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THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

An Artist Who Makes Use of Housedresses, Resin and Sound

From these and other wide-ranging materials, Kevin Beasley creates multilayered works that, even when they're abstract, have much to say about history and identity.

The artist Kevin Beasley in his Long Island City studio. Aundre Larrow

Kevin Beasley begins the tour of his spacious Long Island City studio in the closet. The shelves lining its walls contain two decades' worth of his work, along with bins of colorful housedresses, a hollowed-out falcon missing its head and several busts that look only vaguely human. "I'm able to carry on this continued relationship," he says, "rather than reinvent the wheel every time I make something."

And the 37-year-old multimedia artist is always making something: In Beasley's hands, sneakers fuse with loudspeakers; cotton gins turn into musical instruments; and du rags, kaftans and other clothing items collude with resin, giving shape and texture to abstract, vibrant wall-hangings, or slabs, reminiscent of ancient Assyrian reliefs. His studio transforms, too. "A lot of it's on wheels," he says, and for good reason. Today, three very different sculptures — the latest works slated to be shown at Regen Projects in Los Angeles next month — vie for his attention: a bathtub made from resin and raw cotton, a utility pole that will play 40 hours of field recordings and a slab-in-progress. "Did you touch it?" he asks of the tub. Its surface is riddled with tiny crannies, like an ASMR version of the moon. "On site," as the show is titled, is rich with sense memories of the rural Virginia land Beasley's kin have owned for generations, not far from where he was born and raised. Presenting a range of deeply if obliquely personal objects while also nodding to much more widely shared pasts, then, the artist evokes the unmistakable ache of home.

Initially, Beasley, whose father worked as a mechanic, went to Detroit's College for Creative Studies to learn how to design cars. He eventually pivoted to painting and sculpture but retained a fondness for industrial materials. As a graduate student at Yale, he found the music at the parties he attended so bad that he started DJ'ing, which led him to experiment with sound in his work. While still a student, he began "I Want My Spot Back" (2012), a performance piece that debuted at New York's Museum of Modern Art: Kneeling on the floor with turntables, he sampled a cappella versions of songs by dead rappers such as Tupac Shakur, Biggie Smalls and Ol' Dirty Bastard. Around this time, he went home for a family reunion held near a cotton field; the proximity of the symbolically freighted crop to the celebration spurred him to incorporate it, too, into his practice.

From left: Beasley's "Bird" (2022) and "THE KITCHEN" (2021) at his current show at the Hill Art Foundation in New York City. © Kevin Beasley, courtesy of the Hill Art Foundation

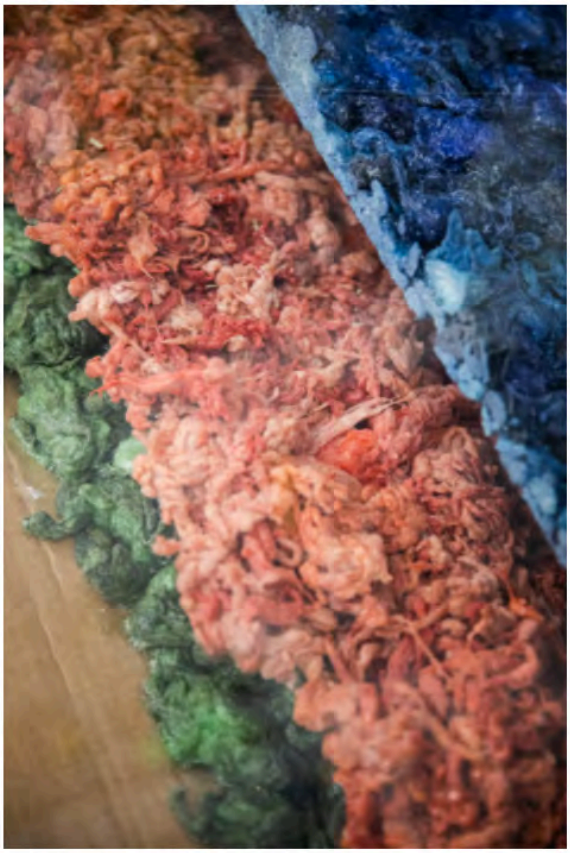
In 2018, "A view of a landscape," a watershed solo exhibition for the artist, opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. In the central installation, a vintage cotton gin motor that Beasley bought in Alabama whirred within a giant vitrine. But just as the engine was designed to separate seeds from cotton, Beasley severed the machine from the sound it made, piping it into another room, where the workhorse's droning was so loud it rattled the benches intended for visitors, and anyone who sat on them. It was a history lesson, felt in the bones — and perhaps a reminder that the gin's original effect was also unexpected: Eli Whitney hoped the invention would end slavery; in fact, it strengthened the institution.

