

# Objects of Consequence

Ruth Erickson

In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—*it is heritage*. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor—it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its own elemental interest. And so enslavement must be casual wrath and random manglings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. It must be rape so regular as to be industrial. There is no uplifting way to say this. I have no praise anthems, nor old Negro spirituals. The spirit and soul are the body and brain, which are destructible—that is precisely why they are so precious.

—Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

There's a process by which bodies blend in, or don't, or die, or roll on past the siren's glow so as not to subpoena the grave.

—Joshua Bennett, *The Sobbing School*

American history is a history of traumatic and blatant erasures of black subjects through perniciously visible, durable, and interconnected systems, including the transatlantic slave trade, centuries of enslavement, lynching and public murders, the industrial prison system, and

Previous: *Untitled (Monday)*, 2016. Housedresses, kaftans, altered bandanas, du-rags, altered kente fabric, resin, wood, and acoustic foam. 78 x 126 x 7 inches (198.1 x 320 x 17.8 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase.

*Untitled*, 2016. Resin and altered sweatpants on canvas. 24¾ x 23¾ x 3½ inches (62.9 x 60.3 x 8.9 cm). Private collection, Boston.

institutional racism. While ranging widely in form and structure, the bodies alluded to in Kevin Beasley's recent artistic production have been anchored in his exploration of black experiences. His practice has emerged during a period of heightened awareness among whites, myself included, of the destruction of black bodies in America, as so powerfully articulated by the contemporary writers Ta-Nehisi Coates, Saidiya Hartman, and Christina Sharpe, among many others, and by the Black Lives Matter movement.

In Beasley's work, bodies are rarely whole or complete, but rather are envisaged in indeterminate and interconnected states. Sometimes the bodies are "spectral" ones, those of deceased rappers or murdered teens; absences are metaphorically presented in the form of a dented surface or the image of a field in the South at sunset. At other times, the bodies are very particular, and even enumerated as personal objects that figure in his artworks: "That is my thermal shirt . . . my underwear . . . my old sneakers . . . my brother's wisdom teeth." And then there are the listeners and viewers who share space with Beasley's performances, sculptures, and installations, and who are always present in the conception of his work. Beasley conjures these bodies and their states of being through various strategies, from selecting objects and manipulating materials to activating space through sound and installation. Each gesture underscores the ethics of his artistic practice—his respect for the power and responsibility of bringing an artwork into the world that requires space, resources, and care.

The material core of Beasley's sculptures and installations is formed by a broad range of objects: baseball caps, du-rags, jackets, dresses, shoes, rugs, chairs, sports equipment, and gas masks, among many other things, recur in his work. The artist carefully selects and repurposes common and familiar items—some of which are store-bought and new, others are used or the artist's own belongings. He uses them as raw materials, drawing on their symbolism as he transforms them into artworks and, in the process, imbues them with new meanings. As such, the existence of these objects in physical space contains deeper meaning in social, political, and psychic space. Meanings then become highly dynamic, evolving over time, from the moment of an object's initial commercial production to Beasley's performative moments of use and reuse, to the reproduction and recirculation of meaning within artworks.

Beasley has a keen sense for how objects engender meaning, and for the possibilities found through relationships and juxtapositions

*Billy's Clubs*, 2017. Resin, polyurethane foam, seashells, golf clubs, golf bag, and billy club. 67 x 28 x 10 inches (170.2 x 71.1 x 25.4 cm). Private collection, London. Photo by Jason Wyche.

within specific communities or cultures—as in theorist Stuart Hall's formulation,<sup>1</sup> the linked operations of “encoding” and “decoding.” Take, for example, the material most closely associated with the artist's recent output: colorful polyester housedresses. As Beasley tells the story, it was during the summer before his residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem (2013–14) that he visited a dress shop on 116th Street in New York City.<sup>2</sup> He remembered going to this very same shop with his grandmother and aunt to buy dresses on his childhood visits to New York City from Virginia. The shop, which used to stand across from where his mother's family lived, has been in operation since 1952, with the same family selling the same quality dresses at affordable prices.

