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New Naturalists

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Tavares Strachan's *Forgetting Is Remembering Everything that is Beautiful*—shown at the 2013 Biennale de Lyon in France—combines Pyrex glass, neon, metal and electric transformers.





NEW

NATURALISTS

by Francie Latour

DURING HIS LAST YEAR AT RISD, Tavares Strachan 03 GL set out to make a piece about distance, longing and loss. To do this, he used three materials: a light meter, a light box and computer software.

The meter was fixed to the roof of his mother's house in Nassau, the Bahamian capital where Strachan was born and which he ached to feel during the long Rhode Island winter. The light box, built by hand, sat in his Providence dorm room. The computer program captured the meter reads, sent them over the Internet and fed them to the light box in real time — beaming the same intensity of waxing and waning light to his bedside that his mother might see from her window.

Before he could only imagine that light. Now he had recreated it, with an immediate presence that nonetheless reinforced its physical absence.

“If a leaf would land on the light meter, I might call home,” says Strachan, 35, who last year represented the Bahamas in its inaugural pavilion at the *55th Venice Biennale*. “My brother might go out and take the leaf off, and the light in my room would turn bright again.”



Shown at the 2013 Venice Biennale, Strachan's piece *Invisible Henson*—a Pyrex glass figure in an acrylic tank filled with mineral oil—references Matthew Henson, an African-American explorer who discovered the North Pole with Robert Peary in 1909 but is rarely mentioned.

“The art - science divide is very quickly being crossed in this age. You see people migrating rapidly across the disciplines.”

Peter Yeadon, associate professor of Interior Architecture

For Strachan the piece marked a turning point in his development as an artist. He had used a simple system of measurements, based on input and output of data, to create an expressive piece. The box of transported light set up an improbable encounter of climates and cultures, one rooted in personal experience but illuminating universal themes—about what is native and what is foreign, about the memory of home and the experience of displacement, about nature and our power to harness it.

Strachan's seamless integration of scientific methods, technological devices and natural processes in an art context puts him at the leading edge of a movement of artists whose work is blurring—or in some cases collapsing—the boundaries between scientific and aesthetic inquiry. These artists include a number of RISD alums working across a wide range of media and scientific disciplines, from genetics to astronomy to nanotechnology and synthetic biology.

Taking deep dives into established and emerging branches of science, these artists are finding radical new ways to do visually what scientists do empirically: to test, to scrutinize, to

interpret, and above all, to imagine the nature of our existence.

“The art - science divide is very quickly being crossed in this age. You see people migrating rapidly across the disciplines,” says **Peter Yeadon**, a RISD associate professor of Interior Architecture whose work focuses on applications for smart materials and nanotechnology. “One way to think about art and science is in terms of the actual activities that people engage in. There are scientists who make discoveries by observing some existing condition. And there are artists engaging in a set of practices that do the exact same thing.”

More than anything, Strachan is an explorer of environments and material; in this regard, he shares a creative kinship with a number of alumni, including RISD Digital + Media Critic **Sophia Sobers** MFA 13 DM. A 2014 Puffin Foundation Grant recipient, Sobers is among six artists chosen this year to create public artwork for downtown Providence as part of the city's multiphase I-195 Redevelopment District project. At once delicate and overgrown, her installations merge organic and inorganic matter in ways that suggest primordial gardens and futuristic biospheres.

In scale, their vision differs dramatically. Strachan's 2009–10 *Invisible Diver A*, for example, features a 900-gallon tank of mineral oil with a suspended glass sculpture of the human circulatory system. In contrast, Sobers' 2013 installation *Uprooted* presents a miniature floating world of moss, bark and glowing wires.

But as they seek to recreate or mimic natural phenomena, both Strachan and Sobers are keenly attuned to the connection between the physical and storytelling properties of materials. The result, for both artists, is a poetic visual language that resonates conceptually but also emotionally and spiritually.

Sobers and Strachan also deal very much in a language of dichotomies—cold and heat, plants and plastics, harmony and hostility. By creating a dialogue between these opposites, they introduce a deep sense of ambiguity about opposites we tend to see as both fixed and mutually exclusive. As artists who continually mine science as a primary source of inspiration and information, they also embody this ambiguity.