When making his slabs, which from a distance resemble paintings, Beasley first dyes a bunch of cotton. "You get all nerdy," he says, "mixing colors up." He then dips the cotton into resin and places it atop a portion of the floor enclosed by a metal mold — a field waiting to grow. When the resin dries, the form is fixed. Plastic blankets this part of the studio, and while Beasley shows off a pair of protective silicone booties that bring to mind Cinderella slippers designed by Kanye, his cousin calls. She's outside, waiting to be let in to help pull cotton that, after it's separated and treated, will dwell on a slab alongside some big T-shirts Beasley has emblazoned with a sunny photo of the sea. ("I can't do it all alone," says the artist. "So there's this question of what it means for folks to engage.") He took the picture himself looking out from Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned, and the work also references another tourist destination, Ghana's Door of No Return, through which hundreds of thousands of men and women stepped before being forced across the Atlantic into slavery. "There's this conflation between these spaces that's also about a beautiful pink view," Beasley says. The glorious ocean vista, an unmarked grave for the millions who died during the Middle Passage, becomes a memorial.

REGEN PROJECTS

Recent sculptural wall hangings, or slabs, as Beasley calls them, surrounded by the materials of their making. Aundre Larrow

Bundles of dyed cotton soaked in resin are fixed to a wooden plank for color reference. Aundre Larrow



Dyed cotton elements soaked in resin. Aundre Larrow

Pictures of Beasley's grandfather's trailer, blown up and printed across still more T-shirts, cover two of the pieces on view at "A body, revealed," another show of the artist's work, running through the end of April at Manhattan's Hill Art Foundation. In a way, these resin-treated tees reconstruct the mobile home, sold off years ago, inside the gallery — a place and its former occupant unearthed by their absence. Similarly, one is left to wonder about the onetime wearers of the clothes in Beasley's work. "My parents came to the show and they started telling stories," he says. "'You remember when the snake came in through the window?' 'You remember all the meals you used to make?' My mom made so much food in that thing. So it was really special to have them there, to put that in the air."

By now, Beasley's assistants have arrived. They type, pull, hammer, drill and plan. But more than a mere site of production or simply a means to an end, his studio braids distant lands together. It rips stitches in time. It gathers his people and holds them close.

What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what's your work schedule?

It's 10-6 in the studio. Sometimes, like right now for this show at Regen Projects, I come earlier — 8 or 9. That's why I scheduled this early. So when everyone comes in, we're finishing up.

I'm usually up at 6. I make my son breakfast. We hang out for a couple hours, change some diapers. And then it's off to the studio. Routine is pretty much that, and then I go back home, to try to be there before he goes to bed, because he goes to bed early.

Additional cotton elements atop a metal table. Aundre Larrow

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

I have no recollection. I've been making work for a really long time. As a kid, I drew ninjas and things like that. I think every kid draws the things that fascinate them, that they're curious about. I see people answer this question and they give this: "Well, it was a misty day and my grandmother took me to the lake." Did she now? That's just the first thing you remember that you thought you could say in an interview.

What's the worst studio you ever had?

