to humankind's origins in Africa. "What better country to talk about coronations in?" he asks. "Nowhere has shaped the Caribbean like England. When it has such a monopoly on storytelling, it's important to have a counterpoint."

● Tavares Strachan's work appears in *Entangled Pasts, 1768-Now* at the Royal Academy, London, [from 3 February to 28 April](#). Tavares Strachan: *Awakening* is at the Hayward Gallery, London, from 11 June to 1 September