MUTATIONS, INTERVENTIONS, DISCOVERIES

Growing up in a home where her mother worked as an engineer and her father was a tool and die maker, Sobers never saw art and science as separate pursuits. At home in both realms, she did her undergraduate work in architecture at New Jersey Institute of Technology, but soon found herself craving the open-ended time, exploration and iterative process of the studio.

After months of research on the influence of lab sciences on studio practice, Sobers co-curated *Investigating the Lab*, a winter exhibition of student work held in conjunction with RISD's 2014 design science symposium (see page 52). Interestingly, the environments she creates in her work probe the controlled conditions of art-world spaces, too—namely, the studio or gallery.

Large-scale installations like *Abandoned Experiment #11* and *Enclosure* immerse viewers in forests overrun with organic and synthetic growth. Undeniably constructed they evoke a kind of futuristic rainforest ecology, with dense roots and undergrowth or hanging vine-like structures set in an LED-powered bioluminescence.



Sobers' sculpture *Uprooted* presents a miniature floating world illuminated by LEDs.



Through immersive installations such as *Enclosure* and *Abandoned Experiment #11 Sobers* combines organic and manmade matter, allowing things to grow and decay naturally.



“I’m intrigued with seeing how organic forms could mutate either with synthetic things or technological things.”

Sophia Sobers MFA 13 DM

In these humid, digital environments, it can be impossible to tell where organic matter ends and inorganic matter begins. In the final stages of *Abandoned*, which Sobers let decay over the life of the installation, a branching twig suspended from a light source seems to have fused completely with interconnecting silicone tubes, creating the illusion of an organic whole that should only be possible in the natural world. Part sculpture, part organism, it underscores the beauty and poetry of nature while suggesting a future where nature may be put on life support.

“Mutation is something I think about a lot with these projects,” says Sobers, 26, who lives in Providence. “I’m intrigued with seeing how organic forms could mutate either with synthetic things or technological things. So usually I’ll have branches and weeds lying around and then all these tubes and plastic things you might see in a science classroom. And then a big part of it is trying to play between the two and see if they can merge and create some kind of dialogue or narrative based on this new form.”

Sobers traces her interest in the intersection of art and science to her childhood. One day in middle school, she says, she caught a cold from her sister, and it wouldn’t go away.

“My dad took me to see a doctor, and I remember them sitting me down in a chair, and a nurse telling me that I had diabetes,” she recalls. “I didn’t know what that meant. But I can remember being in intensive care because my blood sugar was off the charts, and the doctors showing my parents how to give me shots and figuring all that out.”

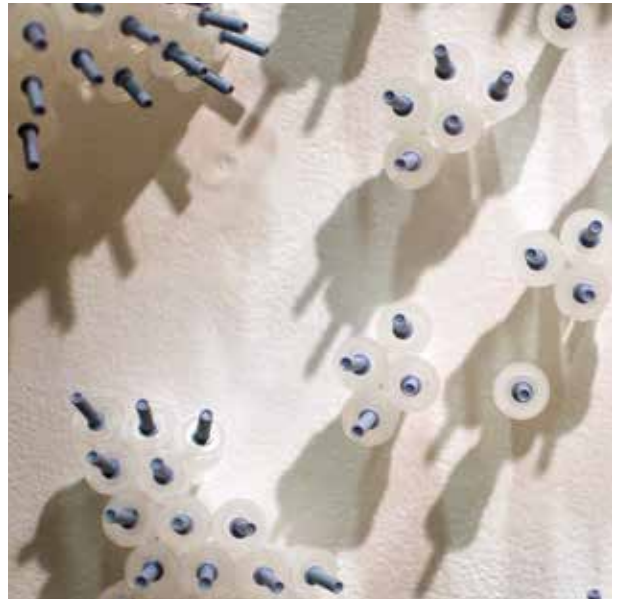
What she came to understand and later contemplate was the way in which the disease represented the failure of her body as a system. Over time the medical procedures and equipment that became part of her daily or even hourly routine—the insulin, the syringes, the finger pricks and blood-sugar checks—began to feel like extensions of that system. Manmade interventions, they were both foreign to her body and vital to her survival.

“I think that experience of diabetes has a lot to do with what type of work I create and how I go about approaching materials,” Sobers says. Even with a major in Digital + Media, which placed her firmly in the realm of computer technology, the pull to explore plant life as a medium was instinctual.

