

Art World

'They Become Ways of Telling Stories': Watch Artist Kevin Beasley Make Thought-Provoking Works From Cast-Off Materials

As part of a collaboration with Art21, hear news-making artists describe their inspirations in their own words.

Artnet News, January 5, 2023



Production still from the Art21 "New York Close Up" film, "Kevin Beasley's Raw Materials." © Art21, Inc. 2019.

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For the Virginia-born artist [Kevin Beasley](#), every object from a cast-off du-rag to a broken twig, is one component in a vast mosaic of art that tells a story both personal and universal. In fact, Beasley's work includes both of those items, along with needles, resin, raw cotton, kaftans, and even a cotton gin itself. Beasley's work is on view right now as part of a sprawling exhibition titled "Black Abstractions: From Then 'Til Now," featuring a multigenerational cohort of Black artists whose work defies easy categorization.

In an exclusive interview filmed as part of [Art21's series New York Close Up](#) back in 2019, Beasley recounts the origins of his first major solo show in New York at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The idea for a show centered on the cotton gin came to him as he drove through Valentines, Virginia for a family reunion, and was moved to anger at the sight of acres of cotton fields. "Why am I so mad at this plant? This plant is not doing anything other than growing and being beautiful" Beasley explains, and he knew "there's a lot of unpacking that has to happen."



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Kevin Beasley, *Untitled (Halo Rags)* (2019). Photo: Chad Redmon. Courtesy of the artist and the Green Family Art Foundation.

For Beasley, cotton is not just a material, it is a theme that touches on politics, social relationships, and of course, economics and reparations. “It all just unfolds and is laid out,” he says. At his show at the Whitney, Beasley constructed a series of sculptural works, comprised of various materials, that he calls “slabs.” He says: “They become ways of telling stories.” In his works, Beasley takes control over not just a material, but the systemic repression of Black people and artists, to construct something new.

“Being a Black person in this current state, that’s what you’re encouraged to do—is to move on. Like, ‘Ok, there’s been time. There’s been space,’ right? It’s a false narrative. But it also is one that you feel the pressure from.”

Watch the video, which [originally appeared](#) as part of Art21’s series *New York Close Up* below. Kevin Beasley’s work is on view in the exhibition *“Black Abstractionists: From Then ‘Til Now”* at the Green Family Art Foundation through January 29, 2023.



This is an installment of “Art on Video,” a collaboration between Artnet News and Art21 that brings you clips of news-making artists. A new season of the nonprofit Art21’s flagship series *Art in the Twenty-First Century* is available now on PBS. Catch all episodes of other series, like *New York Close Up* and *Extended Play*, and learn about the organization’s educational programs at Art21.org.

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Artnet News, December 29, 2022



Production still from the Art21 "New York Close Up" film, "Firelei Báez: An Open Horizon (or) the Stillness of a Wound." © Art21, Inc. 2021.

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An immersive sculptural installation at the Momentary in Arkansas will offer visitors an unusual opportunity: to travel through time and space. The expansive work by Firelei Báez reimagines the ruins of Sans-Souci Palace in Haiti as though they were emerging out of the Atlantic Ocean, with the vastness of the sky and seas evoked by hanging blue tarps and a mural. The work is not only visually stunning, but explores the history of cultural exchanges between Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

In an April 2021 conversation with Art21, Báez likewise addressed

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