


ARTS AND LETTERS

The Black Artists Claiming More Space Than Ever Before

New monumental works are filling landscapes and galleries, where they argue for the freedom and power to play.



EJ Hill's "Braval" (2022), a rideable steel roller coaster that the artist installed at Mass MoCA in North Adams, Mass. Courtesy of the artist and Mass MoCA. Photo: Kaelan Burkett

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IN 2020, THE artist Kiyann Williams began deep-frying American flags, first encasing small, souvenir-size Stars and Stripes in bubbled golden skin, then cooking a full-size nylon banner with paprika and flour. It was a gesture of play as much as protest, striking above all for Williams's decision not to burn the flags but to preserve their crisp, and oddly appetizing, ruination. Last year, around the same time that those works were displayed at Lyles & King gallery in New York, Williams, 32, scaled up their practice by installing a 13-by-8-foot structure of hardened earth called "Ruins of Empire" in Brooklyn Bridge Park. The sculpture referenced the bronze Statue of Freedom (designed by the sculptor Thomas Crawford and fabricated by enslaved laborers) perched atop the dome of the U.S. Capitol since 1863, while sinking it into the earth. Rather than destroying a cherished American symbol, Williams was once again staging its decomposition — now in a larger sense and in view of the public. "I hate to use the word 'magic,'" Williams says. "It's like a mystery. People ask, 'How is this standing? How is this here?'"

While the history of America can inspire fantasies of scorched-earth demolition, Williams is one of several Black artists to respond instead with massive experimental construction. "Ruins" is part of a trend toward monumental Black art located

in outdoor public spaces, as well as in the museum. Last April, Simone Leigh, 55, the first Black woman to have her work shown at the U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, filled the venue with towering abstract sculptures of Black female forms — including the 16-foot-high bronze bust “Brick House” (2019), originally installed on the High Line overlooking 10th Avenue in Manhattan. (Leigh’s first museum survey opens April 6 at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston.) Charles Gaines’s “The American Manifest: Moving Chains,” a 110-foot-long bargelike structure made of steel and African mahogany, with nine 1,600-pound chains churning overhead, arrived at New York’s Governors Island last October. (It’s widely thought to evoke the slave trade.) Hank Willis Thomas, 47, has created several huge works, such as the 19-ton bronze homage to Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King recently unveiled on the Boston Common. Xaviera Simmons’s recent exhibition at the Queens Museum in New York, “Crisis Makes a Book Club,” featured a 16-foot-high structure, “Align,” representing the imagined response of white women to the antiracist books they’ve been reading. And at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, Mass., EJ Hill, 37, has built an operational roller coaster, its rails painted cotton candy pink.



Kiyan Williams’s “Ruins of Empire” (2022), an earthen sculpture placed in New York City’s Brooklyn Bridge Park. Courtesy of the artist and the Public Art Fund, N.Y.
Photo: Nicholas Knight

These works are monumental in every sense — in terms of the money, time, labor and space required to make them, as well as their social and technical ambition. Their creators, all of whom have worked in other media like painting and photography, describe them as manifestations of creative dreams; and the effect of encountering them can, as Williams notes of “Ruins,” verge on sublime. Their appeal is elemental in a nation where we marvel at the sheer size of things; and political, given that those with the resources to create such works, whether within museums or parks, have historically not been Black.

As these works travel America — Gaines’s “Moving Chains” will be relocated to a port in Cincinnati next year — or redefine plazas they permanently occupy, their spectacular presence itself can feel reparative in a country filled with places where Black people could not legally (and still cannot comfortably or safely) go, especially at a moment when Black freedom is often articulated in terms of size: “Never be smaller than you are,” the American poet Elizabeth Alexander recalls her husband telling her Black sons (in her 2015 memoir, “The Light of the World”). Such art signals both presence and absence. For these works, as large as they are, might be best understood as maquettes or smaller-scale models for broader change: By exuding the possibilities of Black power and play, they ask what would happen if there were an even greater freedom, among artists and nonartists alike, to roam, defy and create — to leave every kind of trace or mark upon a space.

BLACK ARTISTS HAVE long staked large-scale claims to the visual landscape of the United States — whether by painting the community-based Wall of Respect mural created by the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) in Chicago in 1967, tagging the New York City subways with graffiti or creating outdoor sculptures such as Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project, a series (begun in 1986) of brightly painted abandoned houses on Detroit’s east side. But the canvases for these works were typically pre-existing structures, and making them was relatively inexpensive (and, in the case of graffiti, often illegal), whereas today’s free-standing sculptures require social sanction and robust institutional support. According to the art historian Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, new, “high-profile, well-funded commissions” are at last going to Black artists.



The most epic of these was perhaps Kara Walker’s “A Subtlety,” the 75-foot-long, 35-foot-high mammy-sphinx crafted of polystyrene blocks and sugar, displayed in the defunct Domino Sugar Refinery in Brooklyn for three months in 2014. (The work, Walker’s first foray into site-specific sculpture, was, like “Moving Chains,” commissioned by Creative Time, a New York-based organization focused on public art.) A critique of colonial sugar extraction, the exhibit was so popular that lines stretched down the block. More recent works, such as Williams’s “Ruins” and Wangechi Mutu’s 2019 bronze goddess figures installed in the exterior niches of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, have been easier to view.

