



Cover: *Unearthing*, 2016. Performed at Dixon Place, NY. Written and performed by Kiyan Williams with performers Kelly Erin Sloan, Linda La Sarabi, Jamie Niel, Miatta Kawinzi. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Cristobal Guerra.

Back cover: *Sentient Ruin I*, 2021. 72 × 22 ½ × 16 in. (182.9 × 56.4 × 40.6 cm). Earth, moss, binder, steel base, armature. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King Gallery, New York.

Above: *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns*, 2020. 7 × 25 ft. (213.4 × 762 cm). Soil, steel, gems, crystals, concrete base. Courtesy of the artist.

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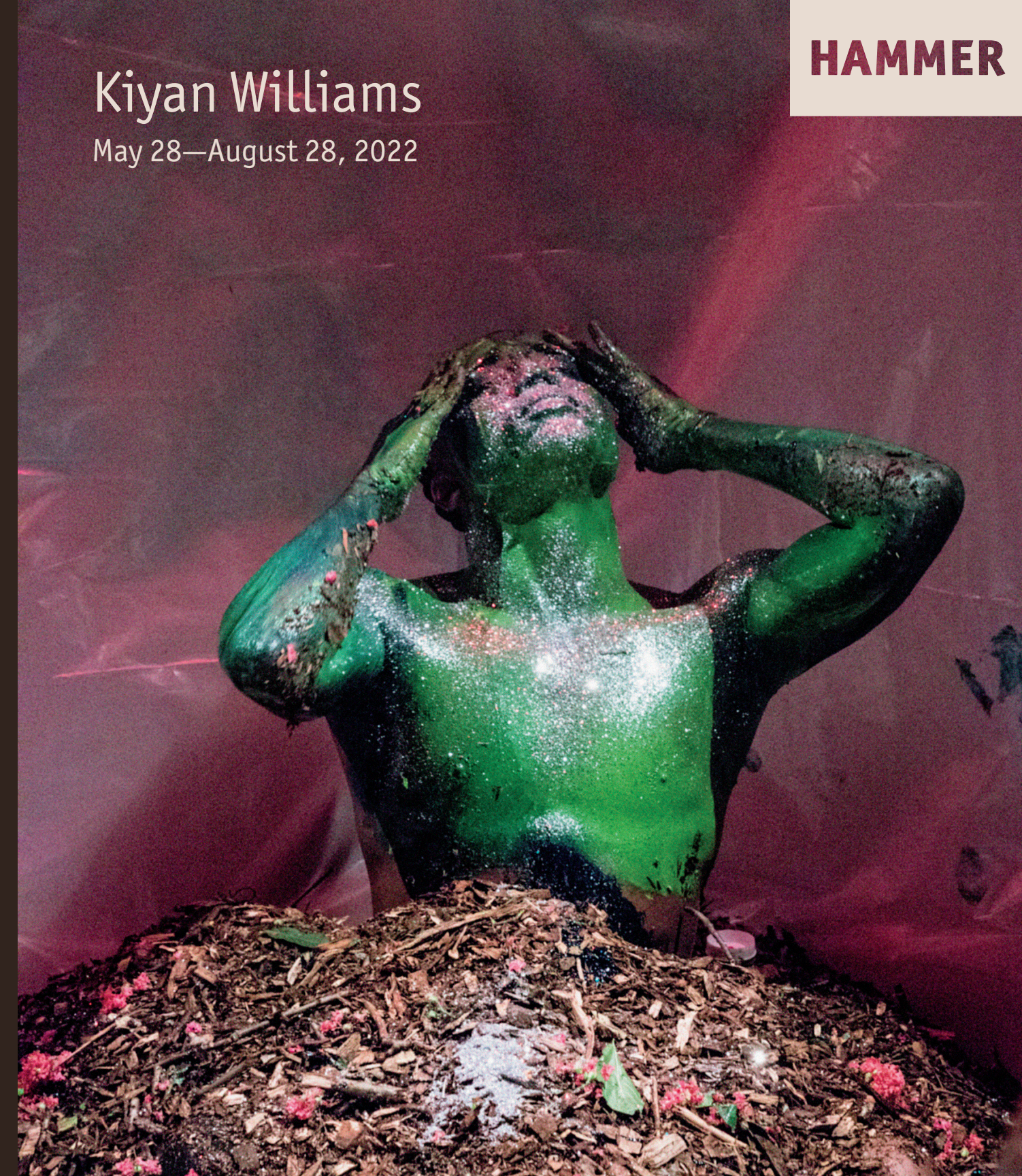
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Kiyan Williams

May 28—August 28, 2022

HAMMER



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Erin Christovale: Your first earth-based piece was a performance called *Unearthing*, which was originally performed in 2016 at Dixon Place in New York. What called you to use what was, at the time, a newfound material?

