

METAL



KIYAN WILLIAMS

TAKING MY BODY OUT OF WORK

Having travelled a lot in the last few months and just arrived at their new studio in Brooklyn after having opened their new exhibition at Peres Projects Seoul, *Between Starshine and Clay*, we speak with Kiyon Williams in a conversation you can read below, turned into an exciting tour for their creative process, audacity and strength as fundamental pillars of their vision in life and artistic practice, and of course about their new show. This latest project insists on haptic intimacy whose idea has been articulated and taken shape across mediums including performance, sculpture, and public art.

“As part of the work, the viewer has to walk on an earthen floor, confronting the earth and leaving their traces in the landscape,” Williams responds when asked about the experience that the public lives when visiting their new exhibition in Seoul, in which the audience gets involved in the show, becoming a fundamental actor. You can visit it in the Peres Projects gallery until November 12. Do you want to know more about their latest project and their plans for the coming months? Keep reading!

Hello Kiyon, and welcome to METAL! How are you and where are you answering us from?

Hi! I'm doing great. I'm answering from my studio in Brooklyn, which I just moved into this week. It's the first studio I'm renting on my own, so it feels like a milestone moment. I was travelling a lot this summer and just returned home from opening my show at Peres Projects Seoul. I was so inspired by all of my travels this summer. I'm ready to ground myself in the studio and get my hands dirty.

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Subverting traditional monumentality and national symbols, your artistic work is characterised by exhuming ignored histories through performance, sculpture, and video. Can you please tell us about your first approach to art professionally? When was it?

I entered my practice through performance, using my body as a material, muddying the boundaries between performance and sculpture by transforming objects and materials in front of live audiences. The first professional performance that I presented in my last year in grad school was *Meditation on the Making of America*, currently on view in my exhibition *Between Starshine and Clay* at Peres Seoul. The work really draws on the legacies of queer, feminist, and process performance art.

It took place in 2019 at the Shed, a brand new art institution in New York City, for its inaugural artist exhibition. I staged the performance while the building was still being built. In this brand-new building, I staged a performance in which I threw, smeared, and whipped mud onto three white canvases. The mud flew everywhere. The thunderous collision of earth hitting the panels roared in the gallery space. At one point, I invited the museum docent to join me in the performance.

Initially, the gestures appeared as abstract expressionist mark-making—splatters of dark matter on a white canvas. As the performance progressed, the dark matter took the shape of a rough outline of the continental United States. After the performance, the installation remained on view for the run of the exhibition. Over the course of the show, the mud dried and hardened, and the outline of the US cracked. It's a visual metaphor that remains in my practice.



I guess that throughout your creative process, in which you root out the hegemonic narratives that some elements and symbols convey and celebrate, many emotions blossom taking you on a very exciting journey, isn't it? What comes to your mind when you think of your first steps in the art world?

I think about how bold and insistent I've been throughout my journey. I've always remained steadfast and determined to experiment with unconventional materials and work with materials I have a relationship with, and I've been committed to making the work that I believe needs to be in the world despite how it's received and despite experiencing institutional challenges early on.

In grad school, I felt ostracized in my program, I was making experimental sculptural installations and performances using fugitive materials like earth, and was confronting a lot of institutional backlash and

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ensorship. During my first and second-year graduate exhibitions, the director of the university gallery had issues presenting my work in their brand-new Renzo Piano building (Renzo allegedly saw the work and loved it, btw!). The gallery director was afraid that my materials would ruin the sterile white cube, which in so many ways is a potent metaphor.

I persisted in making my work, and was curated into three institutional group shows while in grad school — the Sculpture Center, The Shed, and Brooklyn Museum — which affirmed me and my practice amidst some of the pushback I experienced in school.



During June and July, you were presenting your debut European solo exhibition, *A Past That Is Future Tense*, at Peres Projects Gallery in Milan. In this series of works, you examine the lives of objects, bringing to life subterranean and obscured meanings through the appropriation and transformation of architectural forms and national symbols that structure dominant narratives of history and power. How was the feedback from the Italian audience?

It was really refreshing to exhibit work in Milan and receive feedback from non-American audiences who brought different frames of reference. People made connections between my work and Arte Povera. So many people made connections to the work of Cady Noland, whose practice also considers the violence embedded in the American landscape.

The works sparked conversations about collapsing the built and natural environments; ecological, social, and political transformation; and collapsing linear notions of history and monumentality. It was exciting to make these connections in a global context, and also think about larger transatlantic histories that shaped the world.

From early September until November 12, you're presenting your first solo exhibition with Peres Projects in Seoul. If you had to synthesise the concept on which *Between Starshine and Clay* is built in just one sentence, what would it be?

The show insists on haptic intimacy.

“*Between Starshine and Clay* thus points to the notion of the ‘ruined’ body, and disrupts that notion through an emphasis on material traces of history, and archaeological ruins, positioning them here not as sites of disintegration and essential pastness, but as agents of regeneration,” we read in the manifesto that comes along with your new exhibition. How long have you been working on it? What has

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been the most special moment you experienced during the process?

I've been working on and thinking about how the past is not past but haunts the present, and thinking about ruin and ruination as sites and processes through which the future is imagined since my first performance. The idea has been articulated and taken shape across mediums – performance, sculpture, and public art. Now what I feel most exciting is that I've arrived at a point where I can take my body out of the work, which has always been the impulse.

For example, in *Meditations*, my back is facing the viewer, my face out of view. The focus of the video is on what I'm doing. In *Between Starshine and Clay*, my body is fragmented to suggest connections to larger cosmologies. Now, I feel comfortable removing my image and likeness completely, and instead really letting the materiality take centre stage, and allowing the audience to be implicated in the work.

What can the public expect from their visit to *Between Starshine and Clay*?

As a part of the work, the viewer has to walk on an earthen floor, confronting the earth and leaving their traces in the landscape. In many ways, they can expect to be implicated in and entangled in the work.

Your work has been presented in numerous exhibitions, including individual and group projects. What do you enjoy most about each format?

I enjoy group shows because they allow for conceptual and material dialogues to emerge between different works. Sometimes, I learn more about my work because it brushes edges with pieces by other artists. Also, I often make friends with the artists I exhibit within group shows. In solo shows I love fully inhabiting and taking over a space as a singular articulation of my imagination.

Is there anything you can tell us about your upcoming projects? Any dream to fulfil?

I have a few projects coming up in New York. I have a solo show at Art Omi, a sculpture park in upstate NY. I'm really excited to make large-scale sculptures and public art. I'm really excited for my next solo show in New York. In my upcoming projects, I continue to think about how objects perform the past and imagine the future, and look forward to muddying the boundary between sculpture and performance by creating objects that entangle viewers into new worlds.

– Words by Words David Alarcón