The store's owner, Fred Abi-Hassoun, son of the founding couple, Elias and Olga, has said that his retail shop also functions as a community space, holding together the threads of the neighborhood and serving people who live there in a rapidly gentrifying and always changing landscape.<sup>3</sup> On Fridays and Saturdays, women pour into the store to buy brightly colored, loose-fitting dresses in polyester and cotton



Previous left: *Untitled*, 2016. Resin and altered sweatpants on canvas. 48 x 21 x 5½ inches (121.9 x 53.3 x 14 cm). Collection of Steve Corkin and Dan Maddalena, Boston.

Previous right: *Untitled*, 2016. Resin and sweater on canvas. 46 x 19 x 4 inches (116.8 x 48.3 x 10.2 cm). Collection of Clarice Oliveira Tavares, New York.

Dress shop on 116th Street in Harlem, c. 1980. Photo courtesy the archives of George and Fred Abi-Hassoun.

Opposite: *Untitled (Look)* (rear view), 2015. Housedresses and resin. 38 x 28 x 10 inches (96.5 x 71.1 x 25.4 cm). Collection of Jennifer and David Stockman, New York.

for roughly twelve dollars each. As such, the store has a warm and very human atmosphere, and the fact that it is still thriving suggests a bygone era of New York, when lower- and middle-income working people could see the city as a place of possibility. Beasley started buying dresses from this shop in 2013 because the shop and the dresses have a connection to his family history and to his first encounters with New York (which, since 2012, has been his home). The store's owner describes Beasley as "a very good friend," and the artist regularly returns to the shop to fill the metal racks in his studio with Abi-Hassoun's colorfully patterned dresses, which he will make into sculptures that now figure in some of the country's most prominent museum collections. In choosing to work with the polyester housedresses, Beasley joins the strong matriarchs in his young life—his memories of them and of New York City, the housing development where they lived, and the store that supplied these women with affordable clothes—with his labor and effort as an artist, working to make sculptures that matter and that are worth preserving. This circuit functions like a kind of fortress against the relentless social, economic, and physical attacks on civility, respectability, community, and care. Abi-Hassoun characterized Beasley's artworks as "giving voice to a way of life."<sup>4</sup>

Air Jordan and Nike sneakers, du-rags, and hoodies also frequently appear in Beasley's sculptures, items that possess immediate and layered connections to American black culture. Take, for example, the pair of Nike Air Jordans in *Untitled (Jumped Man)* (2014). Coveted by youth, these sneakers are cited in rap lyrics such as "I stay sportin' played Jordan's before Jordan / Verses tight, hooks harder than Ken Norton" by Jay-Z,<sup>5</sup> and the shoes have been at times known to incite schoolyard and neighborhood brawls. The title of the sculpture is a play on words, combining a reference to the sneaker's iconic "Jumpman" logo with the violent experience of getting jumped or robbed. Beasley has attached purplish-gray industrial foam to the white, black, and purple sneakers; the bulbous forms appear like chunks of rock, or tumors. The foam has sections of a black quilted fabric embedded into its surface, as if a jacket once covered the now mutilated body. Beasley's disarming combination of bright, fresh sneakers with the thick, fleshlike agglomeration creates a sense of rupture. The pose of the two sneakers underscores the work's evocation of violence and death. Whether housedresses, sneakers, or the many other items of clothing and things found in his artworks, Beasley's object choices establish strong connections to bodies, especially to black bodies, and to the social, political,

*Untitled (Self-care product II)*,  
2017. Resin, du-rags, and  
neckties. 63 x 45 x 4 inches  
(160.02 x 114.3 x 10.16 cm).

and cultural conditions that can make existence for those same bodies so difficult.