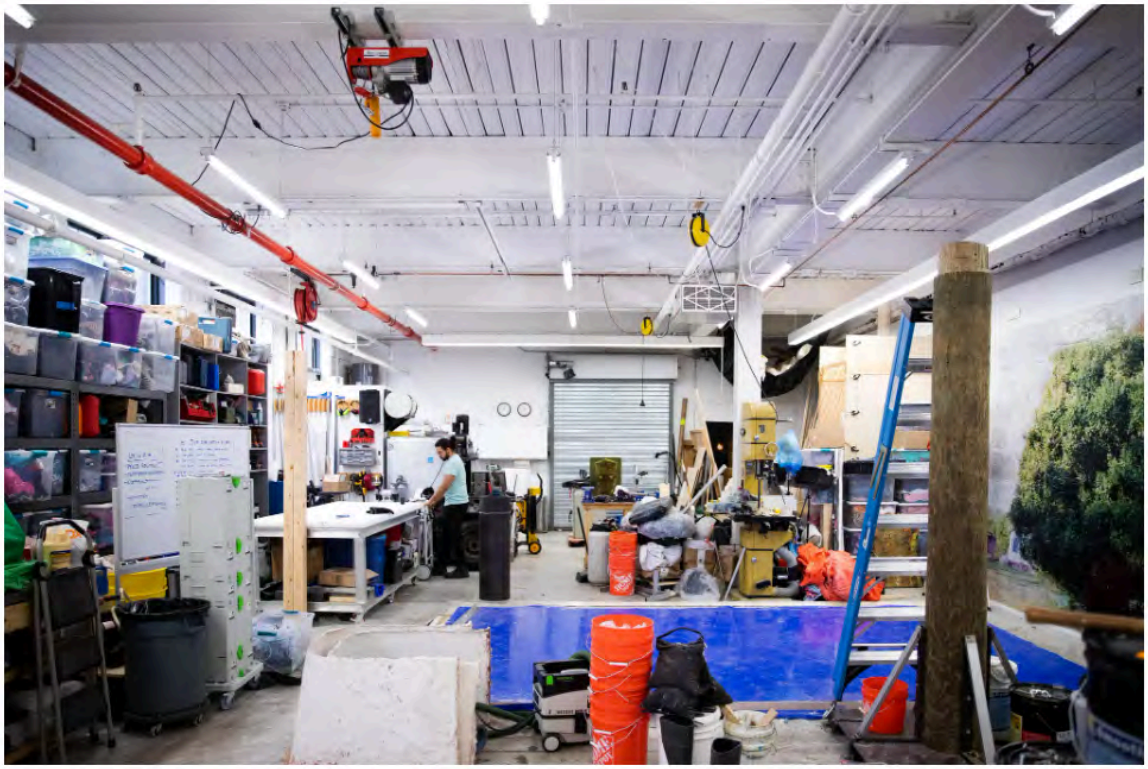
It was not having a studio at all. But to counter that answer, that was also one of my most formative times. It really broke down the most important thing about working, and that is the relationship between time and space. You need a deep understanding of that relationship to develop a studio practice. And you can have a studio practice without a studio.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin — that is, what's the first step?

I always feel like I'm in the middle. I think the beginning was a long time ago for anything and everything, so the first step is never proscriptive or formulated. It's case-by-case.

I just want to be sensitive to what I'm actually doing. That's a big thing that pops up. You know, the doubt, the questioning — you go through impostor syndrome a bit, wondering, "Am I really like this? Am I supposed to be doing this? Am I really doing this?" And then all this stuff comes to the fore, and you have all of your ideas and start to find clarity, and the things that you've surrounded yourself with also start to find clarity, and then you make decisions.

The question "why?" is a really good beginning for any kind of engagement, even beyond making work. Someone inviting you to do something, for instance. *Why the hell am I doing that?* It's healthy. Then you're not just succumbing to the atmosphere, the environment, the vibe, the feeling that you have. You're really questioning it, and that's a lot more fruitful.



A glimpse of tools and techniques. Aundre Larrow

How do you know when you're done?