“Growing up, my sister and I would stack wood and weed the garden—both chores I did not appreciate at the time,” Sobers says. “So there’s definitely a familiarity about something that I’m used to and want to work with on many levels.”

“The branches express a form of energy... like a dead thing that has life.”

Peter Yeadon



In *Washed Up in a Near Distant Future, Organic Cities and Islets of Langerhans*, Sobers explores the relationships between biomorphic systems and patterns, using such inorganic material as leftover needles from her insulin shots.

Drawn to the notion of systems, Sobers created *Organic Cities* and *Satellite Views* to explore the echoes and biomorphic patterns among seemingly unrelated systems, from cellular networks to downtown city grids to images of the atmosphere as they might be seen from space. More recently—and to surreal effect—she has turned explicitly to her own biological systems and the instruments of her medical treatment as a source of material: In *Islets of Langerhans*, exhibited in last year’s exhibition *Carrefour: Intersections of Biomedical Research and Art* at RISD’s Sol Koffler Graduate Student Gallery, she transforms hundreds of accumulated needles from her insulin shots into a landscape of viral pathogens, seemingly growing from inside the walls and invading the surrounding space. “The needles are something I’ve come back to a few times,” she says, “trying to figure out how I can take these medical objects and create a narrative around them as organic objects.”

Though the fictional biomes and systems Sobers conjures up involve varying degrees of technical complexity—integrating light, motion and sound to animate the specimens in her pieces—they are also serene, lyrical contemplations, at times bordering on the spiritual. She calls her 2013 piece *Washed Up in a Near Distant Future* an offering to nature. A totem of translucent, radiating orbs lashed to a tree branch, it reads like a gift left out in the world—for the world—from an unseen and unknown source.

“What interested me is that it seemed like the most unlikely place to find a piece of a tress unless it had washed up there,” says Yeadon, who served as Sobers’ thesis advisor. “The context meant a lot. It would be very different in a gallery, where you have power available. But here the branches express a form of energy, and you think of it as being powered by something, but there are no obvious sources. It seems like a dead thing that has life.”

PLAYING WITH SCIENTIFIC TRUTH

For Strachan context is everything. The idea of place as a set of boundaries that delimits identity and experience is a theme he continually seeks to unsettle and interrupt in his work. He achieves this not just by what he makes but by who he is. That was the case at last year's *Venice Biennale*, as the world's most rarefied art audience encountered an artist representing a Caribbean nation with a multi-sensory installation called *Polar Eclipse*—documenting his voyage to retrace a 1909 expedition to the North Pole.

"It's funny, because it's one of the oldest biennales—if not the oldest—and one of the most sophisticated," says Strachan, who lives and works in New York. "But the expectation was still the same: 'Oh, you're from the Bahamas? What's up with the ice and polar bears and stuff?' So it was an opportunity to disrupt what people thought an artist who grew up on a tropical island might make."

If disrupting stereotypes is a goal, Strachan seems to be well on his way. In interviews and reviews of his work, he is invariably described in hybrid, hyphenated terms: a psycho-cartographer, a wild-card conceptualist, an artist/mad-scientist and a post-colonial fabulist.

In his pursuit of scientific ideas in art, he has collaborated with everyone from MIT scientists to specialists at a Russian space mission training facility. Highly collaborative and highly ambitious, his artistic dares include recreating the phenomenon of cloud formation inside a miniature glass chamber (*Glo-Our Rainmaker*, 2006) and launching glass rockets made from Bahamian sand and fueled by sugar cane (*Blast Off #4*, 2011–12). In April he was among six artists to receive grants from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art for projects promoting art and technology, funding that will allow him to continue his experiments with glass rockets using various alternative fuels.

Strachan calls glass "the most philosophical material on the planet." In some ways, his introduction to glass as a discipline is also a story of unlikely encounters, not unlike the themes of exploration and surprise so richly developed in his oeuvre.

A student who tenuously made his way through RISD on scholarships, Strachan walked onto campus fully intent on being an Illustration major. That lasted for about a week, he says, when he wandered to the fourth floor of the Metcalf Building, and the roar from the Glass department furnaces mesmerized him. It wasn't that he had never worked with glass as a medium. It was that he had never imagined the possibility of it as a medium.



““Oh, you’re from the Bahamas? What’s up with the ice and polar bears and stuff?””

