

MOUSSE

The Past Haunts the Present: Kiyan Williams

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A recent exhibition by the artist Kiyan Williams bore the title *A Past that is Future Tense*. It was on view in the lofty and ornate space of Peres Projects in Milan, where the presentation assembled works spanning fragments of statues rendered in plaster, gypsum columns, and battered American flags. The scenery, at first glance, appeared to recreate a field of ruins, and the pieces draw on familiar iconographies—all related to nation, architectures of power and identity. Each of these elements constitutes a complex sign.

Williams's work is interested in precisely the problematic ways these signs produce an excess of meaning. In an early performance, for instance, they used soil from different sites that are important to their biography to create a muddied silhouette of the United States on a large white canvas. They link biography, the Black diaspora, and the violence of nation-making in very deliberate gestures. Before earning their MFA in visual arts from Columbia University, Williams studied US history and took performance classes on the side. They wanted to focus their research on queer and trans histories as well as the African diaspora, but historiography proved difficult when it came to accounts of people not represented in archives. Archival sources, data, and artefacts

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fail in telling stories of people—such as queer individuals—who are not represented in traditional ways of recording history, and most enslaved people only show up as statistics. And so, since academic history did not readily hand Williams the tools they needed, they turned to art, which provided already-existing structures and forms for appropriation. Williams started thinking about the body as material. They now draw on a rich substrate of overdetermined materials and symbols, such as soil—an element that Williams, as they explained to me over video call¹, considers an alternative archive, imbued with social and political resonance and the capacity for resistance.

A case in point is the sculpture *Ruins of Empire* (2022), commissioned by New York's Public Art Fund, a thirteen-foot-high piece that seems to grow right out of the lawn in Brooklyn Bridge Park. It is a partial rendering in hardened earth of Thomas Crawford's *Statue of Freedom* (1855–66), standing atop the Capitol dome in Washington, DC. Williams's piece is obviously subject to erosion, and is explicitly intended to expose the malleability of the Statue of Freedom; indeed, the triumphant allegory is semantically less stable than one might think. Crawford's statue is a pastiche of recognizable classical symbols—laurels, a toga—and more recent iconography specific to the United States—a Native American headdress, a shield with thirteen stripes. Initially the statue was to sport a Phrygian cap, a marker of liberated slaves since Roman antiquity that centuries later was worn by French Revolutionaries and became a symbol of freedom during the US War of Independence. But Jefferson Davis—then secretary of war and the commissioner of the piece (also a slave owner, and later the leader of the Confederacy)—ordered the symbolic headgear to be changed so as to avoid uncomfortable allusions to slavery.

For their series *Variations on Freedom* (2023), Williams continued making smaller versions of the statue destined for the gallery, giving them different hats—among them the Phrygian cap—as if to try out alternative imagined histories. The pieces were remade from plaster and then treated with soil and silver nitrate, which makes the surfaces shine. Classicism, which repeatedly comes up in Williams's work, one could argue, represents an idea of tradition and the nation, even though the style is almost always laid out in treatises idealizing the past—a retroactive invention. Past and present are entangled in our built environment, and in Williams's work, the past haunts the present. Objecthood comes up again and again in their renditions of classicist statues, as well as the precarious status of non-animated world, when Williams uses materials that are unstable and prone to decay. Entropy and regeneration are core ideas to Williams, they explain. Earth breaks down existing structures, and transforms them into something else. Objects take part in producing meaning, and Williams thinks of their works as akin to ruins, because there too, the animated and the world of objects, nature, and culture become fuzzy categories. Just like Williams's performance straddles temporal boundaries, they also blur the confines of the body and the symbolic realm.

Williams's *Collapsed Columns* (2023) is a pair of columns, one Ionic, the other Corinthian, crossed to form the letter X. Classical forms are ingrained in many authoritarian fantasies—former US president Donald Trump, for example, decreed that all federal buildings in the United States should henceforth be built in the classical style³—and the underlying assumptions and body politics deeply intrigue Williams. Columns are supposedly anthropomorphic, drawing on idealized human proportions. Vitruvius's *Ten Books on Architecture*, written during the first century BCE, testify to that: the author derives notions of harmony and proportion from the human body, and Vitruvius associates Doric columns with male, Ionic ones with female bodies, while the Corinthian is considered the historical successor of the two⁴. Williams suggests that the X indicates collapse, but also the idea of gender nonconformity.

The pieces frequently result from transformations. For instance, the artist's series of American flags displayed in specifically created metal contraptions have all undergone a process. Some are strapped into frames or

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suspended with chains; *Twice Fried Flag (or Double Fried Flag)* (2021) is mounted on two crossed steel ribbons as if crucified; it is particularly tattered, as if it had been burned and buried, then excavated. In fact, it had been flown over the US Capitol, decommissioned, and later, deep fried. Williams invited the public to partake in a barbecue-style gathering with music, coming together as a temporary community. In this irreverent and humorous gesture, all were encouraged to bring their own seasonings. As playful as such happenings might be, the levity of Williams' work is balanced by provocation and unease. It draws connections between soil, and colonial violence, but also the idea of regeneration. Gazing at the work can feel like contemplating the ruins of nationhood through classicist fragments, but there is nothing wistful about it.