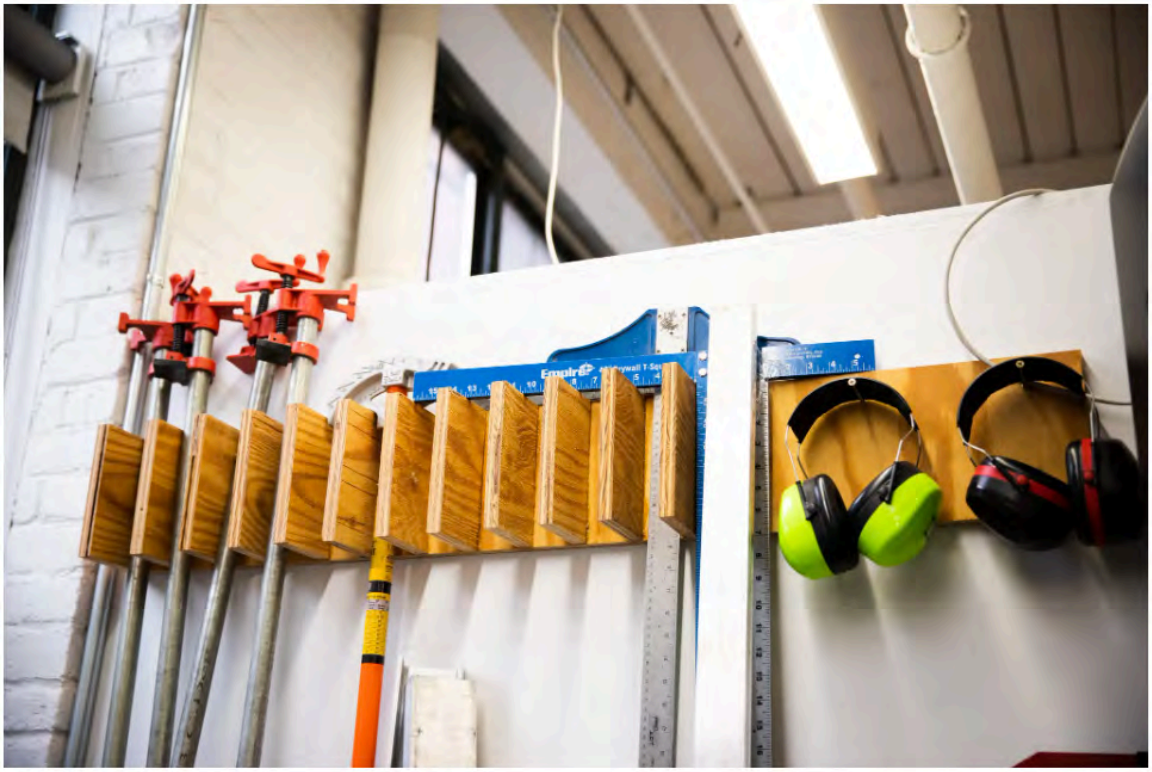
I don't.

How many assistants do you have?

Right now I have four. It fluctuates depending on what's happening. Having assistants is something that's come up for me, actually, since I moved into this space in 2016. First I had an intern, someone who worked for me for a couple months. Then in 2017, I got a full-time studio manager. It became important to be able to delegate tasks that I didn't feel I had to have my hands in directly all the time. I could watch over and advise and be in conversation with and be aware of, but not be the one to carry something out from start to finish.

Before that, I was so terrified of having people in my studio because the work is so personally located that I felt, "How could anyone else function in this space?" And that's when I realized that a studio is not just a place of production. We're not here to be efficient. We're here to make art and construct relationships with one another that are very sensitive. Nourishment becomes really important. Having moments where you can reflect on the world, you can talk about it and be socially involved. Because anything that comes out of the studio should be reflective of the inquisitive and rigorous values that drive the work. So it wasn't scary anymore, and I decided I can actually work on being a good employer.

We've all had jobs where we've worked with people who were complete jerks. You learn how people can be cruel, how labor isn't valued. But there are other things we can learn that cultivate love and sharing and sensitivity and awareness, and that echoes in everything you do. I only want this many studio assistants. The pros and cons of that are you have a small group with whom you have a close, intimate relationship in terms of how you communicate — we are kind and treat each other with a lot of respect — but then there's also a lot of pressure with a small team.



Racks to help keep things organized. Aundre Larrow

What music do you play when you're making art?