The subsequent stage of Beasley's process—his treatment of these objects—takes place in his studio or during performances, and his actions are as varied as his objects, but are often difficult for the viewer to ascertain by simply looking at or experiencing the final works. However, like the objects he chooses, his actions inflect his work with powerful social and ethical meanings. Many of the processes he employs have an alchemical quality: liquids set then fix to become solids, accidents and surprises abound, and empty areas or spaces become forms. Certainly Beasley develops these processes out of his desire for material to manifest itself and appear as he envisions, but it is also through these methods that he makes space aesthetically central to his work. And none of his artworks, even those that have no physical footprint to speak of, would exist without physical—corporeal—space: that of skin, organs, and breath. He uses his own body in every process, holding pieces in place as they set, pressing his knee or arm into the side of a sculpture, or drumming on the surfaces of his acoustic sculptures. By looking more closely at some of Beasley's recurrent actions in the studio and in performance, we can better understand how the artist connects bodies in space and the space of his body, and the ramifications of both.

Beasley began making space a central feature of his work by focusing on particular sites and indexing their historical, aural, or material residues. The artist's interest in site specificity can be traced back to the summer of 2011, between his first and second years of graduate school at Yale, while on a visit to his family's property in Virginia. It was the first time he had ever seen cotton plants flowering, and he was shocked to find out from his mother that the fields were planted with cotton. He made a number of photographs of the parcel and his family members on that trip. The pictures have an eerie quality: a man bends over in an expanse of water in *Drain* (2011–15) and a satellite dish appears to float against a screen of trees in *Untitled (Transmission)* (2011–15). The photographs juxtapose artifacts and people with places, yet the connections or relationships between these subjects and sites remain hazy, conjectural, abstract. If the blooming cotton field triggered in Beasley a reckoning with a site's relationship to slavery (my reading of his story), then this kind of abstraction is absolutely fundamental to the artist's documentation of the site. How else might we document—and trigger a reckoning with—something as horrific, as massive, and as unending as American slavery? Rather than the photographs being

Previous: *Untitled (Jumped Man)*, 2014. Polyurethane foam, resin, soil, coat-sleeve liners, and Nike Air Jordan shoes, size 18. Two parts, each 24 x 16 x 11 inches (61 x 40.6 x 27.9 cm). Collection of Miyoung Lee and Neil Simpkins, New York. Photo by Adam Reich.

*Drain*, 2011–15. Archival pigment print. 26¼ x 39¾ inches (66.7 x 100.8 cm).

*Untitled (Transmission)*, 2011–15. Archival pigment print. 26¼ x 39¾ inches (66.7 x 101 cm).

explicitly *about* slavery, I would suggest they reflect a pivotal moment in which Beasley is exploring sites and their connections to collective and personal histories and inventing new ways to give form to something foreboding that is eternally present.

Over the next few years, Beasley undertook a series of field recordings, performances, and installations that harnessed site and sound as material to pursue the dynamism of absence and presence. His performance *I Want My Spot Back*—first performed in the basement of the sculpture department at Yale University, then at Saint Mark’s Church in New York City’s East Village (a progressive Episcopal church known for its long-standing tradition of presenting poetry and supporting social justice activism and the arts), and finally, to wide acclaim, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2012—consisted of thirty-nine slowed down a cappella tracks by deceased black male rappers from the 1990s, the decade of Beasley’s youth.<sup>6</sup> Beasley’s radical elongation transformed the beats and rhymes into indecipherable and ghostly groans that projected from a bank of powerful speakers, and reverberated through the audience members. For the duration of the performance, the mass of the audience became a vessel through which disembodied voices of dead rappers gained form, or “got their spot back.”

