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Kevin Beasley

In an effort to keep

In February of 2023, Kevin Beasley (b. 1985, Lynchburg, VA) prompted five performers—Taja Cheek, Paul Hamilton, Ralph Lemon, Okwui Okpokwasili, and Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste—to share space in a rented apartment in Brooklyn, NY. Over the course of two days, the group co-existed alongside more than 36 microphones laced from the entryway to the kitchen and living room, recording their actions. The result broadcasts sixteen hours of their happenings—conversations boisterous and hushed (Adrienne Edwards joined by phone), improvisations on a piano, a round of chess, periods of rest, and the movements of their bodies—mapping a collective experience through sound.

Beasley presents *In an effort to keep*, the artist's fourth solo exhibition at Casey Kaplan. The exhibition's titular work draws from the audio documentation of the performance, realized as a soundscape in the round. Within the gallery, an enclosed room constructed to the specifications of the same apartment's architecture, houses a medley of speakers and their armatures, situated to mimic the layout and furnishings of the apartment's topography. As viewers meander through the room, sounds are localized to their respective structures. A kitchen stovetop with speakers that resemble burners emanates the sounds of scrambled eggs cooking or boiling water in a tea kettle, while a speaker suspended above the room's doorway captures the comings and goings of the participants. Two floor-based speakers at waist-height produce the crescendo of piano keys, and a purple carpet provides a comfortable ground amid a series of acoustic wall-based panels that condense and absorb the multi-tones of music and tenors of activity. Translating the often-unnoticed white noise that permeates our daily lives into an all-encompassing experience, Beasley traces the sensory composition of a memory in real time. The sound work runs on a two-day cycle, from 10AM to 6PM, corresponding to the actual time at which the recording took place, effectively preserving an auditory experience of a moment in time.

In the galleries, Beasley presents a collection of floor-based sculptures cast from molds of the sound absorbing wedges of anechoic panels. Titled *Wedge I to V*, the series substitutes the foam-based insulation used to condition the sonic pattern of a space with hardened resin; raw cotton harvested near his family-owned, century-old property in rural Virginia; altered garments and housedresses sourced from a former Harlem dress shop, frequented for decades by Beasley's grandmother and great-grandmother. The functionality of the anechoic panel, which focuses unwanted reflection, is replaced with culturally relevant materials and body signifiers.

In contrast, one side of the freestanding sculpture *Diffuser...Still it burns.* (2023) is cast from the mold of a diffuser—the asymmetrical hard surface that refracts sound in a broken-up pattern. On the other side, resin, raw cotton, dye sublimation t-shirts and other garments (such as a hooded jacket that recalls Beasley's ghost series) coalesce with a resin-soaked copy of the January 28, 2023 issue of The New York Times, with the headline "HELD AND BEATEN BY MEMPHIS POLICE AS HE CRIED, 'MOM'." Conflating two modes of tuning a space, Beasley presents a material reverberation. An object's potential to absorb or refract light, heat or sound becomes a conduit for the viewer's psychological experience.

The shelves of an armoire manufactured by American of Martinsville, Virginia are filled with hangers Beasley has stored for years, previously used to hang hundreds of housedresses that comprise past works. Encased in a bed of resin and floating in space, the empty hangers are unoccupied and left idle like an erasure of what was. Turning to the vessels in which we store memories, Beasley presents a large-scale bookshelf that

supports a group of objects such as a pair of Niagara Spray Starch cans that recall the artist's morning routine in the late '90s—a familiar product that left his clothes crisp and affixed in place. A trio of “Aunt Jemima” pancake mix boxes, which was rebranded in 2021 to “remove racial stereotypes from the product” is engulfed by raw-dyed cotton and resin, further erasing the 133-year-old symbol of supposed “idealized domesticity” and the exploitation of Black women as caretakers for America. Subverting the urge to repress, the gesture of reviving or retelling our shared histories through the objects that linger—the objects we keep—becomes a radical move.

In *Deep Cuts (40 acres/40 lives)* (2023), forty knives pierce the surface of a marble kitchen island lined with bed linens and garments soaked in resin. “40 Acres and a Mule,” the broken commitment to provide a form of reparations to newly freed slaves by offering plots of land no larger than 40 acres during Reconstruction, lingers like a scar from a persisting series of unhealing, deep cuts. A kitchen island serves to symbolize the destruction of a dream, while equally representing the nucleus of a domestic space and our connection to site.

A body of new wall-based sculptures traverse both public-facing galleries. New *Site* and *Vista* slabs (sculptural forms that draw from millennia-old traditions of relief sculpture) bridge overlapping memories tied to the landscapes they stem from. In the *Vista* series, Sharpie transfers combine material and drawing through a casting process. The past spaces of Beasley's mind's eye are rendered in three-dimensions—from New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward and the Blue Ridge Mountains of the northern Shenandoah Valley to the backdrop of Ohio skies connecting his road trips from his hometown of Lynchburg, VA to Detroit, MI.

Abstract, transparent color fields of dyed resin and cotton in the *Site* series offer a view into and through the surface of the work. A site, ground on which to build upon, connotes a future happening. The works' fog-like atmosphere foregrounds what was and what can be. Through this exercise, Beasley keeps us in tune with our own histories and our mutual efforts to keep truth.