We usually play NTS Radio nonstop — every channel of NTS, which is every kind of music in the world. I would say it's everything but pop music, but even that finds its way in now and then.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

Hm, I don't know. It's weird. When I was an undergraduate, I studied automotive design for almost two years. It's a really accelerated program because after you graduate, you're working in the industry, and all the industry designers teach at the school I went to. So you're thrown into it very early on. I chose automotive design because I felt like, "I'm an artist, but I also need to make a living." My parents were like, "Oh, you're not going to …" My mom really wanted me to just be an artist. The difficulty in doing that, living in Lynchburg, Va., you just don't have access. You can't imagine what that looks like. I met a real living artist for the first time when I was in high school.

Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?

A good salad never fails.

Are you bingeing any shows right now?

Not really doing that. It's different when you have a two-year-old. "Peppa Pig," "Pingu"…

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

I think you have to answer that question.

The silicone booties are pretty weird.

Yeah, they're strange. They're cool, though. They market them as, you're going to a function, and it's raining, and you wear them.

The shoes that I wear are Nike Cortezes. And the sole pattern on the booties is the same as the sole pattern on the Nike Cortezes. Even their cut and profile is like a classic, fashionable Nike shoe. I just pieced that together a week ago.

Do you think that was why you were drawn to those Nikes?

No, I used to have like 10 pairs of those when I was a kid, one in every colorway. You can go on the Nike website and customize them all. That shoe is never going away. It's like a cockroach — it's going to be here forever.

Floral patterned housedresses embedded within a plane of resin. Aundre Larrow

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

I don't really procrastinate. I just don't have the time. You're doing what you need to be doing and that's it: I need to drink some water, I need to eat, I need to use the bathroom, I need to wipe this surface, I need to walk from this side of the room to the next. So I don't feel like any of it is me putting off any other thing. The list is so long. Maybe it's a question about priorities, and I'm always reshuffling priorities regarding how my body exists. If all of a sudden we smelled a crazy smell, the priorities would shift.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

Yeah, I can't answer that question. There're a lot of things in the world.

What do your windows look out on?

A parking lot.

What do you bulk buy with the most frequency?

Resin. We'll get 10 cases, which each contain five gallons, once a month. That's a bulk buy. And other materials like gloves, PPE.

What's your worst habit?

I don't know, man. I haven't thought about it. I'm not analyzing my habits that way. I just try to listen to my body. There's a lot of going with the flow.

What embarrasses you?

Another thing I don't think about.

This is a good way to live in the world.

If something happens and you feel exposed and vulnerable, you have to face it head-on. There are other people who may understand you and understand where you are in that position. So you can find solace that even when you feel alone, this is not a solitary experience.

It'll happen. There will be a moment when I'll be totally embarrassed, and I'll think, "Damn, I should have said that for the interview."

REGEN PROJECTS

Music is crucial to Beasley's process. Seen here is the risograph-printed booklet "Remedies for Fatigue," which accompanied vinyl copies of L'Rain's 2021 record, "Fatigue." Aundre Larrow

Plastic bins filled with patterned housedresses. Aundre Larrow

Sketches and plans for forthcoming sculptures and exhibitions. Aundre Larrow

What are you reading?

I'm reading "Kindred" (1979) by Octavia E. Butler again. It's a good one to revisit. There's a bunch of stuff that I'm reading — histories of things and research — but that's the most visceral right now.

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

That's really tough. In my own practice, I wouldn't expect or want someone to say, "This one work is my favorite." I would really prefer a constellation, and when I think of it that way, I'm reminded of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's exhibition "Primitive" at the New Museum many years ago. That was a moment when I walked into a space and was blown away. It was a combination of all of these films, snippets of things, that were sonically stitched together without it being billed or understood as a sound-based exhibition. It sounded like atmosphere, and visually the exhibition was really dark. You were able to experience night and high noon simultaneously, through the lens of these villagers.

His films always have something uncanny about them. You see something, and you go, "I wasn't expecting that." They're deeply spiritual and soulful, too. You see phenomena happen in his films. You experience night and day, you're hearing over the hill and through the woods and by the river, all at once. You see lightning at the actual point it strikes the ground. No one sees that, but he's putting it right in the middle of a soccer game. The weaving of all that has left a lasting impression, and makes the experience of the work, the process, a little bit better than homing in on one instance or one object, even though we know the benefits of zeroing in and going deep on one thing. The constellation is really special.