Tavares Strachan 03 GL



The Bear (from the *Constellation Series*), an 8x5-foot Mylar on Plexiglas piece, was part of Strachan's multimedia *Polar Eclipse* installation for the Bahamas Pavilion at the 2013 *Venice Biennale*. Fueled by sugar cane, the glass rocket in *Blast Off* (2008–09) hasn't yet made it to outer space, but the ongoing experiment continues to fire the artist's imagination.

“One of the things about glass people at RISD is that they’re insanely hardcore.”

Tavares Strachan 03 GL



“Hell no—I didn’t see it on TV, I’d never seen it in a magazine,” says Strachan, who studied painting at the College of the Bahamas before RISD and afterwards went on to earn an MFA in Sculpture from Yale. “One of the things about glass people at RISD is that they’re insanely hardcore. They throw you in, they say, ‘Go get some glass and play with it;’ you open up that furnace door and 1600°F of fire comes roaring out. If I was going to be stuck with the bills, I wanted an experience in a program like that.”

Brittle and durable, common and precious, functional and mysterious, the physical properties of glass came to deeply inform Strachan’s visual vocabulary, revealing itself as a complex, conceptually driven material that operates at the level of both scientific idea and human emotion.

“Glass has played a significant role in the development of both science and art,” notes Glass Department Head **Rachel Berwick 84 GL**, one of his teachers. “Ironically, it’s only in recent history that it has wrongly been given a more limited association. What artists like Tavares are doing so effectively is questioning the limits of what is possible, rather than accepting artificially prescribed parameters. Glass, like science, has a process and a language that lends itself to the themes that are important to him. Everything is fair game and he is—and always has been—fearless in his pursuit.”

Those themes are often at play whether Strachan is working directly with the medium or not. With his light box/light

meter system, which he made for a Glass studio, “it wasn’t necessarily a literal experience of glass or glassmaking. But it definitely was deeply rooted in ideas of translucency and displacement, this sense of longing and loss and fragility, and all of these things that you encounter when you’re working with this material!”

Home is a force that exerts a strong pull on Strachan. By the age of six, he was immersed in artistic process through the Bahamian festival known as *Junkanoo*. A costume-, dance- and music-filled street parade that draws hundreds of thousands to compete in elaborate productions, *Junkanoo* was a family tradition strictly reserved for adults; still, Strachan’s elders would wake him in the pre-dawn hours to head to the town square.

But the idea of home is also an important foil for Strachan, one he has used to forge an aesthetics of belonging based on a multiplicity of experience, loosed from the boundaries of nationhood or geography or race. In his iconic 2006 installation, *The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want*, the artist found an ideal material and context to express this cross-cultural vision: ice—specifically a 4.5-ton block of ice, which he and a team of technicians harvested from the Arctic Circle, encased in dry ice, shipped via FedEx and displayed in the courtyard of his Nassau elementary school in 2006.

Maintained in a transparent, solar-powered freezer, *The Distance* was a feat of engineering, aesthetics and myth-

Strachan continues to be fascinated by ice, going to great lengths to research, mine and move it from the North Pole to his home base in the Bahamas.



“I was also interested in redefining what home might be or what place might be... and how all those metaphors could be transposed onto this inanimate piece of ice.”

Tavares Strachan 03 GL

making. It allowed local school children to study states of matter, the formation of river ice and the interdependency of extreme climates. But it also allowed them to tell a story—about the hometown explorer who crossed the Arctic and brought back a giant block of ice. At night, Strachan says, neighborhood kids would climb trees with binoculars to peer at the lit block of ice—like a monument or a relic.

“Part of it is really the child in me, or the child in all of us,” Strachan says. “It was this very absurd kind of desire for a gesture, to take something that is so unstable and so large—almost like an alien—and bring it into this hostile environment and just try to sustain it. But I was also interested in redefining what home might be or what place might be, or about the specificity of what it means to be local or international, and how all those metaphors could be transposed onto this inanimate piece of ice.”

If Strachan’s art practice is scientific, it is also clearly scientific: In a conscious way, he both claims and casts doubt on the narrative of science in Western culture, a narrative of ingenuity and progress, of making the impossible possible by bending nature to our will.

“To me science is fascinating because it has this kind of architecture or language of authority,” says Strachan. “The idea of science is that of an ‘expert’ revealing certain truths about the world. And as an artist, I like that. That’s what the language of science can do.” ■