Other performances took on site explicitly. The four-part performance *And in My Dream I Was Rolling on the Floor* (2014) took place in a condemned mansion built in the 1850s by abolitionists in Cleveland. It attuned listeners to the sounds of the building, which is believed to have been a stop on the Underground Railroad, and conjured the bodies that had moved through it.<sup>7</sup> In his work *As I rest under many skies, I hear my body escape me* (2014), presented as part of the exhibition *When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, Beasley played sounds recorded on his family’s Virginia property in the museum space, and in a set of headphones played a recording he had made on-site at the museum, thus dislocating site and sound as they are experienced by the visitor. His projects have also brought him outdoors: . . . *all different: for I do, I suppose, partake of multitude* (2013), a performance consisting of a live feed of thirty wind chimes collected and installed by Beasley combined with prerecorded sound bites, took place in a concrete lot in Brooklyn.<sup>8</sup> The project description elaborates on Beasley’s interest in the presence of a harmonic multitude within the singularity of an initial note: “When one strikes a bell there are several tones that prevail, yet the hum tone is one that lies an octave below the strike tone, the resonance being that of

*Movement I: DEF/ACHE/CRYSTALLINE/SLEEVE*, 2013–14. Performance view, Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2014. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo by Paula Court.

multiple tones within one note/or tone of an instrument. A layering that happens at the time of the actual singular act where a multitude is always produced. So what happens when 'we' recognize the initial parts as a multitude and seek to expand that multitude exponentially?"<sup>9</sup> In his performances and his series of sound-based sculptures and installations, the artist explores myriad ways of embodying this multitude in order to render perceptible the multiplicity that exists in every site, history, body, or sound but is frequently obscured in the moment of creation and reception.

Beasley pursued these ideas and material reinventions in his sculpture practice as well, focusing on his studio and his own body. Near the end of his yearlong residency at the Studio Museum in 2014, the artist picked up the black shag rug that had been covering the floor of his small studio in order to fix the marks of its, and his, occupancy. He had paced the floor on this very same rug; it was where visitors had stood, come and gone, and where the debris of his studio practice had fallen. Retained within the swirling thick black fibers of this rug are chunks of iridescent blue and remnants of colorful fabrics—the castoffs of his sculptures and experiments. Beasley petrified all of this by pouring liquid resin onto the rug and allowing it, within minutes, to fix the presence of the past and the flux of his process. Wooden clothespins clipped to the edges of the rug frame it as a composition, and five balls made from his underwear and undershirts suspended by shoelaces dangle against the conglomerate surface. This untitled work coalesces a number of experiments undertaken and strategies developed by Beasley during his fruitful residency—an opportunity that inspired him to quit his day job and fully dedicate himself to his art.<sup>10</sup> This integration of his own clothing and the physicality of his manipulations endowed his early sculptures with an anthropomorphic quality, producing a kind of surrogacy: his works began to stand in for bodies, or parts of bodies. The substitution is emphatic in sculptures like *Untitled (Chest Pack)* and *Untitled (Chest Compression)* (both 2014), where automotive jumper cables and a shop vacuum dressed in clothing call to mind the heart and lung of the human body while underscoring the circulation of blood, air, and electrical charge.

Beasley's suspended sculptures *Strange Fruit (Pair 1)* and *(Pair 2)* (both 2015), made for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's *Storylines* exhibition, deftly braid together his various sculpture-making and performance strategies. Intended to be handled and activated during impromptu performances, these sculptures—made from sneakers

*Untitled*, 2014. Shag rug, polyurethane foam, resin, clothespins, thermal shirts, underwear, and studio debris. 80 x 50 x 5 inches (203.2 x 127 x 12.7 cm). Collection of Lonti Ebers, New York.

