

Kiyan Williams Digs Into the Meaning of Soil

In their film on view at the Shed, the artist explores dirt's unsettling aesthetic effects, as well as its conceptual resonances.

by Louis Bury

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“I had to dig it out,” Kiyan Williams explains in the breathy opening moments of their short film “Notes on Digging” (2020), part of the Shed’s series of online commissions, *Up Close*. “I had to find a way to get it out of and off of my body.” Little is visible of Williams’s body yet, just a close up of their sneakerclad feet working a shovel in a small grass field. The field is part of Virginia’s Richmond Slave Trail, a recreation spot along the James River that, during the colonial era, was a dock site “where some of the first enslaved Black people touch[ed] land” on the continent. The “it” that Williams digs out refers to past and present trauma: the violence inflicted upon African slaves centuries ago and the violence inflicted upon “Black trans people” today in the US, with the implication that the latter should be understood as part of the former’s “unwanted inheritance.”

The nine-minute-long film documents the making of Williams’s uncanny public sculpture, “Reaching Towards Warmer Suns” (2020), a cluster of exaggeratedly long dirt stalks, each culminating in an outstretched dirt hand, that rise like zombie arms from the earth. The ingenious sculpture is powerful even when mediated by a camera; New Yorkers will have the chance to see it in person this fall as part of Socrates Sculpture Park’s *MONUMENTS NOW* exhibition. In the meantime, *Notes on Digging* exists not simply as a prelude but as a compelling artwork in its own right, an ecological Black trans* *ars poetica* that contemplates how to “memorialize the ongoing struggle of selfdetermination for Black people.”

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The film addresses this question through its interplay of spirituality and embodiment, language and visuals. Williams describes the process of making the sculpture as a reparative ritual, an effort “to see what traces of stolen life were left in the soil.” “The first time I touched the dirt I knew it was medicine,” they recount, as they crouch down and rub the soil in their hands, “It held me together, grounded me, kept me rooted.” In another sequence, Williams vogues in a reedy field, wearing an unbuttoned button-down with a tshirt underneath, as the voiceover describes how dirt is “a metaphor for all the things that once made me ashamed of inhabiting this body.” The camera then cuts to a shot of the artist reclined on a dock, wearing a long black dress; Williams adds that dirt “also represent[s] the possibility for transformation, regeneration, to become something otherwise.”



Williams has used dirt as an artistic medium across a number of early career projects, from a response to geophagic practices among enslaved Africans in the Americas (“Dirt Eater,” 2019), to smears of earth and paint on canvas (Earth Works series, 2018) that evoke Richard Serra’s black paintstick drawings and Clifford Owens’s performative drawings with coffee grounds. This is a smart, inspired material choice on Williams’s part. Dirt has gritty, slightly unsettling aesthetic effects, as well as suggestive conceptual resonances, that accord with the works’s overarching themes and underlying ideas. Part of what makes *Notes on Digging* so effective is the way Williams articulates those ideas with conviction and ease, distilling complex insights from contemporary Black theorists such as Christina Sharpe and historians such as Isabel Wilkerson into an accessible, casually poetic, explanatory narrative.

Throughout, Williams connects questions of Blackness and transformation to ecological concerns. The voiceovers include paeans to nature’s soothing capacities but the film’s larger, more disquieting message is that the roots of today’s climate crisis extend back to the extractive practices of settler colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. Geographer Kathryn Yusoff calls these exploitative, often buried eco-histories “Black Anthropocenes,” arguing that they are “predicated on the presumed absorbent qualities of black and brown bodies to take up the body burdens of exposure to toxicities and to buffer the violence of the earth.” In *Notes on Digging*, Williams uses artistic process to work toward sloughing off the legacies of those burdens at both an individual and collective level. The endeavor recalls the chthonic artistic rituals of pathbreaking 1960s and ’70s ecofeminists such as Agnes Denes, Aviva Rahmani, and Ana Mendieta, yet another way that Williams draws on the past to make a present uniquely their own.

Kiyan Williams’s “Notes on Digging” is currently on view online in the Shed’s Up Close series.