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YOUNG ARTISTS 2023 ART

Kiyon Williams Puts the American Flag in a Frying Pan

Pulling materials from the Earth, the artist creates work that speaks to our relationship with the natural world.

WORDS

Elisha Tawe

PHOTOGRAPHY

Tomás Stockton

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Kiyan Williams's work manifests across several mediums, from sculpture and performance to video and installation, but earth remains a constant. "I think of earth as a collaborator when I'm working with it by hand," the artist, 31, says. "It's like this dance, this exchange, where I'm giving it form and we're working together in this slow, rhythmic, meditative way. If you use too much pressure it collapses, but you have to use a certain amount of pressure to create forms. It's changed my relationship to time and touch."

The New York-based, Stanford University and Columbia University alum pulls from a range of Black and queer influences to form their own way of seeing, critiquing, and conjuring. One of their first exhibited pieces to emerge from this process was *Meditation on the Making of America*. Collecting dirt from different sites imbued with fugitive, obscured histories connected to the Black American diaspora, Williams performed a series of gestures involving their entire body, which resulted in a rough outline of the Continental U.S. To Williams, this was a way to speak to the foundational histories of colonial extraction that built the Euro-Western world.

"Museums often consider the materials I work with as fugitive and messy, so inherently there's this sort of institutional critique imbued in the work," they tell me. "I'm interested in both materials and processes that we might name as quotidian. Earth is imbued with history and memory, and in working with it I get to engage with all that." This fascination with the quotidian is clearest in Williams's ongoing works around the American flag. When I ask how they arrived at frying the flag, they laugh before sharing, "I love to cook and one day I was cooking and I was amazed at how the fish I was frying immediately transformed when it was in a pan. I thought it was a beautiful sculptural process. The bubbles, the charring. So I proceeded to create different iterations of that, but with a flag." Their flag-fryings muddy the relationship between artist and spectator. The interventions invite the public to bring ingredients pertinent to their communities which are integrated into the public frying, imbuing the flag with elements of marginalized groups whose contributions to the development of the U.S. are often ignored.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

Williams plans to continue exploring through this iterative process. They are engaging with and enthralled by the works of the members of the contextures movement of the 1970s, and are situating their works within Black conceptual practices that gesture beyond figurative and abstract discourses. Currently, they are creating a series of follow-ups to the New York installation of their hardened earth sculpture: A reimagination of the Statue of Freedom, which sits atop the U.S. Capitol Building, entitled *Variations of Freedom*.