embedded with mics and speakers and other electronic musical equipment hanging from wires—absorb and reflect the sounds of the space: the voices of onlookers, the breath of the performer, and the drone of the building’s mechanical equipment. Beasley’s use of “Strange Fruit” as the work’s title (after the legendary song written by Bronx school-teacher Abel Meeropol in 1937, and famously performed and recorded by Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, and even sampled by Kanye West) deepens the work’s reference to lynched black bodies. “Southern trees bear strange fruit / (Blood on the leaves, blood at the root),” Meeropol’s song begins. More than the title or the sneakers, however, it is the purples, reds, and oranges; the textures like pores and blistered skin; and the bulges that bring to mind violated bodies and that guide us toward seeing bodies in what we obviously can identify as commonplace stuff one buys with a quick online click, or at brick-and-mortar stores such as Foot Locker or RadioShack. In the moment of performance, might the sculpture and the performers summon the spectral bodies of some 5,000-recorded lynchings through the space and bodies of the museum?<sup>11</sup> This would not be an emancipatory move, a suture, a belonging, but rather a means to, quoting Christina Sharpe, “depict aesthetically the impossibility of such resolutions by representing the paradoxes of blackness within and after the legacies of slavery’s denial of Black humanity.” Sharpe continues, “I name this paradox the wake, and I use the wake in all of its meanings as a means of understanding how slavery’s violences emerge within the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic, material, and other dimensions of Black non/being as well as in Black modes of resistance.”<sup>12</sup> *Strange Fruit* circulates in the paradox of presence/absence (or being/nonbeing), unveiling the multitudes of every crevice, cord, voice, and second. This happens on the most literal level as one’s eyes run across the heavily worked surfaces, reveling in their textures and details, which appear to obscure as much as to delineate the forms that lie beneath, just out of sight.

Industrial materials, especially liquid polyurethane resin, expand Beasley’s ability to fix flexible materials and to capture indeterminate physical states. The alchemy of turning liquid into a solid while retaining the sense of a morphing state vastly expanded Beasley’s formal vocabulary. It also posed new challenges, especially given the short hardening time of resin. The artist invented novel support structures in order to manage the hardening process of the resin and the various forms the material would take. Repurposed objects such as mic stands and Styrofoam mannequin heads served as molds and casts to fix his

*Movement III (Karaoke)*, 2014.  
Bass drum shells, polyurethane foam, resin, T-shirts, subwoofer driver, amplifier, contact microphones, Shure SM58 microphone, and audio equipment. Two parts: first part, 60 x 36 x 48 inches (152.4 x 91.4 x 121.9 cm); second part, 29½ x 15 x 19 inches (74.9 x 38.1 x 48.3 cm). Richard Chang Collection, New York.



resin-dipped clothing into diverse shapes that attached to the wall or stood on the floor. His work tended to evolve serially, each new form engaged with the dynamic of absence/presence, generating potent metaphors of, and relationships to, bodily experience.

For his series of “acoustic mirror” sculptures, Beasley employed the form of the satellite dish—invented to aggregate diverse signals—to make concave sculptures that can hinge off the wall on TV mounts or stand freely. He forms these sculptures by layering clothing into the cavity of a parabolic or dish-shaped mold, pouring resin over it, and allowing it to set. Within the overall disc shape, hundreds of minute manipulations are made to the clothing, which articulate the surfaces of the sculptures. The poetics of generation inherent to the casting and creative process mirror the operations of the dish, which concentrates sound or radio waves via reflection to a focal point in order to produce a powerful wave that can be directed and transmitted. Out of the inchoate and unorganized noise emerges a power, a positive, a form, a body. By enabling his acoustic mirror sculptures to be angled in relation to the plane of the wall, Beasley connects his sculptures to the particularities of the space—its architecture, materials, and containment of bodies—which he was simultaneously pursuing in his performances. A viewer standing in front of *Untitled (11)* (2015) might recognize herself in the familiar items, such as hats, T-shirts, and pillowcases, flattened and melted into the concave form, and also in the activity of projecting and receiving sound, her body organized via the sculpture’s mirroring and consolidation of sound waves. The often-untitled “acoustic mirror” sculptures furnish what could be described as a “projected body” that includes artifacts of multiple bodies as well as the sonic environment and built space.

As if seeking to further summon the body, in 2015 Beasley began laying resin-impregnated clothing over Styrofoam mannequin heads and rounded forms supported by microphone stands to create “ghosts.” In these works, the void becomes a primary subject, as jackets, house-dresses, and T-shirts fashion the contours of bodies, but faces remain blank. In *Untitled (. . . just watch)* (2015), a Nautica rain jacket stands on the floor. Its hood appears filled, as if covering a person’s head, and then the shoulders fall away. The body and arms are either absent or too small to fill the raincoat. The jacket, which was Beasley’s in high school, appears to deflate from top to bottom. The sculpture is roughly the height of a child, coming up to the waist of an adult viewer standing before it. The shrouded face and apparent exhaustion of breath below

Top: *Who’s Afraid to Listen to Red, Black and Green?*, 2016. Installation view, Morningside Park, New York, 2016–17. From *inHarlem: Kevin Beasley*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Photo by Jason Wyche.

