



Tavares Strachan, *No Name in the Street*, 2020, two panels, oil, enamel, and pigment on acrylic, overall 96 x 96".

Tavares Strachan

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Encyclopedia of Invisibility, 2018, is a massive, 2,400-page volume in which Bahamas-born, New York-based artist Tavares Strachan collected extraordinary yet "invisible" histories, often of overlooked people of color. These include North Pole explorer Matthew Henson; NASA mathematician Katherine Johnson; and the first African American astronaut, Robert Henry Lawrence Jr. Henrietta Lacks's cells have been used in vital laboratory experiments since her untimely death in 1951—her "anonymous" DNA has been on permanent loan to science, without her consent. Alicia Alonso was the Cuban-born star of the American Ballet who became unwelcome in the Cold War US; a twinkling, life-size neon sculpture of Alonso, illuminating her skeleton and circulation system, flickered at the back of the gallery.

The voluminous *Encyclopedia*—five inches fat, fifteen thousand entries—was the smallest work in this vast and powerful exhibition. Titled “In Plain Sight,” the show included collaged paintings, sculpture, performance, and installation, and some surprises I won’t spoil. This two-floor, multigallery exhibition was operatic in scale, feel, and execution. The first gallery offered eight eye-popping light-box paintings, each a universe of expertly combined images.

Astronauts wear tribal masks in *Touch the Stars*, 2020, connecting the colonizing violence inflicted on the African continent with the drive to conquer outer space. A magazine cover of actor/activist Paul Robeson and the former Ethiopian flag intersect with a line drawing of a football field. (Similar line drawings, riddled with labels and dimensions, recurred throughout the exhibition—perhaps hinting at the demand to “measure up” to some unspoken standard.) A crossword in the corner suggests this maddening puzzle is resolvable: Untold stories can be readily uncovered by those who look—they exist “in plain sight.”

The *Encyclopedia* stood center stage in the room-size installation *EIGHTEEN NINETY*, 2020, named for the year when the most African Americans submitted inventions to the US patent office. Incredibly, this was 130 years ago. Hanging along the walls, the installation’s 1,354 pages framed under glass included a motley selection of entries from the *Encyclopedia*, ranging from news accounts of vanished children to articles on scientific phenomena, overlapped with textbook-style images of Egyptian and Hellenistic sculpture, vintage photographs, random letters and numbers, plus chemical and mechanical diagrams. One of these depicts a steamroller efficiently mowing down palm trees.

Already overwhelmed by the wealth of astounding content pouring from every wall, I suddenly heard magnificent singing echoing through the galleries, coming closer. Three performers—an older man dressed in midcentury attire and two young women, one puckish and youthful, one looking professional in a lab coat—followed choreographed movements while singing or speaking words that expanded on the artworks. They led visitors through the galleries like pied pipers. I eventually followed them upstairs to discover a dozen spectacular sizable two-part sculptures, each combining on a tubular brass structure a traditional mask (from Liberia, Papua New Guinea, or elsewhere) with a plaster bust of James Baldwin, Shirley Chisholm, Lacks, Lawrence, or others, collectively titled *Distant Relatives*, 2020. Strachan has explained that, as the descendent of slaves, he has never known the precise geographic location of his African ancestry, and that his creative processes are his way of “redrawing some of those maps.” Throughout, he creates connections—between mask and sculpted hero, across grouped collaged fragments—while referencing the invisible systems that structure our world: molecular formations, DNA strands, Fibonacci numbers (diagrammed in the painting *Every Knee Shall Bow*, 2020), veins and skeletons, not to mention the ideologies that “invisibly” and forcibly shape historical consciousness.

These sequences and lineages represent only part of Strachan's complex symbolic cosmology. Sight is a recurring theme, from near-blind reggae musician Frankie Paul (pictured in *Every Knee Shall Bow*) to Alonso's failing vision—perhaps hinting at things left unseen. Strachan's reenvisioned past is no mere “alternative” but an immense and heretofore willfully overlooked legacy. Circles abound—a basketball, a tire, a round polar map, a mosque dome, the circle marking center field. This geometric form joins distant cultures and contexts, though one also detects the cynical suggestion that history is spinning in circles, repeating itself cyclically. Nonetheless, Strachan's message feels expansive and hopeful. In *EIGHTEEN NINETY*, words and pictures locked in a grid at the bottom gradually shred and disperse toward the top, dissolving into a night sky—everything drifting elegantly upward to the stars, like the fading music.

—Gilda Williams