

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

The New York Times

Small, Zachary, "The White House Has That Sinking Feeling (Thanks to an Artist)," *The New York Times*, March 22, 2024

The White House Has That Sinking Feeling (Thanks to an Artist)

Kiyan Williams, for their Whitney Biennial commission, recreated the column-lined facade from soil. Viewers can watch as it crumbles, sprouts plants and births insects.



Kiyan Williams at work on the Whitney Biennial commission at their New York studio last month. "Dirt became a metaphor for all of the things that once made me feel ashamed of inhabiting this body. But also that represented the possibility for transformation and regeneration." Clifford Prince King for *The New York Times*

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



By Zachary Small

March 22, 2024

“This is my big girl.”

The artist Kiyon Williams was referring to federal architecture — specifically the northern facade of the White House, which reappears, redesigned in dirt and tilted 15 degrees off its axis, on a roof terrace at this year’s [Whitney Biennial](#).

Commanding the view from the High Line and down Gansevoort Street, it’s a contemporary ruin: an outpouring of grief, a waning symbol of American power in the months before another contentious presidential election.

A self-proclaimed alchemist, Williams specializes in transforming wet soil into hardened sculptures that typically live outdoors, where the wind carries seedlings that may attach to the artist’s creations and bloom. Often, Williams collects the earth from historically important sites of loss in the African diaspora: plantations of the American South, street corners where Black trans women were murdered or the banks of a river that became a thoroughfare for the domestic slave trade. The artist wants to give these painful histories a chance to regenerate, allowing life to flourish in the hostile conditions known by those who identify as Black, nonbinary, transfeminine.

“The earth follows me everywhere and is quite stubborn to remove,” Williams said. “It’s consistently under my nails and tracks in my footsteps. There’s almost always trails of earth behind me.”



Kiyon Williams, “Ruins of Empire II or The Earth Swallows the Master’s House,” at the Whitney Biennial. The earth-formed sculpture with columns appears to be sinking. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

Williams, a 33-year-old multidisciplinary artist and one of the more unlikely stars to emerge from this year's quiet and genteel [biennial](#), recounted a difficult childhood in New Jersey that led to creating work that is so resolutely political.

"It was the age-old pilgrimage of queer kids," Williams recalled. The artist's parents scraped by on the limited salaries of administrative jobs. "The working poor," Williams said. So the fiercely independent teenager started catching trains to New York City to wander through Greenwich Village and the meatpacking district between 2005 and 2009.

"The piers on the Hudson River were wooden and sinking," Williams remembered. "It was like I had missed the point where it was a queer haven a couple decades earlier."

That feeling of having just missed a defining moment in history continued at Stanford University, where Williams attended college and started experimenting with performance, landing in the Bay Area hoping to find the radical legacy of the Black Panther Party. Instead, they found Silicon Valley. "It was a new level of suburb," the artist said. "A manufactured hub like Disneyland."

Williams built an early career re-envisioning the political symbols that define American life. Their interest in nature sprouted from a documentary on the Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, and her inspirational "[earth-body](#)" environmental artworks. An early performance by Williams included a self-burial where they clawed out from the ground.

"I always thought I would become a historian," Williams said. "But I remember being confronted by the dilemma of how to tell stories of people whose lives don't show up in traditional documents. Black people are often statistics in historical archives, and art was a way for me to engage in their lives."



Kiyon Williams's "Ruins of Empire" was commissioned by Public Art Fund and presented at Brooklyn Bridge Park, in New York City, in 2022. The earthen sculpture was modeled on a bronze statue fabricated by enslaved laborers that was installed atop the Capitol in 1863. Nicholas Knight/Public Art Fund, NY

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

Personal and political histories remain embedded in the work. For one installation, “How Do You Properly Fry an American Flag,” Williams dipped American flags that once flew above the Capitol in frying oil. It was a project that returned the artist to the scene of a formative experience: They had served as a congressional page in 2007 for [Representative Donald M. Payne](#), the first Black congressman from New Jersey. Williams had the daily responsibility of raising and lowering the flag.

“That was when I first became disaffected with the American government,” Williams said. “And when I learned that many of the federal buildings and monuments in Washington [were built](#) by enslaved Black people.”

Williams could have destroyed the flag but chose to preserve it; the layers of frying batter created a translucent sheen around the nylon fabric, nodding to America’s love of fatty foods, and a homage to Jasper Johns, who painted his first “Flag” in wax-based encaustic and collaged newspaper scraps.



In “How Do You Properly Fry an American Flag” (2020), Williams nodded to Jasper Johns and to Americans’ love of fatty foods. Jenny Gorman

Williams’s work “was a transgressive act, but also very uplifting,” said Daelyn Farnham, senior director at Altman Siegel, a gallery that has [exhibited the artworks](#). “Kiyari’s practice addresses the symbolic images and objects we associate with structures of power.”

An obsession with federal architecture led Williams back to the Capitol, for an exhibition called “[Ruins of Empire](#)” that was shown in Brooklyn Bridge Park in 2022. Williams created an earthen sculpture modeled on a 19-foot bronze statue of a female form designed by Thomas Crawford, which was installed atop the Capitol in 1863. Known as the “[Statue of Freedom](#),” it was fabricated by enslaved laborers and [commissioned](#) by Jefferson Davis, who later became president of the Confederate States during the Civil War. Williams chose to stage its decomposition and watched as children visiting the park used it as a jungle gym. Through the months, birds nested upon the statue’s head, wasps invaded its body, and ants started digging through its interior.

