



## TAVARES STRACHAN

"Strachan's subtle, complex pieces defy discussion, frustrate all attempts to verbally summarize their content and thwart our desire to associate them with any recognizable cause or movement."<sup>i</sup>

"I work with things that are unreasonable. Working with things that are unreasonable is difficult to discuss. But I like that, that mirrors my own experience, it's unreasonable."<sup>ii</sup>

I don't want to fall victim to the task at hand. I don't want to admit defeat in the face of adversity—or the difficulty of writing about the work of Tavares Strachan. There's always a way out. But, the thing is, the work of Tavares Strachan allows for so many different readings and strategies of interpretation. I had heard of Tavares Strachan before I had seen anything of his work. He had pumped in the sunshine from his native Bahamas to his dorm room in Providence, Rhode Island. I went to school in Connecticut and I can imagine how a New England winter would cajole an artist into thinking he should turn to magic instead of alchemy. Word on the street stereotyped Strachan as a nerd, a geeky, weird science-loving freak of an artist. And, the best thing since, well since... I can't remember. For some reason we are loath to define young artists by such concrete and understood standards. But somewhere in the celebratory chatter was the comparison with art heavyweights like Robert Smithson and David Hammons (*Blizzard Ball Sale*, 1983). Where Hammons had sold snowballs on the streets of Soho in New York City and Smithson moved rocks into a 1,500 foot long coil in the desert of Utah (*Spiral Jetty*, 1970), Strachan—while still in graduate school—cut out a 4½ ton portion of a frozen river in Alaska. While Smithson and Hammons were content to celebrate their medium in their native situations, Strachan shipped his block of ice to his hometown in Nassau, Bahamas. And while the distance between Alaska and the Bahamas is so far

that under normal conditions a block of ice from the north would barely last a few minutes in the sunny climes of the south, Strachan defined that space as *The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want*, (2005) and placed his block of ice in a solar-powered glass freezer. Conjuring contrasts and the vision of the grass always being greener on the other side, so they say, the work evoked the tale of the Heat Miser and the Snow Miser with a peaceful coexistence. The piece was first shown in Nassau and then at the Miami Basel Art Fair and was most recently displayed in front of the Brooklyn Museum. While Smithson and Hammons were keen on the specific spaces in which they worked, there is something fascinating about the generosity at work in a piece like Strachan's. Like Hammons' humorous work, and unlike say Michael Heizer's *City* or James Turrell's *Roden Crater*—situational works designed to be experienced away from masses and urban centers, Strachan's early sculptural installation/performance/intervention is evidence of a transaction meant to bring art to the people, for real. Oh, and there's some world history to go along with the art history. Because he was literally bringing a piece of the great white North to the darker hued South, Strachan has also cited the African-American explorer Matthew Henson's role in discovering the North Pole, especially important in the dissemination of the work in the Bahamas, where Strachan used the occasion to address young school children.

While Strachan's early work highlighted the gap between North and South and hinted at endurance and stress, his most recent body of work, *The Orthostatic Tolerance*, seeks to explore another dual location: the sea and outer space and its particular demands on the body. Known medically as the ability to prevent hypotension under gravitational stress, *The Orthostatic Tolerance* is the result of three years of work. As much as *The Distance...* was about home, and the establishment of home, with its flag placed securely in the ground, *The Orthostatic Tolerance* is about "the discomfort of going back home." Partially presented last fall at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Strachan's project there centered around BASEC

Tavares Strachan, from *Orthostatic Tolerance* project, 2009. Photograph.







Tavares Strachan, *Exploded Body: Many Things Existing Once*, 2009. India ink on mylar.



Tavares Strachan, *Rocket Launch*, 2009. Transparency on lightbox (Ed. of 3) and silver gelatin photograph (Ed. of 5).

(Bahamas Aerospace and Sea Exploration Center). While he was working on *The Orthostatic Tolerance* he figured he was at a point where he had something that was ready for presentation. It didn't need to be a final product, as Strachan negotiates exactly when and where that point will be reached. This initial presentation included the documentation of the young artist attending space training at the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center in Star City, Russia and the futile and failed attempt to launch rockets from the Bahamas that would travel to the moon and then graze the bottom of the sea upon their return. A transport vehicle was the three dimensional sculpture at the center of the room.

With Strachan's longstanding relationship with Grand Arts, he says, he was allowed to "not have certain expectations," and so he has embarked upon this project with a degree of freedom and exploration, characteristic of the Dadaist nature of all his work. With drawings and sculpture in addition to the documentation of performative gestures, Strachan has added a new large-scale work, *Invisible Diver*, a transparent chamber filled with 10,000 pounds of mineral oil. This incarnation in Kansas City, developed with the next version already in mind, is subtitled "Launching into an Infinite Distance." Also included are recently produced documentary films of the artist in training for his experiments with gravitational stress. Shot in crisp high definition black and white, the video plays with our expectations of time and place. At turns looking like a 1970s science-fiction vehicle, our assumptions are thwarted by glimpses of color that give the films a thoroughly contemporary look. In one short video, the slow pan of the camera around the structure of a capsule—one can only assume this is the vehicle for our protagonist's space and sea exploration—evokes the sensuous imagery of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Yet, in another video, the artist is pictured sitting in the

cockpit or control center of the machine, conducting the instruments and looking around confidently as he inspects his vehicle. The brown skin of our sea and space traveling protagonist belies a different time, one perhaps squarely in the present and definitely not in the 60s or 70s. But, image is everything. And, while Strachan's work is about the process and the concept—all the good, juicy stuff that circulates in your head well after the actual experience of the artwork—the images he disseminates with his work are extremely powerful.

