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CLOSE-UP: BREAKING POINT

ARTFORUM

Jace Clayton on Kevin Beasley’s *A view of a landscape: A cotton gin motor*, 2012–18

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Kevin Beasley, A view of a landscape: A cotton gin motor, 2012–18, GE induction motor, custom soundproof glass chamber, anechoic foam, steel wire, monofilament, cardioid condenser microphones, contact microphones, microphone stands, microphone cables, AD/DA interface, custom speaker system, subwoofers, amplifiers, Ethernet switch, mixer, modular synthesizer, equipment racks, wooden table. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2018. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

IN 1969, drummer G. C. Coleman played a seven-second solo on “Amen, Brother,” an instrumental gospel tune by the Winstons sold as the B side to “Color Him Father.” The track’s brief percussion “break” was mostly overlooked until 1986, when two DJs from the Bronx presented Coleman’s work on the first LP of their enormously influential compilation series Ultimate Breaks and Beats, from which it scattered far and wide, via sampling, across music history. The Amen break, as it became known, was first used to create hip-hop beats, then went on to grace everything from TV jingles to David Bowie’s 1997 song “Little Wonder.” The drummer’s grit and swing also formed the core rhythmic unit for drum and bass, a genre that continues to loop and rearrange him endlessly. As the most sampled piece of music to date, the Amen break—played by a black American who died homeless and received no money for feeding the machine—has become a quintessential example of musical displacement.

Sonic displacement is the operative procedure in Kevin Beasley’s installation A view of a landscape: A cotton gin motor, 2012–18, installed as part of the artist’s solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. A view features the titular piece of machinery spinning so fast it initially appears to be still. Encased in a gigantic soundproof glass box, the motor is attended by swooping cables and a dozen microphones, many of them hanging there, swinging in the breeze; a dedicated listening space in an adjacent gallery hosts a live feed of the displaced audio. Beasley’s one-ton gesture takes what museums are good at—dampening cacophonous narratives, assuring provenance, stabilizing vibrant objects—and incorporates these actions into the work itself, nullifying the possibility for actual audio feedback while at the same time creating a museological feedback loop. G. C. Coleman, like composer Julius Eastman and countless others, serves as a cautionary tale; Beasley’s work owns its displacement for a change.

Over in the listening room, the motor audio passes through an array of modular synthesizers, although several of them aren’t plugged in to anything. The droning motor sounds like . . . a motor. The relative lack of sonic transformation ensures that A view’s implacable emanations run counter to a highly conservative humanism embedded in the drone music developed in 1960s Manhattan. The genre aligns itself with universals—mathematical principles are its formal go-to—and often portrays itself as timeless, enduring beyond human contingency. It claims association with transcendent higher powers, whether via specific gurus or through ambiguous, Eastern-tinged spirituality or musical-aesthetic “fundamentals” that in turn defy commercial consumption. Avant-garde drone and its contemporary descendant, ambient music, efface broad musical differences in favor of deindividuated sound sources and slow change. Even in collaboratively produced drones, individual gestures get subsumed by the collective, which tends to be led by a male figurehead. In Africa and throughout the world, lots of music makes audible the complex social polyrhythms from which it arises, whereas drones rush to fill multipolar spaces of actively negotiated difference—produced by a good band playing together, say, or by a good DJ mixing sounds and stories from disparate sources—with the noise of their self-similarity.

Beasley’s drone stands apart from this tradition. It’s a temporal readymade. By separating the motor from its context—it powered a cotton gin on an Alabama farm from 1940 to 1973—and disconnecting the audio from its physical source, the artist lets the real-time transmission, framed only by the museum’s opening hours, provide the auditory experience. The displaced mechanical drone does not ask listeners to identify with or get lost in its sound. Transcendence isn’t an option. We all know that electricity as well as the entwined histories of racial and labor animus power this American engine. If anything, the risk of this gesture is that there’s too much context: Under-standing black artists’ work primarily in terms of race operates as another kind of ongoing drone, a constant dull ringing in the ears.

REGEN PROJECTS

View of "Kevin Beasley: A view of a landscape," 2018–19, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From left: Campus, 2018; The Acquisition, 2018. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

Kevin Beasley, A view of a landscape: A cotton gin motor, 2012–18, GE induction motor, custom soundproof glass chamber, anechoic foam, steel wire, monofilament, cardioid condenser microphones, contact microphones, microphone stands, microphone cables, AD/DA interface, custom speaker system, subwoofers, amplifiers, Ethernet switch, mixer, modular synthesizer, equipment racks, wooden table. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2018. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

Three of Beasley's freestanding, eight-foot-tall rectangular slab sculptures are installed in the space connecting the motor's room and the listening room. In contrast with the sterility of the motor and the audio equipment, raw materials and manufactured goods are here shaped into messy, energetic monoliths. Untreated cotton from Virginia, articles of clothing, and everyday detritus including headphones, a duffel bag, a laptop, and a mortarboard are unified and preserved in polyurethane resin. Two of the wide sculptures stand just a few inches from the wall, which means that viewers can't quite see enough of their verso sides to appreciate how the three hollowed, hoodied bodies figured in The Acquisition, 2018, project through the back of the work, extending the themes of silence and entombment raised by A view's motor; nor can they contemplate the color field rendered in undyed cotton on the back of The Reunion, 2018. That said, the emphasis on the sculptures' frontality directs attention to their striking painterly qualities. The Reunion, for example, appears impressionistic from afar yet up close seems more Katamari Damacy than Claude Monet, revealing lumps of resolutely material stuff, much of it gathered from Beasley's family property in Virginia: soil, twigs, pine cones, caftans, T-shirts, and more. If the Impressionists shunned the use of black, Beasley goes one step further by materializing the color with things like du-rags and hoodies.

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From paintings to smartphones, a portrait view is optimized for an individual's face and upper body, while a landscape view captures the breadth and depth of field of a terrain. In Ways of Seeing (1972), John Berger recognized that there was a direct relationship between landscape images and land ownership. Yet now, things own people, people treat individuals as things, and our phones liquidate the portraits we feed them into fungible data whose revenue we will never see. Beasley steps inside the various timescales and media speeds to look and listen for what accretes into history, and to track what is channeled elsewhere. But back to the engine estranged from its sound: When something exists simultaneously as a conceptual gesture and a massive real-world monster, chaperoned by a dialectic of absence and presence, then we're starting to touch blackness.

"Kevin Beasley: A view of a landscape" is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, through March 10.