

Tavares Strachan: Beyond the Horizon

BY NEVILLE WAKEFIELD



Installation view of *Robert*, 2018, blue neon, purple neon, pyrex, transformers, MDF box, dimensions variable, at the 58th Venice Biennale, "May You Live In Interesting Times," 2019. Photo by Andrea D'altoè Neonlauro.

A conversation between curator Neville Wakefield and multidisciplinary artist Tavares Strachan that took place in the shadow of the American Museum of Natural History in the dog days of a New York summer.



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION



Installation view of (left to right) *The Student*, 2018, mylar, matte paper, pigment, enamel, vinyl, graphite, mounted on acrylic, 91.4×91.4×5.1 cm; *Four Hundred Meter Dash*, 2018, mylar, matte paper, pigment, spray paint, acrylic, oil stick, enamel, vinyl, graphite, unframed: 213.4×213.4 cm, framed: 227.3×227.3×7.9 cm; *The Stranger*, 2018, mylar, matte paper, pigment, enamel, vinyl, graphite, mounted on acrylic, 91.4×91.4×5.1 cm, at the 58th Venice Biennale, "May You Live In Interesting Times," 2019. Photo by Andrea D'altoè Neonlauro.



The artist (left) working on the installation of *I am* (2017) at Desert X 2017, Coachella Valley, California. Photo by Brooke DiDonato.

Islanders, of which I am one, are used to spending time considering horizons. Where others look inward for self-realization, islanders tend to look out, their eyes and thoughts drawn to the horizon. This is certainly true of Tavares Strachan, who grew up in the Bahamas, and for whom the question of what lies beyond has informed a range of projects and investigations that have led him to the Arctic, the desert, and even outer space.

Strachan's artistic practice activates the intersections of art, science, and politics, offering uniquely synthesized points of view on the cultural dynamics of systematized knowledge. He is perhaps best known for his work *The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want (Arctic Ice Project)* (2004–06), for which he shipped a four-and-a-half-ton block of arctic ice to Nassau and exhibited it in a specially designed, solar-powered freezer chamber. The work plays with the notions of displacement and interdependency, which are central both to the climatic systems of equatorial and arctic regions, and the cultural and existential realities conditioned by these environments. With *Encyclopedia of Invisibility* (2018), Strachan explores similar themes and engages directly with epistemology and imperialism. The body of work, which encompasses mixed-media installations and a 2,400-page text with entries on marginalized and esoteric histories, redefines the parameters of what "deserves" to be known, and raises new questions on the link between power and knowledge in the internet age.

NW Let's start with the idea of the island—an idea that was very present to us both in terms of upbringing and, later, philosophy. Many things are born of island experience: one is self-reliance, but another is this idea of the horizon and the insatiable curiosity that I think all islanders, whether from the Bahamas or the Isles of Scilly, have about what lies beyond.

TS Something that I've been thinking about a lot recently is the aesthetics of survival. What does survival look like? And then when survival moves from just base-level existing to thriving, what does that look like? There's no clear-cut playbook on that. A lot of work and ideas come out of a sense of invention and survival. You do those things because you have to do them, because your resources are so limited. And I think that relates deeply to the idea of the horizon. I think in the quest for survival, you end up finding the horizon; the things you do in order to survive end up equaling the things that you discover.

NW Is exploration a side of survival, particularly in a world that is spatially circumscribed, which of course an island and, in different ways, a gallery is?

TS I think exploration is the scene in *Planet of the Apes* [1968] where the head guy says, "Don't go over to the forbidden zone," and can't really articulate why. He just says don't go over there because we're not allowed to go over there. And I think that's kind of how most of society operates. You can't go over there until someone goes over there and realizes that it's not a big deal to go over there. Islands kind of prepare you for that. Those limitations prepare you for that kind of life structure—the kind of corporate, quasi-political life structure where you have to traverse terrains and rules that are not necessarily based on anything fundamental. They're just based on either some specific entity's aesthetic or access to power at that particular moment. And so explorers either jump over [those barriers], climb, tunnel underneath, or blow them up. I think the idea of the island is deeply connected to managing all of these structures.

NW You've been drawn to geophysical extremes, places where time and space get a little bit distorted. I'm thinking of both the expedition to the North Pole and your excursions toward outer space, via rocketry and cosmology. What attracts you to these places?

TS I think a lot of it has to do with—for lack of a better way of saying it—wanting to get off the island. It is about wanting to both physically and metaphorically leave, which is especially acute when we're talking about an island that measures 21 by 7 miles. It's a desire to go beyond the border, because you're very much defined by the edge and it becomes a little bit claustrophobic at times.

NW Would you say that that your work has therefore intentionally resisted categorization?