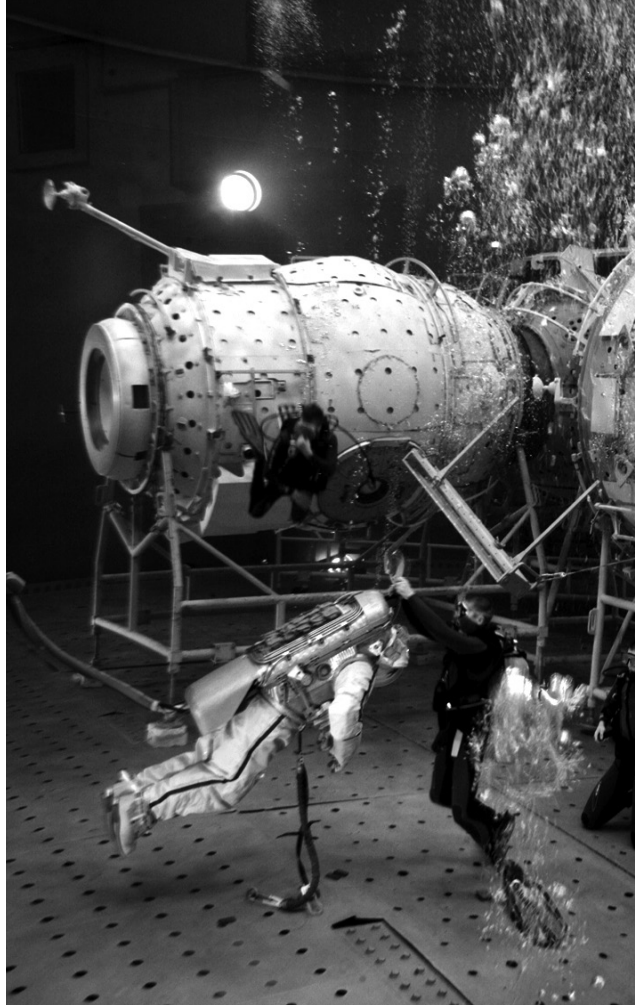
Another artist well known for mining the borders between art and science, Olafur Eliasson, who set up a studio, or laboratory, for "spatial research" in Berlin in 1995, once said, "I am trying, by means of a documentary language, to evaluate certain phenomena and situations that to a greater extent reflect our processes. Normally I would say the notion of the documentary is based on mapping the idea of a static field or matter, but I prefer to focus on the aspects of 'the map,' that prove that no matter can be by definition be static, that the idea of the objective observer is not a neutral or truthful one but instead a cultural construction that fundamentally serves the objectification of our senses and selves."<sup>iii</sup> Like Eliasson, who frequently uses photographic series to document his process oriented works, Strachan's work has always thrived on the word of mouth of those who have encountered some of his artistic feats. The story of the parking meter removed from the cement sidewalk in New Haven and re-presented in a San Francisco gallery lives on in the surreal image used as the only document for people unable to experience the show.

An image accompanying the 2005 project *The Distance Between...* shows the artist in a heavy parka, winter hat, boots and gloves following behind a

forklift holding the 4½ ton block of ice in Alaska. A more recent image from the first presentation of *The Orthostatic Tolerance* in Philadelphia, shows a man dressed in what looks to be a white Hazmat suit. Standing in front of the compact BASEC mobile unit, the man's face is covered but the stance is frontal and obviously aware of the camera. In both images, the artist/scientist dichotomy is made explicit. Is this figure acting out as one of Strachan's heroes? Matthew Henson, the discoverer of the North Pole or Robert L. Lawrence, the first black astronaut killed during training? Maybe and maybe not.

With an eye toward the Beuysian trope of social sculpture that aims to shrink the intellectual and entertainment-value distance between art and everyday life and another eye on science, Strachan strives to make works that bridge gaps in the imagination and in effect allow us to see things we don't often see, to make the invisible visible. His work is less about the "contested" body in the popular postmodern sense derived from much art history, than it is about the inner functions of the body as they are laid out scientifically. There are no cyborg manifestoes lying within these bodies. In that sense, it is also about the universality of the human body rather than the differences highlighted in many identity-based practices that strive to differentiate between us. It is also less about the Naumanesque body "in space"—social, public and private space—than it is about the body in space, literally, outer space. And, with that in mind, the work also conjures a space often defined as futurist, where elements of historic and science fiction merge with magic realism to reimagine the past and invent the future. Sun Ra, described as the missing link between Duke Ellington and Public Enemy, comes to mind. And in this work, Strachan, too "travels the spaceways, from planet to planet."<sup>iv</sup>

Franklin Sirmans  
Terri and Michael Smooke Department Head and  
Curator of Contemporary Art  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
January 2010



Tavares Strachan, *The Plunge*, 2008. Photograph.



Tavares Strachan, *Suit*, 2008. Photograph.

<sup>i</sup> Maxwell Heller, "Tavares Strachan: Hermetically Sealed," *The Brooklyn Rail*, December 2006/January 2007. [www.brooklynrail.org/2006-12/art/tavares-strachan](http://www.brooklynrail.org/2006-12/art/tavares-strachan).

<sup>ii</sup> The author in conversation with the artist, January 23, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew Drutt, "Seeing Oneself Sensing: An Interview with Olafur Eliasson," *Olafur Eliasson: Photographs*, The Menil Collection, 2004, p. 17.

<sup>iv</sup> *We Travel the Space Ways* is an album by the American Jazz musician Sun Ra and his Myth Science Arkestra. Recorded mostly in 1960, the album was released in 1967, on Sun Ra's own label.

The artist and Grand Arts would like to thank the MIT List Visual Arts Center for their assistance and co-production of *The Orthostatic Tolerance*.

front cover image: Tavares Strachan, *Another Place*, 2008. Photograph.