

ARTS AND LETTERS

The Black Artists Claiming More Space Than Ever Before

New monumental works are filling landscapes and galleries, where they argue for the freedom and power to play.

By Emily Lordi
March 24, 2023



IN 2020, THE artist Kiyan Williams began deep-frying American flags, first encasing small, souvenir-size Stars and Stripes in bubbled golden skin, then cooking a full-size nylon banner with paprika and flour. It was a gesture of play as much as protest, striking above all for Williams's decision not to burn the flags but to preserve their crisp, and oddly appetizing, ruination. Last year, around the same time that those works were displayed at Lyles & King gallery in New York, Williams, 32, scaled up their practice by installing a 13-by-8-foot structure of hardened earth called "Ruins of Empire" in Brooklyn Bridge Park. The sculpture referenced the bronze Statue of Freedom (designed by the sculptor Thomas Crawford and fabricated by enslaved laborers) perched atop the dome of the U.S. Capitol since 1863, while sinking it into the earth. Rather than destroying a cherished American symbol, Williams was once again staging its decomposition — now in a larger sense and in view of the public. "I hate to use the word 'magic,'" Williams says. "It's like a mystery. People ask, 'How is this standing? How is this here?'"

While the history of America can inspire fantasies of scorched-earth demolition, Williams is one of several Black artists to respond instead with massive experimental construction. "Ruins" is part of a trend toward monumental Black art located in outdoor public spaces, as well as in the museum. Last April, Simone Leigh, 55,

PERES PROJECTS

the first Black woman to have her work shown at the U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, filled the venue with towering abstract sculptures of Black female forms — including the 16-foot-high bronze bust “Brick House” (2019), originally installed on the High Line overlooking 10th Avenue in Manhattan. (Leigh’s first museum survey opens April 6 at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston.) Charles Gaines’s “The American Manifest: Moving Chains,” a 110-foot-long bargelike structure made of steel and African mahogany, with nine 1,600-pound chains churning overhead, arrived at New York’s Governors Island last October. (It’s widely thought to evoke the slave trade.) Hank Willis Thomas, 47, has created several huge works, such as the 19-ton bronze homage to Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King recently unveiled on the Boston Common. Xaviera Simmons’s recent exhibition at the Queens Museum in New York, “Crisis Makes a Book Club,” featured a 16-foot-high structure, “Align,” representing the imagined response of white women to the antiracist books they’ve been reading. And at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, Mass., EJ Hill, 37, has built an operational roller coaster, its rails painted cotton candy pink.

These works are monumental in every sense — in terms of the money, time, labor and space required to make them, as well as their social and technical ambition. Their creators, all of whom have worked in other media like painting and photography, describe them as manifestations of creative dreams; and the effect of encountering them can, as Williams notes of “Ruins,” verge on sublime. Their appeal is elemental in a nation where we marvel at the sheer size of things; and political, given that those with the resources to create such works, whether within museums or parks, have historically not been Black.

As these works travel America — Gaines’s “Moving Chains” will be relocated to a port in Cincinnati next year — or redefine plazas they permanently occupy, their spectacular presence itself can feel reparative in a country filled with places where Black people could not legally (and still cannot comfortably or safely) go, especially at a moment when Black freedom is often articulated in terms of size: “Never be smaller than you are,” the American poet Elizabeth Alexander recalls her husband telling her Black sons (in her 2015 memoir, “The Light of the World”). Such art signals both presence and absence. For these works, as large as they are, might be best understood as maquettes or smaller-scale models for broader change: By exuding the possibilities of Black power and play, they ask what would happen if there were an even greater freedom, among artists and nonartists alike, to roam, defy and create — to leave every kind of trace or mark upon a space.

BLACK ARTISTS HAVE long staked large-scale claims to the visual landscape of the United States — whether by painting the community-based Wall of Respect mural created by the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) in Chicago in 1967, tagging the New York City subways with graffiti or creating outdoor sculptures such as Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project, a series (begun in 1986) of brightly painted abandoned houses on Detroit’s east side. But the canvases for these works were typically pre-existing structures, and making them was relatively inexpensive (and, in the case of graffiti, often illegal), whereas today’s free-standing sculptures require social sanction and robust institutional support. According to the art historian Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, new, “high-profile, well-funded commissions” are at last going to Black artists.

She prefers to think of her sculptures in relation not to such traditional monuments but to the abstract works by Joan Miró and Pablo Picasso that she grew up seeing in downtown Chicago: “fabulous” sculptures, as she calls them, that “weren’t forced upon the public.” Similarly, Thomas has described his “All Power to All People” (2017), a Monument Lab-curated eight-foot-high sculpture of an Afro pick in downtown Philadelphia, as a homage to Claes Oldenburg’s giant 1976 “Clothespin,” located nearby. Williams, whose work with the earth nods to unrecorded ancestral histories and pays tribute to their grandmother’s practice of gardening, describes “Ruins” as revising the tradition of American land art, in which artists used machines to carve into the earth.