

# émergent magazine

## Kiyan Williams

Interview by Riccardo Pillon

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Born 1991. Kiyan Williams is a visual artist based in New York City. Working across a range of media, they create artworks that subvert dominant narratives of history, power, and American identity. Recent exhibitions were held at: Altman Siegel (San Francisco, CA), Peres Projects (Milan, Italy); The Hirshhorn (Washington D.C.), Lyles and King (New York), SculptureCenter (New York), Brooklyn Museum (New York), Socrates Sculpture Park (New York), MIT Vera List Center (Cambridge), and The Shed (New York). Their debut institutional solo exhibition, *Between Starshine and Clay*, was presented at the Hammer Museum (Los Angeles) in 2022. Their work has appeared in numerous publications including *Artforum*, *T Magazine*, *ArtNews*, *Frieze*, *BOMB Magazine*, and *Hyperallergic*. They were recently featured in *Cultured Magazine's* 2023 Young Artist List. Williams is the recipient of the Jerome Hill Artist Fellowship, Graham Foundation Grant, Franklin Furnace Fund, and Fountainhead Fellowship in Sculpture and Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University. They have been awarded residencies at Smack Mellon and BTFA. They earned a BA with honors from Stanford University and an MFA in New Genres from Columbia University.

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**As a multidisciplinary artist, your practice shifts from sculpture, over video, to installation and performance. How does this intersectionality shape your work routine in your studio?**

I work by hand across all mediums so in many ways I'm always trying to expand my sense of self beyond my flesh through the tools and the materials I use to make work, and am exploring different modes of haptic intimacy. I'm often working on multiple projects at a time, so my studio routine is based on upcoming projects but also what I need and what stimulates me most creatively and intellectually. Working across mediums allows me to engage the full spectrum of my curiosity and sentience. Sculpture, for example, is very physically intensive. It also requires problem solving and thinking about weight and gravity and physicality. How do I get this material to stand up a certain way, to hold a shape. Sculpture allows for a certain kind of touch, physical intimacy, though which my sense of self and being is extended through the tools I use and the materials I work with. Also, the materials I work with - metal, earth, plaster - all have distinct and unique smell profiles that are very earthy and terrestrial. Sculpture is often a very embodied and physical process that engages my senses of touch and smell. Also when sculpting I'm often thinking about the conditions of objecthood - what it means for me, as someone from people who were historically relegated to the position of objecthood, to be making objects. I'm thinking about how the objects I make can resist the very conditions of objecthood, can take on emit and evoke and act on a viewer, can be dynamic and imbued with a sense of transformation and change. In short, I work in sculpture when I desire touch, care, and physical rigor, and am thinking about the nature of objecthood, how materiality and scale and form act on a viewer. Most of my studio practice is centered around sculpture because it's the most time intensive and physically demanding.



I edit videos when I need a break, or an interruption to a physically demanding production process and allow myself to sit at my desk for a long time. My videos often have a certain rhythm because I edit to sound. In video I'm often thinking about the politics of the gaze and the politics of spectatorship, how to resist and subvert dominant ways of looking in which there is a primary perspective that articulates power or dominance. My videos are often documentation of performances in which I am a subject in the video and I'm always trying to hide or obscure myself in the video, or that is trying to make the focus of the video the action of transforming and creating something and not my body. I do this by facing away from the camera during the filming of the performance, and through cutting, splicing, and zooming such that I can direct the gaze of the viewer. When video editing I'm also thinking about the cut and the break, both as a tool and a method of editing video. My videos often include footage shot on multiple cameras, many of which I am not directing or staging. I always set up of two stationary cameras from a front and  $\frac{3}{4}$  angle, and then I also collect video footage captured on

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people's iPhones and I cut and stitch all of these fragments and shots taken at different orientations and angles to create a whole, such that there is always multiple perspectives of the same action or event. Video is the medium that I engage most visually and auditorically, that is I'm thinking about how looking and hearing evoke and articulate the ideas that interest me.

My performance work often takes place outside of the studio, in galleries or parks or outdoor spaces. The performance largely is me needing to be in the world and wanting to play with other people and think about the gestures I develop in the studio in a collective and dynamic social context. Often in performances I'm inviting other people to participate in the creation process through both joining the act of transforming a material or object and also witnessing the creative act.



**You once mentioned that your favourite approach to sculpting is a very slow one: repeating the same gestures over and over again, letting the medium and the way it reacts dictate the rhythm of creation. Do you have any other rules or rituals that accompany you during a day of work?**

Yes! A day of work for me is really dynamic. I really thrive with routine and structure in the studio, but also believe in and need to break and deviate from a structure. I typically write and ideate in the mornings, that's when I'm the most cerebral and mentally focused. I'm in the studio by 10/11am. I take a walk around my studio neighborhood everyday, to be outside and feel connected to the world. I also do a lot of important "work" when I'm walking aimlessly with no destination or focus, but allowing myself to be in motion and to inhabit my imagination. I think of my walks as active meditation.

When I'm working on a piece that is unresolved or is frustrating me, I have a "rule" to break it. Throw it on the floor or throw a what ever tool in hand at it. To not treat it as something too precious that I feel I can't mess with it or transform it. "Breaking" and "ruining" things is a really important rule.

