

Alumni Artists Featured at the Shed in Hudson Yards

BY REBECCA SHAPIRO | SUMMER 2019



When the Shed — New York’s ambitious new cultural space — announced it was commissioning “trailblazing projects” by emerging artists, more than 900 hopefuls applied. Only 52 were chosen. Five were Columbians.

A meditation on the marginalized



For Kiyani Williams ’19SOA, performance art has always been about more than aesthetics. It’s a way to explore identity and “reclaim power in a society that devalues Black, queer bodies.”

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Williams — who uses the pronoun “they” — says that growing up in Newark, they would dance to gain acceptance. “Being in front of a crowd — whether it was at a family barbecue or a queer nightclub — I felt freer than I did in other spaces,” they say.

As an undergraduate at Stanford University, where they pursued an independent course of study on art and identity, and as an MFA student at Columbia, Williams started using performance as a form of activism. In one piece, for example, they traveled through the gentrifying New York neighborhoods of Bushwick and Harlem wearing trash bags and cardboard boxes. In another, they emerged from a trash bag on a street corner and recited the story of two Black lesbians who were murdered and left in a dumpster.

“These kinds of pieces are meant to be uncomfortable and transgressive,” they say. “I want people to have to confront truths about how members of society are marginalized and discarded.”

Much of Williams’s work has involved dirt, and particularly the act of geophagy — consuming dirt — which was a common practice among slaves in the Caribbean and the American South. For their piece *Dirt Eater*, Williams sculpted the torture masks that were given to slaves as punishment for geophagy, using soil sourced from St. Croix, where the artist’s ancestors were slaves.

Williams will again incorporate dirt into their performance at the Shed. For that piece, Williams says, they will use their body and long braids to throw and smear soil onto a blank canvas, creating an outline of the map of America. After the performance, the canvas will be displayed in a group show at the Shed.

“Black people were brought to this country to work the soil. And when slavery ended, we were supposed to disappear,” they say. “This piece is a physical monument to the fact that we’re still here.”