

Contemporary Project 14

Tavares Strachan: Between Me and You



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This gallery guide accompanies the exhibition *Tavares Strachan: Between Me and You* (November 9, 2024–June 1, 2025) at the Blanton Museum of Art.

Tavares Strachan: Between Me and You is organized by Hannah Klemm, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Blanton Museum of Art.

Support for this exhibition at the Blanton is provided by a partnership between the Ford Foundation and Austin City Art Fund, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization.

Additional support is provided by David and Ellen Berman.

Tavares Strachan's expansive approach to making art is situated within a visual language of storytelling. Through this language, his work expresses the affinities, contradictions, and dependencies within often untold stories, while drawing attention to the space between the disciplines of art, science, history, exploration, and collective memory. Strachan describes his work as an "infinite protest" against the benchmarks and boundaries of convention. His immersive installations, performances, ceramics, paintings, and sculptures become tools to investigate a sense of belonging. Much of Strachan's current practice is connected to an ongoing conceptual project, *The Encyclopedia of Invisibility*. The *Encyclopedia* and its research fuels the artist's persistent questioning of which narratives and perspectives have been relegated to the historical wayside. The works in this show—from the immersive installation to the three sculptures from the artist's *Black Madonna* series installed in the European galleries—summon the power of these historical and cultural references.

Strachan has transformed the Contemporary Project gallery into a "meadow" of dried rice grass. While rice is a fundamental component of the Afro-Caribbean diet, it is also a staple across the world. As a food group, its universality asks fundamental questions about the culinary threads that run through civilization, space, and time. Viewed from above, the terrain takes the form of an Adinkra symbol, a West African ideographic character. Derived from a wide variety of sources—proverbs, historical events, the shapes of everyday objects, human behaviors, philosophies, gestures, animals, and plants—Adinkra symbols express complex ideas about community, interdependence, and the metaphysical relationships we have to earth, God, and each other. They prompt one's imagination of what language can describe far beyond the

limitations imposed by a writing system derived from the spoken word.

For this installation, Strachan uses the Adinkra symbol Mmere Dane, or "time changes," which articulates the spiritual and philosophical concept of impermanence. At the center of the rice meadow sits a large ceramic sculpture of stacked objects referencing the Jamaican political activist Marcus Garvey.

Throughout the exhibition, the artist invites viewers to consider how history is recorded, what kind of cultural knowledge is legitimized, and by whom. Through these questions, he creates artworks that expose the very nature of invisibility, bringing to the fore what has been commonly erased.

Sitting in the center of the gallery, a stack of ceramic objects rises from the grass meadow constructed around it. A camera sits atop two vessels and a basketball, referencing everyday life and objects with a connection to the forms of Africa through the vessels. The portrait depicts Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican-born leader of the Pan-African movement, and his efforts to unify and connect people of African descent worldwide.

The sculpture is situated within a rice grass field. The use of rice grass alludes to its complex history as a grain that often accompanied enslaved Africans across the Middle Passage to South America, the Caribbean, and the United States. The field is constructed in the shape of the Adinkra symbol Mmere Dane, which symbolizes how time is constantly changing. As a trans-linguistic symbolic sign system from the Akan people of Ghana, Adinkra symbols combine image and language. They often appear on textiles, pottery, stools, linguist staffs, and combs in West Africa, and are recognized for conveying both meaning and aesthetic quality.

In Akan cosmology, the world is comprised of two realms: the world of the physical or the living, and the nonphysical or spiritual world. For the Akan, these two worlds stand in harmony, as every living creature transitions between the realms. Adinkra symbols explore this flow, and interpreting their meaning is meant to create a shared experience. Strachan's installation embodies this shared experience through the bricolage of global historical figures, meaningful objects, and the Adinkra symbol itself. It centers a multivocal, African worldview, where we can appreciate Mmere Dane—our collective experience of the ever-evolving nature of time.



Figure 1. Mmere Dane, Ghanaian Adinkra symbol.



Tavares Strachan
Nassau, Bahamas, 1979–New York City and Nassau, present
Between Me and You, 2022
Ceramic, Indian rice grass, maple, gold foil
Installation: 10 1/2 × 23 1/2 × 15 1/4 ft. (3 × 7.2 × 4.6 m)
Courtesy of the Artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

Strachan's ongoing *Encyclopedia of Invisibility* project, the culmination of two decades of research, has in many ways become an overarching conceptual framework for his multidisciplinary practice, including the other works displayed in this exhibition.