Kiyon Williams: It’s so nice to be able to reflect on that. When I first conceived of *Unearthing*, which was in 2014, it was during a residency at EmergenNYC, and I was doing really rigorous performance-based exercises and experimenting outside of a more studio-based practice. One day this image came to me of my body in a mound of earth and I was rubbing the earth into my skin. So I dug up some dirt from a local park in downtown Manhattan and did some research and learned that it was a former African burial ground. And so through performance and working with the material, it was kind of revealing itself to me, and I felt this deep desire to have a connection with the land through earth. In a way, I think I was quite literally attempting to ground myself because I had just graduated from college and was trying to figure out a new city—New York—and I also was thinking about how dispossession and nonbelonging can inform a Black queer experience. There was also something about being in a mound of earth from a formal perspective and how creating a new form of my body, in the sense that my lower half was just a mound of earth and transcending a human and gendered form with no recognizable legs or not necessarily having genitalia and all these things that society uses to mark and code gendered bodies. So this performance would eventually lead into my sculptural practice.

EC: You often cite Black feminist and queer literature as sources of both inspiration and affirmation. The title of this installation, *Between Starshine & Clay* (2022), takes its name from a Lucille Clifton poem, “won’t you celebrate with me.” I’ve returned to that poem many times over the years as a source of recognition that so concisely and elegantly informs Black femmehood. What about this line and this poem drew you in? And do you have a writing practice that coincides with your art practice? How does language inform your work?

KW: I’ve always found poetry to be illuminating and really vital in terms of how certain poets use language to describe a process of self-emancipation and determination. I’m always trying to mine these different relationships to land or the natural world and how that is rooted in the process of self-creation for many Black creatives. I love the line “between starshine and clay” because it’s about the earth and light as the materials used to forge a new self. As a sculptor and as someone who works three-dimensionally, I am invested in earth and light and all the materials that I’m assembling in order to create a new kind of cosmology or a way to articulate my own self-determination, and this desire also stems from a larger emancipatory project that Black feminist/queer cultural production is engaged in. I do have a writing practice, and it often goes hand in hand with art making. When I’m in the studio and working with the earth and touching it, language also comes to me, and I think about this process as part of a larger, more holistic synthesis in which, in my daily life, I’m always confronted with these regimes that are trying to make me split my body, mind, and spirit.

EC: You collect earth from various familial sites and spaces that hold Black American history. Can you speak to some of the sites the earth and sandstone in this installation were sourced from and why?

KW: When I was in graduate school at Columbia University, my studio was on 125th Street, across from the housing projects that my great-grandmother used to live in. I didn’t have a relationship with her, so that geographic proximity made me curious to retrace my family’s migration to Harlem. That moment began a process of retracing my ancestors’ last addresses and going to those locations, even as far away as Saint Croix. Many of these spaces were in a state of ruin because of neglect and natural disasters, and so the literal debris and earth were the only remnants that I felt held traces of the lives of the ancestors I was trying to build this connection with. In 2014 my high school building was demolished to make way for luxury condominiums, and all the alumni went there and collected the bricks and the debris and took it home, and so the convergence of those two experiences made me realize that materials like earth and debris are imbued with memory. When I was in Virginia doing a residency at Virginia Commonwealth University, I started visiting former plantations, and I was really shocked by the commodification of these sites. People get married at these plantations, and I’m like, wait, what is this? Historical amnesia? So collecting materials in these spaces felt really significant. The sandstone included in *Between Starshine & Clay* was inspired by a research trip to Washington, DC, for my public art project *Ruins of Empire* (2022). I saw a commemorative piece of sandstone, and it said something like “this sandstone was carved in a quarry by indentured and slave laborers,” and it hit me that all these federal buildings were made by people who were subjugated.



That realization made me want to incorporate the sandstone into the project, so I reached out to a local historical society that had materials from an original building, and they generously sent me some sandstone to use in my work.

EC: When you create these amorphous bodies that bear traces of the human form, you employ techniques that shape and harden your materials. What concoctions and recipes have you created over the years that generate these objects?

