

Whitney Museum of American Art

Object & Extended Labels for *Kevin Beasley: A view of a landscape*

8th Floor

Dec 15 – Mar 10, 2018

Curatorial team: Christopher Y. Lew, Nancy and Fred Poses Curator, with Ambika Trasi, curatorial assistant

Kevin Beasley

b. 1985; Lynchburg, VA

A view of a landscape: A cotton gin motor, 2012–18

Chamber room: GE induction motor, custom soundproof glass chamber, anechoic foam, steel wire, monofilament, cardioid condenser microphones, contact microphones, microphone stands, microphone cables, and AD/DA interface; Listening room: custom speaker system, subwoofers, amplifiers, AD/DA interface, ethernet switch, mixer, modular synthesizer, equipment racks, and wood table

Collection of the artist; courtesy Casey Kaplan, New York

The installation was realized in partnership with BuroHappold Engineering, DEGSound, Goppion, and David Andrew Tasman / DVLPR

Chamber room extended label:

The motor encased within this soundproof chamber once powered a cotton gin, a machine that was invented in 1793 by Eli Whitney (1765–1825)* to automate the separation of cotton seeds from fibers during crop processing. The cotton gin radically changed the industry of cotton production in the American South. Although initially intended to reduce the need for manual labor, the gin, in fact, increased efficiency so significantly that it created a greater demand for slave labor to grow and pick the crop by hand.

Reflecting on the racial and sociopolitical history of the American South, which intersects with the mechanization of cotton production, Beasley uses this motor to create a network of connections within the exhibition at large. Beasley's sleek glass enclosure is designed to displace the sounds of the motor's constant drone while it operates non-stop during museum hours. Strategically placed microphones capture the various sounds, noises, and frequencies emitted by the running motor as well as its ambient effects. Lavalier, dynamic, and condenser microphones receive the tonalities produced by the motor, while contact microphones absorb vibrations from the machine's surface. The recording system captures the full spectrum of the motor's sonic output and transfers it into the listening room.

*The founder of this Museum, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, was married to Harry Payne Whitney. While he is not a direct descendent of Eli Whitney, the two men shared an ancestor named John Whitney, who emigrated from England in 1635.

Listening room extended label:

In the adjacent room, raw audio signals collected from the motor in the chamber room are processed and amplified. These sounds, manipulated and altered using a digital soundboard and modular synthesizer, play through a sound system custom designed to fill this space with distinct compositions, with no one speaker emitting the same sonic elements. The system presents a live durational broadcast driven by the mechanism of the running motor. For Beasley, this technical equipment along with the sound-dampening panels lining the room have a sculptural function—that is, although they are not discrete sculptures made by the artist, their physical impact, in sonic terms, is paramount to Beasley's work, enabling the artist to evoke an image of the motor through the transmission of its resonance. Beasley considers the live transference of the motor's sonic activity as a way to recollect the object, which embodies an often unspoken yet ever-present history.

Performances by artists and musicians invited by Beasley will occur in this space. Please visit whitney.org/beasley for the performance schedule.

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The Reunion, 2018

Polyurethane resin, raw Virginia cotton, Virginia soil, Virginia twigs, Virginia pine cones and needles, housedresses, kaftans, T-shirts, du-rags, HID light bulb, guinea fowl feathers, cotton bale strap, aluminum, and steel

Campus, 2018

Polyurethane resin, raw Virginia cotton, housedresses, kaftans, T-shirts, du-rags, selected pages from *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, Charles Joseph Minard Civil War-era cotton trade map, painted clown masks, Yale University School of Art graduation collar, graduation cap, graduation gown, Yale University sweater, Campus duffle bag, aluminum, and steel

The Acquisition, 2018

Polyurethane resin, raw Virginia cotton, housedresses, kaftans, T-shirts, du-rags, overalls, button-down shirt, rain jacket, hoodie, altered garments, clothesline, work gloves, foam, tube socks, plastic bucket, motor belt, altered fan, adjustable wrench, vapor rub, headphones, Samick SM-122 sound mixer, respirator mask, speaker, Acer laptop, microphone cables, sea shells, canvas, garment rack sale sign, aluminum, and steel

Collection of the artist; courtesy Casey Kaplan, New York

“Slab” sculptures extended label:

Beasley’s three “slab” sculptures incorporate raw cotton harvested near his family’s Virginia property as well as found garments and other materials set in polyurethane resin. These narrative reliefs—a sculptural form that goes back to antiquity—chronicle Beasley’s experiences leading to his procurement of the cotton-gin motor upon which this exhibition is grounded in 2012. The works were conceived as free-standing sculptures meant to be viewed from different vantages. Their display here emphasizes the pictorial quality of these new works, a change in direction from the artist’s previous slab sculptures, which made reference to abstraction and architecture.

In *The Reunion*, a pastoral scene, figures rendered in du-rags float above a lush field, not only referencing the artist’s relatives and the Virginia land that his family has owned for generations where annual reunions are held every August but also cutting back through time to suggest ghostly figures who are in the fields not of their own volition. Dyed raw cotton delineates land and sky, while white and pink specks of the material allude to the cotton plant’s flowering stage, or “bloom period,” marking the time as summer.

Campus draws connections between the cotton-gin motor and American universities, particularly Yale University, the alma mater of both Eli Whitney, the inventor of the cotton gin, and Beasley. Here a collection of pages from *The Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* by David Eltis and David Richardson (Yale University Press, 2015) are arranged in a formation that resembles a campus map. A river rendered in blue du-rags weaves around items typically worn by students, such as a logo sweatshirt, as well as Beasley’s own graduation cap and gown. Three ghoulish blackface clown masks peer down from the top of the slab, referencing Jim Crow-era caricatures of Black people—depictions that are still prevalent on university campuses and which Beasley uses to acknowledge trauma experienced by Black students when facing systemic racism. This legacy gives context to the opposite side of the sculpture, which depicts an abstract field, perhaps as seen from above, and acts as a reminder of how our contemporary terrain has been shaped by labor and human intervention.

The Acquisition serves as a document of Beasley’s first encounter with the motor and how he transformed it into an art installation. In this sculpture Beasley merges the tractor shed on a farm in Maplesville, Alabama, where the motor was housed for over seven decades, with the artist’s studio. Embedded studio materials, such as a wrench, an audio mixer, a speaker, and a laptop, appear alongside an evocation of the motor—an altered fan cage outlined in resin-drenched cotton accompanied by the actual fan belt that was used to drive the gin. The resulting composition bridges time, space, and historical and contemporary types of labor.