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ARTFORUM

New York

Kiyan Williams – LYLES & KING



Smoke literally and metaphorically suffused Kiyan Williams's solo exhibition "Un/earthing" at Lyles & King. Also lingering in the air were the smell of soil, vegetable oil, and flour, along with assorted seasonings used for summer cookout dishes. Channeling rage and a desire for representation at this turbulent moment in history, the show opened only weeks before the commencement of the January 6 select committee hearings into the Trump-instigated insurrection. Just inside the gallery's entrance, Williams had installed a dozen four-by-six-inch nylon souvenir American flags that had previously flown over the Capitol and which they had purchased via various Congressional representatives' websites. They, however, had been battered and deep-fried.

All of the banners were titled *How Do You Properly Fry an American Flag?*, 2022, and are a continuation of Williams's 2020 performance of the same name. The works recall Dread Scott's controversial installation *What Is the Proper Way to Display the U.S. Flag?*, 1988; Scott critiqued the national symbol by placing it on the ground, inviting viewers to step on it as they wrote responses to the titular question. Produced at the height of the US

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culture wars of the late 1980s and early '90s, Scott's work caused a national uproar that dovetailed with a 1989 Supreme Court decision that upheld "flag desecration" as an act of free speech. Williams's Old Glory cookout also suggests a link to the whitewashed history of barbecue, which has long been rooted in the customs of African American cuisine.

Williams's flags were mounted to the wall in sundry positions: right side up, upside down, or backward. Crunchy layers of thick, pale batter almost totally obscured the stars and stripes on some of them, while others bore tawny burn marks or zesty spatters of paprika across their centers. Near the works, Williams showed a pair of untitled drawings from 2020 that were created from the aftermath of a fry. The lovely, earthy abstractions get their color from oils and spices—such as turmeric, paprika, and the Puerto Rican seasoning blend sazón—used in the cooking process. As performances, Williams's flag fries exist somewhere between joyful celebrations that reclaim BIPOC culinary traditions, and burn-it-all-down expressions of rage. During the course of the show, the artist held one such event, inviting participants to bring condiments of their choice to "flavor" three large flags that were likewise once flown over the Capitol.

The exhibition also included sculptures from the artist's series "Sentient Ruins," 2021–, composed of mud, moss, binders, and other elements, and are built around steel armatures. Williams transported some of the earth from Virginia's Lake Drummond—part of the remote Great Dismal Swamp, where Indigenous and formerly enslaved people created independent communities. The works variously evoke people, architectural remnants, and tree stumps. Though cracked and seemingly delicate, the sculptures are precisely constructed, as evidenced by the detailed facial features on Sentient Ruin 1 and the Donatella Versace–esque blond wigs in *Sentient Ruin 7* and *8*. Williams has written that their practice is influenced by Land artists such as Beverly Buchanan and Ana Mendieta. Like theirs, Williams's work monumentalizes the presence of race, queerness, and femininity in the landscape—aspects that run counter to white and masculinist ideations of "the wilderness." Placed atop metallic sheets, Williams's sculptures simultaneously evoke the reflective surface of a body of water or the understated silver Mylar glamour of Warhol's 1960s Factory.

As an artist two generations younger than the pioneers of Land and Conceptual art, Williams freshens the logics of transposition and opposition inherent to those movements. Our fraught national symbol becomes a crispy savory snack, its textured surface reminiscent of both scorched flesh and desiccated ruins. The swampland is relocated to the gallery—but reimagined via the invocation of Indigenous nations or diaspora whose members might have inhabited it. Invested as they are in questions of monumentality, Williams accepts neither nature nor culture as a blank slate that can be reinvented by artists. Rather, their work engages in the complicated reparative labor of un/earthing historical truths in places where such records no longer exist.

— Wendy Vogel