KW: The impulse to start making sculptures out of earth stemmed from a residency in Northern California. I would go on these meditative walks every day along the coast, and the landscape is so striking because there are these huge cliffs that meet the ocean. Every day, for hours, I would observe the ocean brushing against the land, and one day it hit me how sublime that is and how magnificent the ocean is to have carved these massive, beautiful shapes into the hard, dense earth. This repeated gesture was a choreography if you will, like the ocean just constantly meeting the earth, and over time these shapes emerged and formed. When I first started making the sculptures, I had a pile of dirt on the floor in my studio that I was experimenting with, and I thought of that coastline and realized I was missing water to give it shape, so I started making a mud mix. Sometimes I think about my hand as the ocean, in the sense that

the ocean is a sculptor, and over time I developed both the recipe, the way I get the material to mold, but also the gestures that I use to get it to take shape. I think of the material as a collaborator because the conditions have to be right for the work to be created. Otherwise the works will fall apart, and so it has been a long and engaged material study in terms of how to make sculptures that are sound and sturdy. I also found an organic, eco-friendly binder that I add that makes the pieces durable.

EC: The act of sourcing earth from sites that specifically hold histories of Black life/death can be heavy and loaded. How do you hold space and care for the spirits and experiences that are connected to these landscapes?

KW: Well, I’ve realized that the whole damn country is haunted, period. There’s no site that hasn’t witnessed a violent form of extraction or dispossession or displacement, so you can probably go anywhere, and if you learn the history of a site and see what its former use was before industrialization, you’ll learn some really wild stuff. For me this practice of sourcing earth comes from a place of care, and it always starts with acknowledging the earth that I’m standing on. You know, I engage in my own private rituals, and I also think there’s something cathartic about it. I don’t want to compare it to an ancestral-like veneration, but I am trying to be a steward.

EC: You speak of the “ruined” form as a body that is in transition or that has the capacity to reshape and become anew. Can you speak to how that notion calls forth histories of survival but is also a stand-in for the fluidity of gender identity/norms?

KW: During these different research trips, I was confronting ruins, so there was this architectural reference that was always present. But then, when I was thinking about what a ruin is, it had all these broader relationships to time and this history of being a form from the past that has been destroyed. It’s going through a process of decomposition or decay, such that it’s not what it was before, but it also holds a certain type of sturdiness and resiliency. So there’s this paradox, a play between being susceptible to decay and becoming something different than it was before. In that way the reminder of the past exists in the present, but there’s a possibility for a future form. I think about this in the same way I think about gender, this idea of ruining gender and ruining the gender binary. My sculptures often speak to a former sort of self that is going through a process of transformation while gesturing toward the possibility of something different.

EC: You often reference a history of land art throughout your work and have used the terms *earth*, *soil*, and *dirt* interchangeably to incite some of this history/canon. How do you see your practice engaging with that movement?

KW: I started to think about that question a lot more in graduate school, when I was learning more about art history and thinking about these genealogies and movements. I would say that my relationship with it begins with artists like Beverly Buchanan and Ana Mendieta, who weren’t necessarily central figures in the movement but who worked with land using their own hands and immersed their bodies into the environment. I think about the fact that land holds meaning and has a relationship to diaspora, notions of belonging, and is a space to reflect on the past and the present. These ideas resonate within my practice, which feels very divergent from the cis white male canon. You know, these ideas of making work in regions such as the Southwest, places that are imagined as blank canvases even though they hold indigenous histories and are spaces of mass displacement, this act of bulldozing and carving out incisions in the land. I find myself looking at and responding to someone like Walter De Maria, specifically his *New York Earth Room* (1977), but there’s a barrier around that work, so you can’t touch or walk on it directly. When I do my earth works, people can walk on the floor. I want people to have this physical encounter with the earth similarly to the way I do in the studio. So I think that describes the way I’m engaging with land art and reimagining it, but it is also an ongoing conversation.



Above: *Dirt Eater*, 2019. 6 × 3 × 3 ft. (182.9 × 91.4 × 91.4 cm). Digital video, color: 7:29 min. (loop). Soil, clay, steel, patina, bricks, wax, kanekalon, incense, wood. Installation view, In Practice: Other Objects, SculptureCenter, New York, January 14–March 25, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

Left: *Ruins of Empire*, 2022. Installation view, Black Atlantic, Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York City, May 17–November 27, 2022. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Nicholas Knight, Courtesy of Public Art Fund, NY.

Biography
Kiyon Williams (b. 1991, Newark, NJ) is an artist and writer who works fluidly across performance, sculpture, video, and 2-D realms. Rooted in a process-driven practice, they are attracted to unconventional quotidian materials and methods that evoke the historical, political, and ecological forces that shape individual and collective bodies.