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On View

Why This Artist Is Deep-Frying American Flags – and Inviting Guests to Bring Their Favorite Seasonings for the Batter

Kiyan Williams will be dipping nylon American flags that once flew over the nation’s capitol into spattering pans of oil.

Taylor Dafoe, June 3, 2022



Kiyan Williams, *How Do You Properly Fry An American Flag* (2022). Courtesy of Lyles & King.

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While many Americans were enjoying Memorial Day barbecues this past weekend, artist Kiyon Williams was concocting a cookout of a different sort: This Sunday at Lyles and King gallery in New York the artist will be frying up some American flags.

At the event, the artist will be dipping nylon flags that once flew over the U.S. capitol building into spattering pans of oil. Visitors are invited to bring their own regionally-favored seasonings for the batter.

A dozen previously cooked flags are already installed in the gallery as part of the New York-based artist's solo show, "Un/earthing." Crispy as corn dogs, the objects look both delicious and disgusting; more like something you'd find at a state fair than an art exhibition.



Installation view of Kiyon Williams's exhibition "Un/earthing," 2022. Courtesy of Lyles and King.

Both the sculptures and the performance belong to a body of work titled "How Do You Properly Fry An American Flag?," which the artist began in 2020, during the pandemic, when Williams took part in the Recess residency program.

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“A source of vitality for me during the pandemic,” the artist said, “was cooking on the phone with my friends and sharing recipes... It became this way of being with people and engage in a kind of ritual of community without being able to physically be with people.”

By that point, Williams had already been collecting capitol-flown flags, which, apparently, are available for purchase. Cooking provided a fitting transformation agent.

“I started to realize that cooking was this kind of non-traditional way to manipulate materials, kind of a sculptural process,” Williams recalled.

To do anything with a flag is a political gesture, and, sure enough, baked—fried?—into Williams’s project is a send-up of Americana and the passive nationalism it implies, not to mention the country’s love of fatty foods.

But there’s another side, too. As the project extends beyond the sculptures to include a participatory event—a “social practice piece,” the artist said—so, too, do its intentions broaden beyond pharisaical critique. Inviting participants to introduce their own spices and culinary traditions to the recipe, Williams is also asking them to reflect on our own relationship to the flag, the country, and our national pastimes.

“I think it’s about making a mess of all these contentious ideas” of what America means, the artist explained, noting that they’re also documenting the project with video. “It’s really the transformation of this bubbling, charred crust that comes out of frying that I find to be particularly compelling.”

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Installation view of Kiyan Williams's exhibition "Un/earthing," 2022. Courtesy of Lyles & King.

Also on view at Lyles and King are six human-sized figures from the artist's "Sentient Ruins" series, each built from steel and soil. The latter material is particularly important for Williams, who often sources samples from historical sites of racial subjugation and environmental violence, then combines them into totemic, earthly creatures. Much of the soil used for the "Un/earthing" sculptures, for instance, came from the Great Dismal Swamp in North Carolina and Virginia, where escaped slaves established maroon communities the 18th and 19th centuries.

By combining dirt from different parts of America, the sculptures, Williams said, "are engaging with a collective experience or history that speaks to all of the land across the United States and how the country was built."

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In addition to “Un/earthing,” Williams just opened a solo show at the Hammer Museum in L.A. and is included in Public Art Fund’s current outdoor exhibition, “Blank Atlantic.”

“Kiyan Williams: Un/earthing.” is on view now through June 25, 2022, at Lyles & King in New York.