**Henry Miller said that "an artist is always alone", and it is often inevitable to be lonely in one's studio. Despite this, your practice includes fundamental aspects of collective action and public performance. How do you create a balance between the social aspects of your work and the seclusiveness of your studio?**

The studio practice is indeed deeply solitary and fulfills my need to be in solitude and to be in intimate relationship to my imagination, my intuition, my compulsions and fears and anxieties. The public performance practice is exactly that, it fulfills my need to be in community and relationship to people when the studio becomes too isolating. Also, I think of my studio as a lab or incubator, when I develop ideas and gestures that I experiment with alone. When I feel like I have my hand on the idea or gesture, I need to give it to and allow other people to play with it and be involved in its transformation, which is when I stage public performances. Witnessing and being witnessed, not having to do something alone but with/in a collective, is a really crucial aspect of the work, which is the premise for the public performances. I'm deeply interested in exploring the idea that there is one way of knowing and seeing the world, sometimes including my own perspective. I'm more

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interested in rhizomatic perspectives that hold space for multiplicity and dissonance. The public performances allow for that kind of multiplicity and allow for me to subvert my own ego, to dissolve myself into a collective by inviting people into my process.

**You like to work with unconventional materials, experimenting with clay, dirt, spices of all types, mycelium, and even chemicals, for example in the series “Variations on Freedom” (2023). I am curious to know whether the smell of these varied materials lingers in your studio, and if and how this becomes integral to the life of your artworks?**

Smell is such a crucial element to the work. For example, whenever I show a flag piece the gallery smells of oil and fire and char. For me smell is one of the ways in which my sculptures subvert the conditions of objecthood. They emit and act on the viewer. They also insist on being engaged by multiple senses, not just visibility. Smell is induced when tiny particles enter and are perceived by the nose and olfactory system, which means in some ways the objects are entering into the viewers body and dissolving the imagined barrier between object and viewer. Smell also is a powerful way to elicit and create memory, and functions very differently than sight. People often remark that they remember what my exhibitions and works smell like.



**You said that you are interested in materials that are natural, such as soil, and processes that are quotidian, such as cooking, as their simplicity has the power to evoke a lot. Could you share an example of a revelation you had in your studio, when a simple object or gesture transformed into a meaningful element of an artwork?**

In grad school I first started making sculptures out of earth and was developing the technique. I would leave the sculptures “wet” by covering them in plastic until I finished working with them. On one sculpture I noticed a white film growing on the sculptures. I learned that it was mycelium, and the mycelium worked like a “glue” that gave the sculpture integrity and held it together until it dried. I also noticed plants sprouting out of earth sculptures when they were wet. This was an important revelation for me, in thinking about working with live materials, materials that is a catalyst for other forms of life, and also conceptually a way for me to think about the sculptures as transgressing the conditions of objecthood by being alive and active as opposed to inert or passive.

**Similar to Ana Mendieta, one of your most referenced influences, the most important tools in your studio are your hands. Instead of working with machinery, you prefer shaping soil and dirt with your hands, leaving their imprints on the sculptures. Why is this approach such an important aspect of your practice?**

My work is often trying to build haptic intimacy. I think that materials are imbued with the memory and traces of

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the people who touched them, lived with them, that energy is not destroyed but transformed and transferred in and through matter. There is a way I am touching history, touching and connecting through people whose lives have been erased and obscured, when I touch the same materials and matter they touch, like when I'm working with sandstone that was previously on the facade of the U.S. Capitol building I'm creating haptic intimacy with the people who quarried that sandstone and built the federal building. I also think that working by hand connects me to traditions of historically marginalized and oppressed people who worked by hand, who were instrumental in building the world we inhabit but seldom credited for doing so. It connects me to working class and blue collar people who work by hand, and fundamentally I think that working by hand and making things by hand, is a gesture of agency and will power and transformation, and world building.

I also feel the primacy and importance of touching my materials in an era of increasing automation when humans are distanced and divorced from what I make. I also use digital fabrication in my work, and so I using analog and digital technologies in the making process.



**Most recently, for your solo exhibition “A Past That is Future Tense” at Peres Projects, Milan (8 June - 14 July 2023), you presented sculptures altered by the chemical reaction between silver nitrate, soil and cement. How and why has this alchemical approach become part of your work?**

Silver nitrate is such an interesting process because it's a chemical reaction that deposits silver on a surface to create a metallic and reflective finish. For me it was a way to create a material contrast, dark dense earth that absorbs light and silver nitrate that reflects light. So much of my work is about transformation, decay, and ruination, and the silver nitrate fits within that conceptual language.

**In “A Past that is Future Tense”, two neoclassical columns form the familiar shape of an X. Could you talk about this fascinating work and its subversive meaning against the norm?**

In recent works, I transform the symbols and monuments that represent dominant ideologies, those that shape, police, and inform how bodies move through the world. In Collapsed Columns, two neoclassical columns - the architectural forms that uphold government buildings and represent hegemonic notions of power, beauty, purity, and idealized bodies - cave into themselves. The sculpture topples the usually vertical position of the pillars to form an X: a symbol for the unknown, a symbol for the indescribable, a symbol of negation, and the indicator on government identification for non-binary gender identity. These works take on and critique government regimes like in the US., Where state legislatures are attacking trans identity and erasing and Black history.

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**Can you share with us a powerful act of queer rebellion you practise in your everyday life?**

Following my intuition, committing to my creative practice, and making subversive work in an era of profound backlash.

**Your upcoming solo exhibition is “Between Starshine and Clay” at Peres Projects, Seoul (7 September - 12 November 2023). Is this exhibition a continuation of the one in Milan or is it more connected to the homonymous sculpture you installed at the Hammer Museum in 2022? What can we expect**

The exhibition feels like a mini survey. It includes an early video performance, the sculpture from my Hammer exhibition, and new wall works. In many ways it shows my material experimentation over 4 years and how that emerges across performance, installation, and sculpture. The last room, which has wall works that use silver nitrate, is a bit of a preview and sneak peak of future works.