The Whitney Biennial commission, “Ruins of Empire II or The Earth Swallows the Master’s House,” is the sequel.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



Kiyan Williams's "Ruins of Empire II or The Earth Swallows the Master's House," 2024, is off its axis on the roof terrace of the Whitney Museum. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

The collapsing dirt facsimile of the White House portico required nearly 6,000 pounds of earth and steel, a structural engineer and a forklift that transported the materials onto the terrace of the Whitney. Anyone with a clear view of the museum will see the artwork decompose, sprout grass and birth insects.

"It will have its own towering presence, even as it collapses," said Meg Onli, a curator for the Whitney Biennial. "It looks like the facade of a bank when separated from the White House, and we also see the portico in logos for investment firms."

Alongside the crumbling portico, Williams is displaying a human-scale monument of the trans activist Marsha P. Johnson. For several months, a cardboard cutout of the civil rights figure rested against the artist's studio wall; in it, Johnson holds a protest sign in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

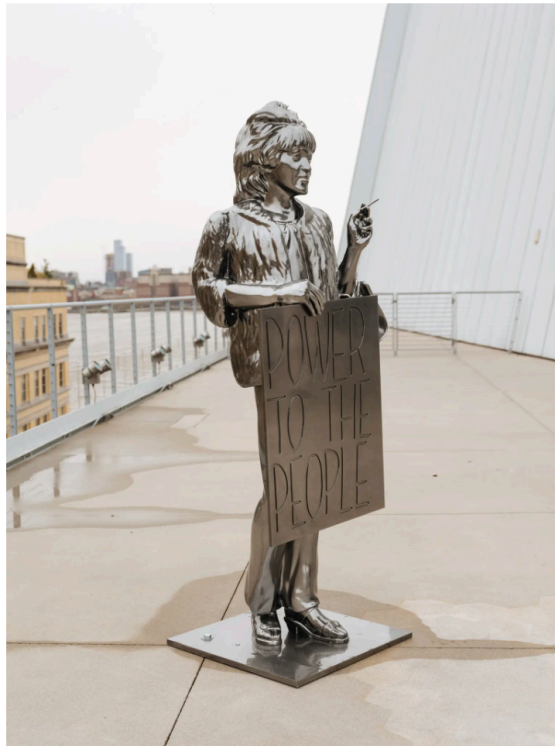
"It's based on an archival image of Marsha at a protest in the 1960s that I have lived with as a source of inspiration since I was 17 years old," Williams said, explaining that its silver-plated surface "isn't completely reflective but will give a distorted reflection back to the viewer."

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



Kiyon Williams, "Statue of Freedom (Marsha P. Johnson)," 2024, is one of two tributes to the trans activist at the 2024 Whitney Biennial. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

This is the artist's second attempt at honoring Johnson. The first came in 2019 when Bill de Blasio was mayor of New York and his administration [announced](#) that the city would dedicate statues to her and another trans leader, Silvia Rivera, as part of a promise to increase diversity in the city's public artworks. The commission [never materialized](#), but Williams decided to proceed anyway.

To cover the estimated \$90,000 it would cost to manufacture the work, Williams asked [Michael Sherman](#), an art collector and Hollywood film producer, to underwrite the project.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

“The problem is that lots of young artists these days aren’t getting enough support from galleries,” said Sherman, who started collecting work by Williams in 2020, when the Los Angeles dealer David Kordansky sold him a [fried flag](#). “Even if the project is expensive, I’m lucky enough to afford helping in the hopes that the Whitney Museum will eventually buy it.”

(The Whitney Museum, which pays participating biennial artists \$2,000, typically acquires several artworks from the show, and it said those decisions are not formalized until near the end of the exhibition.)

Williams has resisted a conventional partnership with a gallery, though several have collaborated with the artist’s shows. “The last gallery I worked with referred to their artists as being in a stable,” the artist said, adding, “I am not a show pony.” But there is no clear market for earth sculptures destined to crumble. Williams currently finds most of their support through institutions, including the [Hirshhorn Museum](#) in Washington and the [Hammer Museum](#) in Los Angeles, which recently included Williams’s artworks in exhibitions.

That support network encouraged Williams to take risks. “It is their way of processing and coping with the world,” said the artist Sable Elyse Smith, who mentored Williams during Williams’s graduate studies at Columbia University.



“The last gallery I worked with referred to their artists as being in a stable,” Williams said. “I am not a show pony.” [Christine Prince King](#) for [The New York Times](#).

Smith pointed to a 2020 sculpture, “Reaching Towards Warmer Suns,” that Williams installed on the banks of the James River in Virginia during the Black Lives Matter protests that year. It was a haunting tribute to the surrounding geography, a [docking point](#) in the city of Richmond for enslaved Africans.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

Williams had stumbled upon the location after hiking through the woods. The outstretched tree branches reminded the artist of hands reaching toward the sun. “So I began to dig,” Williams recalled in a video documenting the artwork’s creation. “I began to dig to see what might come up, to see what traces of stolen life were left behind in the soil.”

“Decomposition as decolonization,” the artist explained. “Dirt became a metaphor for all of the things that once made me feel ashamed of inhabiting this body. But also that represented the possibility for transformation and regeneration.”

Williams retrieved the work, which had been removed, and it was reinstalled in later exhibitions at [Socrates Sculpture Park](#) in New York and the [Anderson Collection](#) at Stanford University.

The artwork struck a chord with some curators, who recognized that Williams was advancing a version of land art from the 1970s. “Kiyon forces us to acknowledge that land is not neutral,” said Anne Reeve, the Hirshhorn Museum curator.

The re-creation of the White House facade extends Williams’s symbolism to one of trans identity, something the artist realized while planning the sculpture.

“This is my way of articulating a queer and trans embodiment,” the artist said.

“Like a hip tilt or a bent wrist, that is the way I move through the world,” Williams added. “Off my axis but also on balance.”

Zachary Small is a Times reporter writing about the art world’s relationship to money, politics and technology. [More about Zachary Small](#)