TS I think there's a certain impulse to define someone's body of work before they have a chance to actually complete it. I wanted to have a much longer dialogue about the set of things that I was interested in and have them play out over time, because then time becomes an interesting ingredient in all of it. And so there are certain things you can't know, but only within time.

I think something dies in the human quest for knowledge. You kill an idea once you start to want to define it too succinctly, and when an artist is developing a body of work, I think one of the worst things he or she can do is try to lock it in by categorizing it, by trying to organize it. Artists I know and respect are always interested in disrupting this quest for order in the midst of chaos, and I think that's a beautiful thing.

NW Is that why you've been notably resistant to participating in black identity shows, or the gallery system more generally?

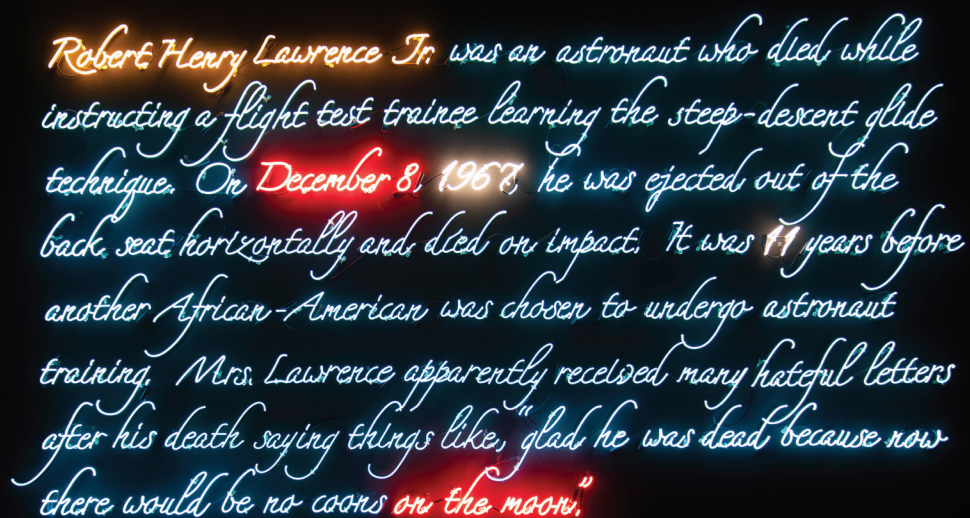
TS I think those ideas are actually very much related because fundamental to any artist is some kind of economic underpinning, and so you can't really have "white" artists, "black" artists, or "yellow" artists without having a gallery system for those ideas to live within. And if you're interested in ruffling those feathers, I think you need to know where you stand in relation to it.

NW What do you see as an alternative to the gallery system? These spaces of commerce and categorization have defined exposure and consumption for the last century-and-a-half—how do you see artistic practice going out into the world without these vehicles?

TS It's interesting and, I think, productive to take a wider view of that issue in relation to time, especially because before there were galleries, there was a patron model. Artists had relationships with patrons and those kinds of relationships are not unique, but because we can become a little myopic, we forget that's only one way in which one can go about being an artist. I think it's troubling when you meet with art students and all they want to talk about is which gallery they're going to show in. That seems to me beside the point.

NW The last decade or so has seen a general shift within art schools away from a laboratory model, born of the 1960s emphasis on experimentation, to more of a guild model, which is much more vocational and artisanal in its approach.

TS I think experimentation is, to a certain degree, dying. I think there's an old saying: "If everything's going right, then you're doing something wrong."



Robert Henry Lawrence Jr. was an astronaut who died while instructing a flight test trainee learning the steep-descent glide technique. On December 8, 1967, he was ejected out of the back seat horizontally and died on impact. It was 11 years before another African-American was chosen to undergo astronaut training. Mrs. Lawrence apparently received many hateful letters after his death saying things like, "glad he was dead because now there would be no coons on the moon."

Installation view of *Robert Henry Lawrence Jr.*, 2018, 4500k neon, blue neon, yellow neon, orange neon, tube supports, transformers, 198.1 × 367.7 × 10.5 cm, at the 58th Venice Biennale, "May You Live In Interesting Times," 2019. Photo by Andrea D'altoè Neonlauro.

NW Does it ever go right? Back to the ideas of exploration and of limits, another aspect of this discussion is to do with the epistemological boundaries that define the edge of knowledge. Could you talk about these more conceptual horizons with reference to your *Encyclopedia of Invisibility*?