There are distinct pleasures in making large work — Leigh says she feels her hand transform “from being a club to a fine tool” when sculpting, say, the eye of a figure that dwarfs her — and in displaying it for the public: Williams speaks fondly of seeing kids climbing on “Ruins” as though it were a jungle gym, or adults resting in its shade. Hill says he created “Rises in the East,” a 2021 Ferris wheel sculpture, in New Orleans in the hope of giving that city’s residents more opportunities for joy. Most of these artists’ abstract and portable works, which are as invested in the future as they are critical of the past, can be seen as monuments only in the most expansive definition of the term, devised by Paul Farber, the 40-year-old co-founder and director of the Philadelphia-based arts organization Monument Lab: “a statement of power and presence in public.” It can be a trap to view them as substitutes for older monuments, like the toppled statues of Confederate generals. As Leigh says, “I get calls once a month to right a wrong.” Such reparative civic work often requires artists to compete with one another and to cater to myriad stakeholders who see their work as a “political symbol” — which Leigh, for one, is loath to do.



Kara Walker’s 75-foot-long and 35-foot-high “A Subtlety,” installed at the former Domino Sugar factory in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 2014. *Sara Krulwich/The New York Times*

She prefers to think of her sculptures in relation not to such traditional monuments but to the abstract works by Joan Miró and Pablo Picasso that she grew up seeing in downtown Chicago: “fabulous” sculptures, as she calls them, that “weren’t forced upon the public.” Similarly, Thomas has described his “All Power to All People” (2017), a Monument Lab-curated eight-foot-high sculpture of an Afro pick in downtown Philadelphia, as a homage to Claes Oldenburg’s giant 1976 “Clothespin,” located nearby. Williams, whose work with the earth nods to unrecorded ancestral histories and pays tribute to their grandmother’s practice of gardening, describes “Ruins” as revising the tradition of American land art, in which artists used machines to carve into the earth.

These Black artists are asserting their right to public space at a time when that space is still circumscribed by race, gender and class — and can be fatal to occupy. (Renisha McBride, the teenager who was shot in Dearborn Heights, Mich., in 2013, when asking for help, and Ahmaud Arbery, killed while jogging in Brunswick, Ga., in 2020, were assumed to be not neighbors but threats.) In a world of lower Black life expectancy — the activist and scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore has defined racism as “state-sanctioned ... group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” — a work such as Leigh’s “Brick House,” a part-goddess, part-West African domicile figure cast in 5,900 pounds of bronze whose eyes Leigh omitted to avoid individualizing her, asserts Black presence and endurance, even as it memorializes Black denigration. Another of its references is a mammy-shaped restaurant in Natchez, Miss., that’s still in business today. Hill’s roller coaster, designed with Christopher Torres of Agency Artifact in collaboration with Skyline Attractions, and his larger Mass MoCA exhibition, “Brake Run Helix” (up through next January), seek to inspire awe and fun while also invoking the history of segregated amusement parks: Some visitors to the hangar-size room are invited to ride the artist’s manually operated roller coaster — which they do one at a time, often with a mixture of trepidation and glee.



Simone Leigh's "Sentinel" (2022), a bronze statue over 16 feet tall that she created for the United States pavilion of last year's Venice Biennale. Courtesy of the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery © Simone Leigh. Photo: Timothy Schenck

“Moving Chains,” like “Brava!,” is also animated by the public’s encounter with it; Gaines, 78, wanted the work to critique the Statue of Liberty, across from which it is currently situated on Governors Island. Upon climbing up the hill behind the sculpture, visitors can see how it interrupts the self-congratulatory energy of Lady Liberty, as well as those monuments to American commerce, the skyscrapers, just beyond. For a Black artist to make such an intervention at this scale feels as audacious, in its way, as Williams’s decision to fry up American flags.

THE CHARGE OF such works is altered, but not necessarily diminished, when they are encountered in museums. The black walls of Simmons’s massive temple-like sculpture “Align” — the centerpiece of her Queens Museum exhibition — are filled with a white handwritten script she would like white women readers of antiracist texts to declaim: “We are entering the reparations framework,” she has them say. “Align” is a metaphorical megaphone broadcasting white remorse across the kind of museum real estate previously reserved for white artists. Yet Simmons, 48, goes further by bringing a reparations framework into the museum in a more practical way — distributing thousands of free books, including Alex S. Vitale’s “The End of Policing” (2017) and Jackie Wang’s “Carceral Capitalism” (2018), to exhibitiongoers.

Leigh has likewise used museum spaces not just to display work but to host symposiums for other Black women artists and thinkers, and says the “work would not have been complete without bringing the audience in.” In that spirit, the walls around Simmons’s sculpture feature photo collages of Black figures holding flowers — a nod to abolitionist iconography, Simmons says, as well as a “sensual” respite from the “heady” demands of “Align.” Behind the grand proscenium of Hill’s “Brava!” is another such refuge: a gallery filled with images of painted pink roses, some outlined with green neon light. Such florals recall what Zora Neale Hurston, in her 1934 essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” calls “the will to adorn” — Black people’s life-affirming practice of making beauty in whatever space they have. That terrain might never have been the 40 acres promised by reparations, but it might have been a garden, or a windowsill. When Williams plants an earthen sculpture in a public park, when Leigh meticulously molds a giant female eye, these artists remind us that we can scale up indefinitely, but what we scale up from is the intimate process of lovingly tending to what is at hand.

A correction was made on April 4, 2023: An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to Kara Walker’s “A Subtlety.” The exhibition was free and open to the public; viewers did not need a ticket, and it did not sell out on many days.

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