

Inside Kiyon Williams' Earthen Odes to Ancestral Power

The 32-year-old artist discusses their inner child, deep frying the American flag, and the therapeutic potential of art.

BY WREN SANDERS – April 21, 2023



Kiyon Williams started out the same way many artists do: throwing mud at the wall to see what sticks. Only for Williams, the process was literal. In 2019, the Newark-born creator had just arrived at Columbia University's MFA program. Unlike their studiomates — a mix of painters and photographers — Williams had no prior experience with wall art. "I remember having this profound sense of anxiety," Williams says, recalling the fear of being "confronted by the white wall," which became something of a looming antagonist.

Then Williams found a way to confront it. "What I did was go out and collect a bunch of dirt from the park by my school, as I had been familiar with the material." Returning to their studio, Williams began throwing the soil at the canvas, manipulating it, repeating the gesture over and over until the mess of mud began to resemble the continental United States. "It was this aha moment," Williams remembers, "when the meaning of the work revealed itself:" an organic reckoning with the inescapable role of settler colonial violence in the creation of America.

Earth has proven to be a constant throughout the 32-year-old artist's career. They have alternately used it as a vehicle for expressing their evolving sense of self, as in their 2016 performance piece "Unearthing," and as a "silent witness" to America's history of racial capitalism, as in "Reaching Towards Warmer Suns," a sculpture

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made from the soil of the Virginia riverbanks where kidnapped West African people first arrived in America.

Ahead of Williams' latest exhibition, *A Crack Beneath the Weight of It All*, now on-view at San Francisco's Altman Siegel gallery, we spoke to Williams about their ongoing relationship with natural materials, deep frying American flags into deliciously tongue-in-cheek sculptures, and the value of making art simply because it feels good.



Before we get into your new exhibition, let's start with your relationship to art. Was it something you grew up around? How would you trace the roots of your creativity?

I didn't grow up, let's say, engaging contemporary art, but I grew up around people with a really strong aesthetic sensibility and an appreciation for aesthetic joy. I'm thinking of my grandmother, about my mother, and their fashion, which helped cultivate my aesthetic taste.

Can you recall the first piece of art that pushed you toward being the kind of creator you are today?

When I was in high school, I took a visual art class that took us to MoMA. To be honest, I don't really remember shit from that trip besides this one piece, which left a piercing impression on me. It was a pointy sculpture that the museum educator said was about the impact of HIV and AIDS. Fifteen years later, I went searching for the piece, which by then I was sure was by Félix González-Torres. Two months ago, I went back to the museum and found it.

What was it like to see it again now as a sculptor in your own right?

It opened up a lot of questions for me about the relationship between form and content. González-Torres' piece is a series of seven white paper cones, titled, "Supreme Majority." But the cones also look like Ku Klux Klan Hoods. And so when I revisited the work, it made me think about how minimal shapes can be imbued with and elicit such meaning. A series of cones can reference the history of KKK terrorism and relate that to the Supreme Court; it's paper, but it can evoke and engage so much.

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Which brings us to ***__A Crack Beneath The Weight of it All, __***the titular piece from your latest exhibition. I'm excited to ask you about it, as I understand the sculpture marks a sort of personal revolution.

Absolutely. I love someone who does their research. [laughs]

You see where I'm going with this. In an interview with ***__BOMB magazine __***a few years back, you mentioned that a rule you have is to avoid making square or rectilinear pieces. "I think squares, boxes, and cages are oppressive," was how you put it. "They're meant to contain and capture and create boundaries. When working with soil, my goal is to create a form that doesn't yet exist or one that evokes biomorphic shapes. I don't want to package it into something neat and safe for easy consumption."

So, tell me — why the square now?

I made this geometric minimalist form, both because it appears to be cracking, crumbling, breaking open, and to reference the tradition of minimalist sculpture wherein the square emerges a lot, yet is only about the form, the aesthetic and holds no social or political implications. I wanted to appropriate the form of the square to suggest that it can be read within a context of global climate change, to show how the earth is quite literally being impacted by ecological catastrophe.

Earth, soil, dirt — all are essential, distinct features of your practice. What draws you to working with this material?

What it comes down to is that I just really like the tactile sensation of having earth in my hands — manipulating it by hand. If I was to relate it to anything, it would be growing up and helping my grandmother in her garden and planting things with her — this really transcendent experience of working with earth by hand. It's also an

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object material; it relates conceptually to how I think about queerness: of being messy, of refusing boundaries, of being considered disposable, like dirt. Dirt is matter out of place; dirt is everything that doesn't belong, what needs to be removed in order to make a place sterile. In this sense, dirt not only refuses normativity, it's literally the catalyst for life. It is the lifeforce. And, of course, it holds so much history. All of those things converge to compel me to continue making work with it.

That's so beautiful. There's something powerful about making an aesthetic choice based on the enjoyment one finds from simply doing it, physically.

Being an artist is not easy. It is not guaranteed that you'll have a career that will sustain you. For all intents and purposes, it's not the practical choice. I do this every day because I deeply enjoy it, because it gives me such a sense of vitality. For me, there was literally no other option. I don't really know what else I would do and live a life of dignity and a life of creativity and vitality if I wasn't an artist. It was this or bust.



I'm thinking now about the connection between you and yourself as a child in the garden with your grandmother. What role would you say younger versions of yourself play in your practice?

Oh my God. Such a huge, huge role. Like in "Meditation on the Making of America," I'm literally throwing dirt on the wall. That gesture comes from this childlike sense of wanting to both play and fuck shit up. In what other context is it socially sanctioned to just throw a bunch of fucking mud at the wall?

Not enough.

There's nowhere else you could really do that. And there should be more, because it's very therapeutic. *[Laughs]* I highly recommend it if you haven't done it.

Speaking of therapeutic, how's it feel to fry an American flag?

I wouldn't use the word therapeutic there. But once again, it was just fun. Let's call it subversive play.

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Switching gears a little, in addition to your art, you're also quite the fashion girlie. In terms of your personal style, who do you look to for inspiration?

When I was a kid and first coming into my own gender queerness and nonbinary-ness, I was obsessed with Lenny Kravitz. There was this image that I love of him from some Fashion Week back in the day, the 2000s. He had on these really fab Rick Owens thigh-high snakeskin wedge heel boots. That was my icon: someone who wasn't afraid to push against gender norms and was just really fly.



From performance to sculpture, your practice has already evolved so much. I'm wondering if fashion might be another space you could see yourself moving into?

Yes. This conversation has helped name those desires. As someone who grew up having to defend my choice to wear clothes that made me feel beautiful, and as an adult who now takes it for granted sometimes, I thank my childhood self for enduring those challenges so that I can arrive at a place where I get to wear really beautiful clothes. For my exhibition opening, I'm probably going to wear off the runway Loewe, one of my favorite designers. With ease and little effort, I get to wear clothes that make me feel beautiful, and that wasn't always the case. So those reminders help remind me that fashion is really powerful. If I'm talking about my dreams, and I'm going to dream, I would love to design and do an installation for a fashion show.

I so see that, Kiyon. And what a beautiful resonance with the beginning of our conversation — how your earliest exposure to art was the style of the women in your family.

Right? Yes. Full circle moment.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

A Crack Beneath the Weight of it All is exhibiting at Atlman Siegel through April 29.