

INTERVIEW ([HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/FORMAT/INTERVIEW/](https://bombmagazine.org/format/interview/))

## Kiyan Williams by Louis Bury

Sculpture and performance that work with soil.

NOVEMBER 10, 2021



([https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/\\_hiresolution/Sentient-Ruins-Kiyan-Williams.png](https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Sentient-Ruins-Kiyan-Williams.png))

Kiyan Williams, *Sentient Ruins*, 2021, earth, steel base, and armature, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Visual Arts Centre, Montreal.

Kiyan Williams is not afraid to get dirty in quite literal ways. From a performance in which they emerged from a trash bag beside a New York City dumpster (*Trash and Treasure* [2014]) to a sculpture of uplifted, zombie-esque arms made from soil and installed without permission on the riverbank of a colonial-era slave dock site (*Reaching Towards Warmer Suns* [2020]), their art places them in intimate relation with the abject and the taboo so as to meditate on the human body's capacities as well as its fraught, complex gender and racial histories.

In particular, Williams has developed a homespun repertoire of gestures—throwing, rubbing, patting, licking, whipping—to manipulate the material of soil. Sometimes these gestures comprise the content of a public performance; other times, they take place behind the scenes and are evident only as sculptural traces and impressions of the artist's body. In all cases, they enact a smart, suggestive transvaluation of dirt as both a material and a concept. The mid-century anthropologist Mary Douglas notoriously defined dirt as “matter out of place,” the kind of perceived pollutant that well-ordered galleries and institutions assiduously scrub out of sight. Williams's work instead moves toward the mess—toward the displaced, discarded, or conveniently forgotten—taking up the burden, as well as the opportunity, of reparative care.

### **Louis Bury**

Can you talk about your background in performance?

### **Kiyan Williams**

When I was an undergraduate at Stanford, my performance studies classes introduced me to artists such as Pope.L and Ana Mendieta who used their body to investigate the conditions that shaped their sense of the world. That resonated with me in terms of remaking norms around gender identity. My earliest performances were interventions in public spaces. Those performances gave me a language to describe experiences in my personal life.

### **LB**

A language in the sense of a performance-studies vocabulary or a language in the sense of choreographic movements?

### **KW**

Both. Performance studies gave me a vocabulary to understand how power, history, and social norms are encoded in bodies, and the performances themselves were a mode of analysis to think about the conditions in which my body exists. My performance *Unearthing* (2016) in which I buried myself in a mound of dirt, glitter, and effluvia illustrates this point. As I rubbed soil into my skin, I improvised words exploring my identity's rejection of normativity. This process helped me understand dirt as a metaphor for my shifting sense of self, particularly through natural processes of growth, transformation, and decay.

### **LB**

It's fascinating how you play with dirt's positive and negative meanings.

### **KW**

I move between the terms “dirt,” “soil,” and “earth” because they each have different connotations. The range of meanings is what draws me to the material. In works that critique hegemonic institutions, I often say “dirt,” drawing on Mary Douglas’s ideas about how dirt transgresses established borders. In works that engage with the legacy of American Land art, I’ll often say “earth” or “soil.”



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Kiyan Williams, *Meditation on the Making of America*, 2019, performance, earth, canvas, wood panels. Photo by Lily Wan. Courtesy of the artist.

**LB**

How do these considerations manifest in the physical experience of working with soil?

**KW**

It always feels like a collaboration. I might have an idea for what form I want a piece to take, but there are certain shapes that the material, because of its viscosity, won't allow. I make a mixture out of mud, and depending on how well I mix it there will be different levels of clay and air content, which allows me to manipulate its qualities to fit the effect I'm looking for. But the most important thing is being careful and working slowly—repeating the same gestures over and over. As the sculpture dries, it cracks and appears to be fragile when in fact it's actually quite rigid and structurally sound. To me, that tension—that precarity—metaphorically embodies what it means to be human.

**LB**

Can you talk about the artworks in which traces of your body are evident but your body itself isn't directly represented? I think it was Gilles Deleuze who said something to the effect of, “It's not a question of what a body is, but what it can do.”