The many iterations of the physical *Encyclopedia* exist as art objects that situate themselves at the intersection of literature and sculpture. Though based on the traditional Western encyclopedia reference book or series, such as the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Strachan's version documents people, events, and ideas that didn't typically make it into its mainstream counterpart. Consisting of thousands of entries focused on historically obfuscated individuals, places, and events, it serves not only as a compendium but also as source material for other works of art that bring these unseen histories to light.

This pocket edition of Strachan's *Encyclopedia of Invisibility*, is a smaller volume, consisting of a selection of 196 entries taken from the larger, 4000-page edition. Entry topics span from the Aḥmad Bābā Institute (a library and archival center located in Timbuktu, Mali, that houses tens of thousands of ancient manuscripts) to the zoo hypothesis (the proposition that super advanced forms of alien life exist but are deliberately hiding from us).



Tavares Strachan
Nassau, Bahamas, 1979–New York City and Nassau, present
Encyclopedia of Invisibility (Pocket Guide), 2024
Leather, gilding, archival paper, Lucite box and stand
9 1/4 × 12 1/8 × 10 in. (23.5 × 30.8 × 25.4 cm)
Courtesy of the Artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

Tavares Strachan's *Black Madonna* series draws on iconography used in Christian art from the fourteenth century onward known as the Pietà, in which Mary holds the crucified body of her son, Jesus. The artist's sculptures depict important Black men from history who were violently silenced, held by their own mothers. Strachan thus draws upon the poignant poses and figures developed in Christian art to present a resonant narrative of maternal and community loss within the histories of colonialism and the fight for civil rights. Each of the three sculptures represented here are loosely based on a famous Pietà by Renaissance artist Michelangelo.

In this work Strachan has combined figures from two sculptures: Mary's solid, frontal, seated pose from Michelangelo's *Bruges Madonna*, and her son's slumped, bent-legged body from the *Florentine Pietà*. Strachan depicts Kadiatou Diallo, the mother of Amadou Diallo, seated upright and poised, as her son sits on her lap with his head leaning against her. In 1999, Amadou Diallo was shot forty-one times by plainclothes police officers from the New York City Police Department's Street Crime Unit when he was mistakenly identified as a suspect. He was only twenty-three years old when he was killed. After the officers were acquitted of murder, his mother sued the NYPD and received one of the largest wrongful death settlements for a single male at that time. Diallo's killing sparked a public outcry and led to an investigation of the Street Crime Unit and its subsequent disbandment. Despite this, all four officers remained with the NYPD.



Tavares Strachan
Nassau, Bahamas, 1979–New York City and Nassau, present
Black Madonna (Kadiatou Diallo and Amadou Diallo), 2022
Bronze, silver leaf
23 5/8 × 13 × 11 in. (60 × 33 × 27.9 cm)
Courtesy of the Artist and Perotin

This sculpture resembles Michelangelo's final Pietà—the *Rondanini Pietà*, which the artist worked on shortly before his death at age eighty-eight. Strachan has replaced Mary with a depiction of Alice Nokuzola “Mamcethe” Biko holding upright the limp body of her son Bantu Stephen Biko. Biko was an anti-apartheid activist in South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. He founded the Black Consciousness Movement, which empowered and mobilized South Africa's urban Black population. In 1977, he was arrested by state security forces in South Africa and beaten to death in their custody.



Tavares Strachan
Nassau, Bahamas, 1979–New York City and Nassau, present
Black Madonna (Alice “Mamcethe” Biko and Stephen Biko),
2022
Bronze, gold leaf
31 1/2 × 10 5/8 × 8 11/16 in. (80 × 27 × 22 cm)
Courtesy of the Artist and Perotin

This sculpture utilizes the form of Michelangelo's most well-known Pietà, created when the artist was only twenty-three years old, for St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. In his version, Strachan depicts Louise Little looking down at the body of her son Malcolm X, clad in slacks and strewn across her legs, her palm held up in a devotional gesture. Malcolm X was assassinated while giving a speech in 1965; he is widely regarded as one of the most prominent religious and civil rights leaders of his generation.



Tavares Strachan
Nassau, Bahamas, 1979–New York City and Nassau, present
Black Madonna (Louise Little and Malcolm X), 2022
Bronze, copper leaf
22 5/8 × 23 5/8 × 13 in. (57.5 × 60 × 33 cm)
Courtesy of the Artist and Perotin

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