Bottom: *Who’s Afraid to Listen to Red, Black and Green?* (detail), 2016. Installation view, Morningside Park, New York, 2016–17. From *inHarlem: Kevin Beasley*, The Studio Museum in Harlem. Photo by Jason Wyche.



... *ain't it?*, 2014. Hooded sweatshirt and resin. 21 x 37 x 2½ inches (53.3 x 94 x 6.4 cm). Rennie Collection, Vancouver, BC.

the neck elicits a sense of death, of life squeezed out; the bottom of the jacket pools lifelessly on the floor.

Beasley made this work in 2015, the same year NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo was acquitted in the murder of Eric Garner, who died on July 17, 2014, from, according to the medical examiner's report, compression of the neck and chest; the same year Cleveland police gunned down twelve-year-old Tamir Rice on a playground; and three years after George Zimmerman murdered Trayvon Martin, citing the boy's "dark hoodie" as suspect.<sup>13</sup> Garner's final pleas for his life—"I can't breathe, I can't breathe . . ." (eleven times)—while trapped in Pantaleo's chokehold, became a cry of outrage against these and many other instances of police brutality and murder, while the hoodie rose to become a widely recognized symbol of resistance.<sup>14</sup> Beasley's sculpture is not a response to any one instance of murder or brutality but rather an evocation of a bodily state, a passing in plain sight. The work's title, *just watch*, could be read as a call to witness. Perhaps we are called out of resignation to the inevitable: "Just watch." Perhaps this is an instruction to watch our backs. Or maybe this is a pointedly taunting response to our utter disbelief.

Opposite: *Untitled (. . . just watch)*, 2015. Nautica rain jacket and resin. 37 x 38 x 20 inches (94 x 96.5 x 50.8 cm). Collection of Brian McMahon, New York.

The singular figure of *Untitled* (. . . *just watch*) begins to multiply into tight clusters of “ghosts,” or groupings, that are suspended from the wall or stand on the floor. Their graceful swooping forms recall the robes of mourners or a choir, almost classical in appearance. In *Untitled (Sea)* (2016), eleven bodies reach out from the wall like shrouded heads emerging from a mass of blue housedresses. Each rounded volume is oriented slightly differently, and the strings of the dresses appear frozen mid-sway, endowing the sculpture with an incredible sense of movement and gesture. Many of Beasley’s titles include references to music, such as *Untitled (Back-ups)* or *Untitled (Rhythm and Blues)* (both 2016). The cast shapes often possess uncanny connections to these short parenthetical elaborations: the harmony of the four bodies in *Back-ups*, or the inclusion of a wool coat as the base of *Rhythm and Blues*. Recently, Beasley experimented with combining sound equipment with his “ghost” sculptures, producing *Phasing (Ebb)* and *Phasing (Flow)* (both 2017). In these works, microphones placed at a distance from the colorful sculptures pick up the conversations and din of the environment. These sounds are processed by equipment sitting on the floor near the sculptures and then emitted from speakers hidden within the housedresses, T-shirts, and du-rags. A sheet covers each cluster as if the figures are huddled together, sheltering from rain. The distorted sounds ebb and flow, as the titles suggest, connecting viewers located in different places. The empty space is fundamental to the powerful effect of Beasley’s “ghost” sculptures. As the voids stare out at us, we stare back. We see empty cavities and sense bodies once present. Light passes through the sculptures, making them appear to glow, and the colors turn brilliant.