**KW**

It all depends on what I want to convey in a particular piece. In *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns*, for example, I wanted to suggest collective, as opposed to individual, experience, so I incorporated multiple arms into the sculpture. In *Meditations on the Making of America* (2019), a performance that resulted in a wall work, I made a rough outline of the continental US using mud. The completed map contains numerous imprints of my hands, evidence of the process of creation and transformation. These material traces are related to questions of Diasporic embodiment. I think of them as an alternative archive, as evidence of lived experience for people whose lives elude traditional documentation.

**LB**

You've told me that sometimes you give yourself rules or guidelines in the creative process.

**KW**

I have rules to help me develop forms and shapes that don't reproduce a colonial visual grammar. One of my rules is to avoid making a square or rectilinear shape. I think squares, boxes, and cages are oppressive. They're meant to contain and capture and create boundaries. When working with soil, my goal is to create a form that doesn't yet exist or one that evokes biomorphic shapes. I don't want to package it into something neat and safe for easy consumption.

**LB**

Whoa! Where does your rule against squares come from?

**KW**

When I was in grad school, the critic Claire Bishop delivered a talk in which she argued that research-driven contemporary art adopts the visual vocabulary of science, which results in work placed in vitrines or squares. That resonated with me and helped me realize that I don't want to reproduce the visual language of science and containment in my own work. This well-known critic made this observation, and, without disagreeing with it, I felt clear that it wasn't the thing I was going to do.





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Installation view of Kiyan Williams, *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns*, Anderson Collection at Stanford University, July 29–December 5, 2021. Photo by Andrew Brodhead. Courtesy of Stanford University, Stanford, CA.

**LB**

How do you understand your way of working in relation to predecessors?

**KW**

The additive way that I layer soil on top of itself feels related to historical processes, to the way soil can conceal history but can also reveal it when things are unearthed. In terms of art history, some of my works are inspired by Lynda Benglis's early pours as well as Richard Serra's early work with lead. Serra has this piece that's basically just a document listing all the ways he was manipulating lead. I wanted to take a similar approach to manipulating soil, whether by pouring it, scraping it, shaping it, or even allowing it to collapse into itself. Ana Mendieta and Beverly Buchanan are also touchstones for me because they're Earth artists who worked with their hands rather than large machines. Buchanan worked in the American South and was concerned with how the land holds history and memory.

**LB**

How would you characterize your own work's relationship to place and site?

**KW**

I'm interested in understanding my relationship to the US through the African Diaspora as a way to acknowledge the erased or ignored histories embedded in the land because of settler colonialism. Several years ago, I attempted to retrace some of my ancestors' early 1800s journeys to the Americas, using census and ship records to identify locations where they once lived or traveled

and then visiting those locations in New York, Virginia, and the US Virgin Islands. However, today many of those sites contain no physical evidence of my ancestors' lives. I collected soil from the sites and used it in sculptures and performances, as the soil seemed to contain the only material traces of their lives.



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Kiyan Williams on site at the Anderson Collection at Stanford University installing *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns*, July 29–December 5, 2021. Photo by Andrew Brodhead. Courtesy of Stanford University, Stanford, CA.

**LB**

What are you working on going forward?

**KW**

I was recently at a BOFFO residency on Fire Island where I did a series of performances and sculptures on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, thinking about it as a portal of Diasporic identity and the shore as a site of trans\*formation. I'm also at work on a book project in which I outline a divergent genealogy of American Land art. Like my work to date, these new projects consider the systems of extraction and dispossession that are at the root of global climate catastrophe and that disproportionately impact Black and Indigenous peoples. However, I'm also expanding my range of materials by incorporating mycelium and other organic materials into the work. Fungi have been particularly exciting materials to work with because of their reparative capacity; for example, some fungi can be used to clean soil contaminated by oil. It's a way to think about remediating lands and bodies haunted by colonial violence.

<https://anderson.stanford.edu/programs-exhibitions/reaching-towards-warmer-suns-2020/> is on view at the Anderson Collection at Stanford University until December 5; Williams's work can also be seen in the group exhibition [How to Cook](#)



a Wolf (<https://centerforbookarts.org/how-to-cook-a-wolf-exhibition>) at the Center for Books Arts in New York City until December 11 and in the exhibition [Bodies in Conflict](https://www.vac.ca/present/bodiesinconflict) (<https://www.vac.ca/present/bodiesinconflict>) at the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington in Bowmanville, Canada, until December 15.

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