

Tavares Strachan: Hermetically Sealed by Maxwell Heller

A few art students follow their professor into a high-ceilinged room of the Ronald Feldman Gallery, slowly arranging themselves on an empty floor. They have come to see *Glo-Our Rain Maker*, an installation created by young artist Tavares Strachan, whose work has already appeared in galleries across the country. A computer counts down to 3:20 PM as everyone gathers around a fishbowl-sized glass globe that hangs from a vine of tubes and pipes, only inches from its curious viewers. Suddenly, a series of pneumatic blasts shake the delicate installation. Some students gasp as an artificial cloud formation takes shape in the glass globe's trembling belly, warmly illuminated by spotlights. All whispers fall silent. As the miniature cumulus cloud convulses and swells dramatically, the audience shuffles for a better view, but within a few breaths the mist has already evaporated, disappearing as abruptly and mysteriously as it appeared.

Tavares Strachan, originally of Nassau, Bahamas, holds a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design (2003) as well as an MFA from Yale University (2006), and has received numerous awards of recognition since 1998. His installations, four of which appeared last month in Brooklyn's Pierogi and Manhattan's Feldman Galleries, incite discussion of two very political and timely issues—on one hand, the power of natural phenomena, including climatic and edaphic events, symbiotic interdependence, balance within homeostatic systems; and, on the other hand, man's relationship to nature, that is, his antagonistic struggle against it, his efforts to collapse distance and space, and his myopic pursuit of progress at the planet's expense. Strachan eschews the coldness adopted by other conceptual artists, instead creating installations that speak not only to our intellectual interests, but to our emotional concerns, our feelings of loneliness, desire, and loss.

These central themes are discussed most eloquently in Strachan's ambitious *The Difference Between What We Have and What We Want*, an installation first exhibited in his home town of Nassau. For this piece, Strachan traveled thousands of miles north to the Alaskan Arctic where, with the aid of a skilled team, he removed a 4.5-ton block of ice and FedExed it to his old elementary school where it was displayed for local students—in a massive, solar-powered freezer—on the hottest day of the Bahaman year. The piece confronts its audience with an unusual symbiosis, a counterintuitive cooperation of polar opposites—solar heat creates artificial cold, destructive power fuels a nurturing energy. The installation effectively operates as an artificial homeostatic system wherein opposing forces balance one another perfectly. The piece brings to mind larger homeostatic systems. It reminds us, for example, of the vitally important (and recently-threatened) relationship between Earth's polar and equatorial climates: the climatic stability of tropical environments depends entirely on our planet's now-vanishing ice caps. Tavares delivers and displays a portion of this endangered ice as though it were a holy relic, that we might know it more intimately and, perhaps, finally recognize its value.

Beyond this exploration of natural balance and homeostasis, as Strachan juxtaposes natural extremes, he also triggers a discussion of human agency. For while the installation raises our awareness of nature's delicate power, it makes us equally conscious of the artist's power in this context. *Difference* serves as an object lesson concerning man's ingenuity (*id est*: Strachan's ingenuity), reminding us that we have become powerful enough to traverse continents in a matter of days, to relocate tons of matter, to transform heat into cold, simply for the sake of art. The schoolchildren who view this installation learn that technology allows humankind to transcend space as never before, to bring the distant within reach; and

suddenly an object that existed only in their imaginations now lies visible behind thin glass.

Strachan's *Where We Are is Always Miles Away* (2006) also explores these themes, but places more emphasis on human issues than on natural ones. For *Miles Away*, Strachan removed a 3000-pound, 56' x 56' portion of Crown Street in New Haven, including concrete, a street sign, a parking meter, underlying earth, surrounding air, *et al*, and transported these "materials" to San Francisco's Luggage Store Gallery. While a team of skilled workers (this time provided by New Haven's Department of Cultural Affairs, the Office of Economic Development and Engineering Departments) worked to fill the resulting void in New Haven, San Francisco's Luggage Store Gallery displayed Strachan's objects in a "hermetically sealed container" that simulated the lighting, atmosphere and temperature conditions they were immersed in at the time of their removal. Once again, Strachan's work raises issues of human ambition and collapse of space but, this time, his use of artificial materials alters his commentary. *Miles Away* urges us to consider the homeostatic relationship between opposing coastal cultures rather than opposing natural forces.