Beasley’s enmeshment in the optics and politics of air and breathing is also present in his performance work. For the installation and performance *Your face is / is not enough* (2016), the artist constructed elaborate headdresses around gas masks and encased megaphones in bulbous shapes, reimagining these studio tools and militaristic objects of safety and control. Each of the twelve figures has a distinctive style, ranging from the carnivalesque to the gothic and high pop. Materials used include guinea fowl feathers, an umbrella, a metal colander, and baseball cap bills detached and positioned like Mickey Mouse ears. For the installation, Beasley used some of the studio techniques he had developed in making his ghost sculptures, presenting the masks on microphone stands. The artist scored the piece to guide its activation. It begins with individuals wearing the masks and holding the megaphones; they lift the megaphone microphones up to the gas mask vents

*Untitled (Sea)*, 2016. Resin and housedresses. 82 x 96 x 26.5 inches (208.3 x 243.8 x 67.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis.



Performance view, *Your face is / is not enough*, 2016, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 2016. Image courtesy the *Hyde Park Herald*, Chicago. Photo by Spencer Bibbs.

and begin to breathe. Distorted through the mask and megaphone, the in-and-out of air sounds mechanical, wheezy, and thick. The performers begin with their own breathing rhythm and slowly sync up. Chests come to rise and fall together. The control and emphasis of the breath in this performance calls to mind a range of musical connotations, from the circular breathing of jazz horn players to the syncopated vocalized breathing in rap and beatboxing. Set against Eric Garner's dying words and the recurrence of Beasley's exploration of air, breath control might be a profound signifier of black cultural invention and simultaneously a symbol of the tragic deaths of so many black men and women.

Another recent work by Beasley, *Air Conditioner (Tempo)* (2017), overlays the droning blow of a window air conditioner unit with intermittent clips of political rallies, documentaries, and news coverage. The sculpture—a gutted window air-conditioner embedded in the middle of a wall—has two sides. Just as the ubiquitous window units circulate air between outside and inside, the sculpture connects two distinct places within the architectural environment (two separate rooms when it was installed in *Sport/Utility* at Casey Kaplan gallery). Beasley hones in on the object's essential function, not to mention its evident class and economic symbolism, as a starting point to remake ambient sound. The hum is no longer "white noise," vacant of meaning, but carries with it people's cries and stories, as captured and broadcast on radio and television. What is so striking about *Air Conditioner (Tempo)*, like all of Beasley's

Opposite: *Your face is / is not enough*, 2016. The Tate Americas Foundation, courtesy of the North American Acquisitions Committee in honour of Bob Rennie, Chair of the Committee 2010–2016, 2017. On long term loan. Installation view, *Between the Ticks of the Watch*, The Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, 2016. Image courtesy The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. Photo by Tom Van Eynde.



*Air Conditioner (Tempo)*,  
2017. Two-channel audio, air-  
conditioner shell, custom  
speakers, and audio equipment.  
Dimensions variable. Rennie  
Collection, Vancouver, BC.

work, is the artist's integration of culturally significant content and laden signifiers with his sensitive rendering of material. It connects spaces, literally within the gallery and metaphorically by bridging the public and the domestic, the collective and the personal: air, breath, and wind.

Beasley's most recent works, just finished at the time of my writing, are his "slab" works, which exist somewhere between sculpture and painting and are like containers for all of the ideas discussed thus far. For these artworks, the artist returns to laying clothing and objects into a mold and then pouring resin over them so that they stiffen and eventually stand. The process compresses clothing and other, odder things—so far, a hair roller, a mouth guard, and the side of a rolling shopping trolley—into a slab that is five or so inches thick. Patterns and colors appear like waves—coming and going—across the superflat surface of the works; the visible side is the one that would have been prone against the floor as Beasley laid down his materials. They read like impressions of an urban environment, as if Beasley somehow compressed the churning urban streets into an abstract landscape. One can imagine this studio work involves numerous choices and the element of chance. What objects shall be included? Are they personally significant? What will appear clearly once the soupy resin dries? What will be obscured?