TS With so much opportunity, I think people also feel the most powerless. We're in a moment where there's the most opportunity for communication, the most opportunity for connecting the dots and connecting people, but at the same time, I think people probably now feel the least powerful. I think that has to do with the idea of how we're defining power. And if we're defining power by what is versus what's not, then I think we're always going to run into a kind of collision with the natural world. I like the idea of interrogating systems of power because they are, in a way, how we define ourselves. Can we as individuals create systems of our own? Can we investigate where knowledge is coming from, on an individual level? That used to be a huge part of scholarship, and the *Encyclopedia of Invisibility* is a kind of interrogation of these kinds of power systems.

NW The *Encyclopedia Britannica*, from which it's derived, was a body of colonial knowledge, and now we have Google, which has also in a different way become its own post-nation-state of knowledge. Do you think they're radically different?

TS As a kind of capitalist tool or weapon, Google and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* are all about knowledge mining. And from the perspective of a conceptual artist, what you're really talking about is mining ideas—something that has been traditionally the realm of artists. As an art project, the question of *Encyclopedia Britannica* versus Google is quite fascinating because they function on a similar wavelength, except one is on steroids because you're introducing the speed of access to information into the equation.

NW Do you think about that in terms of velocity—how rapidly and how far ideas travel? In your practice, are you trying to slow down or speed up this process, or merely reveal it to be what it is?

TS Absolutely. I think velocity has a lot to do with sound and music, and if you think of an artist's career, I think the changing of speeds creates rhythm. And this is why it's important for artists to be able to mature before they have to worry about public feedback, because you're making this music over an extended period of time. The switching of speeds matters a lot, in terms of the asterisks of a narrative arc, the asterisks of material exploits. And so certain things might not make sense to an audience member now that would make a lot more sense in 20 years, but that time, that agreement of time, has to be introduced into the equation for all of it to make sense. And so the question for a lot of artists is how do we buy time? How do we get the 20 years in between one idea and the other so that the dots can become connected?

NW That idea of interval is also one that's based on music. The iconography of music makes frequent appearances in your Mylar collages. Is that another way of notating time?

TS Yes, I think it's a notation for time but also for a kind of game plan. I think this plan is really important, and there's a difference between a finite game and an infinite game—when you look at a finite game, there's a winner and a loser, but with the infinite game, the participants play again. And so this element of time comes back in, this element of music comes back in, and all these references come back in through these two-dimensional works because they are kind of working out all of these different layers of game-playing, which is important for doing anything.

NW Music appears within the work in the form of images—for example, of dancehall legend Yellowman. You have also described music as a vehicle for protest; in our previous conversation, you spoke about Bob Marley, and the idea of framing resistance within a popular idiom.

TS I think Bob Marley and the Wailers were some of the most successful, politically problematic censors that I've ever come across. They were very successful in telling the world about all of its problems, and they amassed a huge following, which is a really difficult thing to do. Most people want to chew bubblegum and look at butterflies, so it is hard to get people to pay attention to someone who is telling you that there's going to be a "soul shakedown" or that Africa needs to unite. And I think it proves this sort of general idea that there actually can be a balance struck between form and content.

TAVARES STRACHAN was born in 1979 in Nassau, the Bahamas, and now lives and works in New York. Having studied painting at the College of the Bahamas and liberal arts at Brown University, Strachan graduated with a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design, and a MFA from Yale University. His recent solo exhibitions include "Invisibles" (2018) at Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and "Always, Sometimes, Never" (2018) at the Frye Art Museum, Seattle. He has also participated in major international festivals including the 58th Venice Biennale (2019) and the 57th Carnegie International (2018), Pittsburgh. Strachan was recently named the 2019-20 artist-in-residence at the Getty Research Institute. In 2018, he won the Frontier Art Prize and was the Allen Institute's inaugural artist-in-residence. As part of his LACMA Art + Technology Lab Artist Grant project, Strachan has been working on a project with SpaceX to celebrate the forgotten story of Robert Henry Lawrence Jr., the first African-American astronaut selected for any national space program.

NEVILLE WAKEFIELD is a creative director, writer, curator, and critic. He has acted as senior curatorial advisor for MoMA PS1 and as curator of Frieze Projects. He is the co-founder of *Destricted* (2006), a series of films that address the issue of sexuality in art, as well as the creative co-director of *Tar* magazine. He has worked extensively with international institutions, including Schaulager, Newmünchenstein, where he curated the Matthew Barney retrospective "Prayer Sheet with the Wound and the Nail" (2010). Recent curatorial projects include Elevation 1049, a site-specific biennial in the Swiss Alps that is currently in its third edition; and Desert X, for which he has served as artistic director since its establishment in 2017.



Installation view of *I am*, 2017, neon, EPS foam, urethane, acrylic, sand, dirt, electrical components, 121.9×91.4 m, at Desert X 2017, Coachella Valley, 2017. Photo by David Blank.