Beneath their purely scientific environmental and sociological commentaries, Strachan's installations subtly engage their audience personally and emotionally, raising unanswerable questions about desire and longing. *Difference*, *Miles away*, and *Rain Maker* bring distant objects within view, transporting arctic ice to equatorial heat, an east coast sidewalk to a west coast gallery, a storm cloud to eye-level—but these installations also distance objects from the audience, sealing them away, locking them behind layers of steel and glass. The foreign materials with which the viewer expects to interact are made visible, yes, but they remain as inaccessible as before. In this respect, Strachan's work intentionally contradicts its own implications about man's power to transcend distance, suggesting that physical proximity does not necessarily provide intimate interaction, that technology does not truly unite distant locales or populations. These concerns can be traced, perhaps, to Strachan's personal experience of isolation during his education in the United States, which relocated him to a culturally unfamiliar environment far removed from his Bahaman home. As Strachan suggests, his work sometimes touches on this experience, and on "the idea of desire—wanting to be in more than one place at a time, wanting to be *there* when you're *here*—which is part of living in a multicultural, global society" where anyone "can travel to ten countries within a week." Like his relocated objects, Strachan now finds himself sealed into absolute isolation, alienated not only from his new environment, but from his native country. Having traveled so far, he cannot truly return to the home he once knew.



Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts and Pierogi Gallery

These implications, concealed beneath the fascinating mechanical nature of his constructs, separate Strachan from his colder conceptual contemporaries and thematically unite his individual installations to form a larger whole. His works emphasize isolation, both human and artistic, underscoring the lonely nature of our individual endeavors. In *Homeostatic Feedback Loop #1* (2006), Strachan constructed a distillation device that enabled him to purify and bottle a year's worth of his own urine. The resulting installation, exhibited in the Pierogi Gallery, displayed the distillation device, a refrigerator packed with his bottled product, a series of salt-crystal-frosted beakers and, most importantly, three videos documenting his solitary work. In the Feldman Gallery, Strachan displayed *Components for an Absolute Symbiosis* (2006), where the blown-glass arteries and chambered heart of a human circulatory system hang in a 300-gallon aquarium of crystal-clear mineral oil. Along with *I Can't Forget What I've Forgotten* (Pierogi, 2006), where a 10' x 10' cube of warm air hovers in a frigid room, these works speak not only of the artist's hermetic experience, but of the audience's involuntary isolation. 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. Like the glass capillaries of *Symbiosis*, Strachan's messages hover on the edge of invisibility, slipping in and out of our perceptual grasp as we struggle to locate them within his work.

Today, the art students wander away from *Rain Maker*, following their professor toward *Absolute Symbiosis* in another room. If they have been affected by Strachan's breathtaking installation, they say nothing to one another on the subject. Of course, Strachan expresses some concern that his work may be inaccessible, particularly to modern viewers who have grown accustomed to the sound-byte simplicity of contemporary media. He recalls the rejection of his DaDa predecessors, acknowledging that audiences have consistently overlooked conceptual work dating back to Marcel Duchamp's much-maligned, ready-made *Fountain* (1917) which, like Strachan's *Difference* and *Miles Away*, "took an ordinary article of life" and placed it "so that its useful significance disappeared" under a new title and point of view. As Strachan suggests, there is a "certain level of investigation that our survival depends on, and it should be carried over into how people talk about [art]. But often times viewers are not willing to do that, they just want to... be done with it." BR

Where We Are is Always Miles Away remains in San Francisco's Luggage Store Gallery until January 6, 2007. Tavares Strachan is next scheduled to work with Russian space officials on a satellite project.

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