Opposite: *Slab (Site/Picked A Constellation)*, 2017. House-dresses, kaftans, T-shirts, socks, du-rags, cotton, soil, bandanas, altered garments, altered fitted caps, and resin. 78¾ x 80 x 3 inches (200 x 203.2 x 7.6 cm). Hill Art Foundation, New York. Photo by Jason Wyche.

How will viewers relate to this slab and its contents? I imagine that Beasley does not know the answers to all of these questions, and I would wager that he is asking these and dozens of others. His practice allows for the space and time of the studio to matter and for the experience of the viewer to matter. It is through process that Beasley harnesses the communicative strength of symbols and then reconfigures those powerful forms to be open, vulnerable, and resilient. His work connects bodies in space—those present and those absent, whole and fractured, alone and entangled, black and white—to offer new forms and languages that express the human condition as we have inherited it and endeavor to reinvent it.

Previous: *A view of a reflection*, 2017. Housedresses, kaftans, T-shirts, socks, du-rags, bandanas, altered garments, altered fitted caps, altered bedsheet, mouthguards, feathers, and resin. 82¼ x 178 x 5¼ inches (208.9 x 452.1 x 13.3 cm). The Komal Shah and Gaurav Garg Collection, Atherton, CA. Photo by Jason Wyche.

#### NOTES

1. Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1993), 90–103.
2. Conversation with the artist, Queens, NY, March 22, 2017.
3. Conversation with Fred Abi-Hassoun, New York, September 13, 2017.
4. Ibid.
5. Jay-Z, "S. Carter," track 8 on *Vol. 3 . . . The Life and Times of S. Carter*, Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam, 1999.
6. At the invitation of the choreographer Ralph Lemon, Beasley's performance at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, took place on October 26, 2012.
7. At the invitation of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland, Beasley created four compositions for different parts of the day—sunrise, high noon, sundown, and nighttime—that were performed in the condemned Cozad-Bates House for a small audience. The site-specific performance, *And in My Dream I Was Rolling on the Floor*, took place on April 12, 2014, between 6:45 a.m. and 8:45 p.m.
8. At the invitation of Cleopatra's in Brooklyn, Beasley's exhibition, . . . *all different: for I do, I suppose, partake of multitude*, took place at the gallery Interstate Projects, Brooklyn, NY, June 14–30, 2013.
9. Press release for . . . *all different: for I do, I suppose, partake of multitude* at Interstate Projects, Brooklyn, NY, 2013, curated by Cleopatra's.
10. Conversation with the artist, Queens, NY, March 22, 2017.
11. "History of Lynchings," NAACP, accessed October 19, 2017, <http://www.naacp.org/history-of-lynchings/>.
12. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 14.
13. See "12-Year-Old Boy Dies After Police in Cleveland Shoot Him," *New York Times*, November 23, 2014, [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/24/us/boy-12-dies-after-being-shot-by-cleveland-police-officer.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/24/us/boy-12-dies-after-being-shot-by-cleveland-police-officer.html?_r=0); "Tragedy Gives the Hoodie a Whole New Meaning," March 24, 2013, NPR, <http://www.npr.org/2012/03/24/149245834/tragedy-gives-the-hoodie-a-whole-new-meaning>; and Al Baker, J. David Goodman, and Benjamin Mueller, "Beyond the Chokehold: The Path to Eric Garner's Death," *New York Times*, June 13, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/14/nyregion/eric-garner-police-chokehold-staten-island.html>.
14. A key precedent here is David Hammons's *In the Hood* (1993), a sculpture consisting of the detached hood of a green hoodie sweatshirt.

*Movement V: Ballroom*, 2017. Performance at the Eldorado Ballroom, Houston, Project Row Houses and Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts, University of Houston, 2017. Courtesy Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts, University of Houston. Photo by dabphoto creative.

Overleaf: *Chair of the Ministers of Defense*, 2016, and *Untitled (Curtain)*, 2016. Installation view, *Hammer Projects: Kevin Beasley*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2017. Rennie Collection, Vancouver, BC. Photo by Brian Forrest.