

Kevin Beasley's Peculiar Take

Hannah MacDonald

Hill Art Foundation

26 July 2023



Kevin Beasley, *Untitled Slab (Concavity II)*, 2018. Housedresses, kaftans, t-shirts, socks, du-rags, altered garments, resin, 82 1/2 x 20 1/2 x 5 1/2 inches (209.6 x 204.5 x 14 cm). © Kevin Beasley. Courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York. Photo: Jason Wyche.

Kevin Beasley's *Untitled Slab (Concavity II)* (2018) can be described as being a large collage-like creation, similar to several other of his works in the past. Beasley was born in 1985 in Lynchburg, Virginia and now lives and works within Queens.<sup>1</sup> His artwork mainly consists of combinations of a variety of clothing and accessories. In a sense of preserving all of these materials into one, he uses polyethylene foam and resin to pour over the bright t-shirts, house dresses, du-rags and other types of clothing that carry personal and cultural weight. By incorporating material that has hidden context, Beasley challenges the traditional modes of storytelling, offering a more unique perspective concerning both history and memory.

Beasley uses a vast variety of techniques, that being texture, color choice, dynamics, etc. For example, he incorporates bright colors and anomalous objects, allowing movement to come into play. His use of t-shirts, socks, house dresses, du-rags, kaftans, and other altered garments offer a glimpse into his ethnicity, as well as all these pieces weaving together to acquire a bright and lengthy range of color. His entire piece takes on a simple shape of a three dimensional square, all compacted together by that resin, giving the objects a more shiny yet peculiar look to them. This leaves it to the viewer to analyze and question what Beasley has frozen in time and why.

Digging deeper into the artist's life as an African American male, his background has a significant role to his art pieces. As an inspiration to his work, Beasley recalls “his own experiences as a Black American artist and the broader history of racial dynamics in America.”<sup>2</sup> Through understanding Beasley's culture, his decisions in the mediums he uses can come to make sense. Along with this, he also incorporates these same ideas to visually

---

<sup>1</sup>Kevin, Beasley. n.d. “Kevin Beasley | The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation.” Guggenheim Museum. Accessed July 24, 2023. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/kevin-beasley>.

<sup>2</sup>Zimra, Chickering. 2021. “Representing Blackness: Kevin Beasley and Contemporary Art.” The Emory Wheel. <https://emorywheel.com/kevin-beasley-lecture/>.

reflect upon space, race, bodies and relationships within his work. He mainly utilizes repurposed materials that derive from his old garments, including his grandmother's house dresses. The process first starts with dying pieces of cotton that later gets dipped into the polythene resin. He then positions those garments onto a portion of the floor that is enclosed by a metal mold, and the process gets repeated over and over until seemingly finished. However, in an interview done by the New York Times, Beasley is questioned how he knows when he finishes a piece, to which he responds with "I don't."<sup>3</sup> Clearly, his work comes with uncertainty, due to the vast allowance of what the audience can pull from his collections.

Beasley's unique techniques create new realms of perspective concerning race, identity, or whatever may be brought out to the viewer. When diving more deeply into the artist's background, the decisions in color and material can be understood and respected, as well as what Beasley is trying to put forth to his viewers. In a way of connecting back to his background and his past relatives, he uses a combination of techniques, not only by the foundation of cotton but also his family's clothing that they've lived and worked in. In one sculpture, *Untitled (Jumped Man) (2014)* the centerpiece being a pair of Nike air jordan's incites schoolyard and neighborhood brawls that occurred during childhood.<sup>4</sup> While it consists of a simple sneaker, the shoe conveys social and ethical meanings within itself, similar to the way the cloth symbolizes slavery within the slabs he creates.

---

<sup>3</sup>Miguel, Morales. 2022. "Kevin Beasley Makes Use of Housedresses, Resin and Sound." The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/27/t-magazine/kevin-beasley-hill-art.html>.

<sup>4</sup>Ruth, Erickson. Kevin Beasley. Boston, Massachusetts: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2018.



Kevin Beasley, *Untitled (Jumped Man)*, 2014 (detail). Polyurethane foam, resin, soil, coat sleeve liners, and pair of Nike Jordan size 18 shoes, 2 pieces: 24 x 16 x 11 in. (61 x 40.6 x 27.9 cm) each. Collection of the artist. Source from: <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/2014-biennial/kevin-beasley>

Beasley connects with his audience in several ways. He often sticks with his common theme of piecing together clothing from moments within his past. Kevin describes his thought process during this, explaining, “I’m using my clothes because it’s something for me that has a really particular thing, pieces that start to draw on some broader cultural resonance.”<sup>5</sup> The hidden reason behind implementing cotton as his main source of material comes from the first time he saw a cotton gin, sparking the ideas upon the history of cotton and how it relates to his ancestors. It’s also explained by Chickering how cotton can be used as a symbol of the vast and tumultuous history of slavery within the U.S.<sup>6</sup>

Beasley challenges the traditional modes of storytelling, offering a more state-of-the-art perspective concerning history and memory. Due to his peculiar techniques and distinct use of material, he finds a way to resonate back to times he views significant.

---

<sup>5</sup>Harry, Gassel. 2014. “Visual Identity: Kevin Beasley On How Sound Shapes His Art.” The FADER. <https://www.thefader.com/2014/11/07/visual-identity-kevin-beasley>.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid

These techniques allow the viewers to delve into a more complex experience while analyzing the art put in front of them. The question that Kevin Beasley leaves his viewers with is, “what can this represent in its parts and its process, not just in its formal or literal visual imagery?”<sup>7</sup> By applying these techniques, he enables an open space for what the viewer can take out *Untitled Slab (Concavity II)* (2018), that being the historical significance of the material he uses, or how the slab can relate to the viewer as a whole.

---

<sup>7</sup>Ibid

## Bibliography

1. Erickson, Ruth. *Kevin Beasley*. Boston, Massachusetts: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2018.
2. Chickering, Zimra. 2021. "Representing Blackness: Kevin Beasley and Contemporary Art." The Emory Wheel. <https://emorywheel.com/kevin-beasley-lecture/>.
3. Morales, Miguel. 2022. "Kevin Beasley Makes Use of Housedresses, Resin and Sound." The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/27/t-magazine/kevin-beasley-hill-art.html>.
4. Gassel, Harry. 2014. "Visual Identity: Kevin Beasley On How Sound Shapes His Art." The FADER. <https://www.thefader.com/2014/11/07/visual-identity-kevin-beasley>.
5. Beasley, Kevin. n.d. "Kevin Beasley | The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation." Guggenheim Museum. Accessed July 24, 2023. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/kevin-beasley>.
6. Image Caption: Kevin Beasley, *Untitled Slab (Concavity II)*, 2018. Housedresses, kaftans, t-shirts, socks, du-rags, altered garments, resin, 82 1/2 x 20 1/2 x 5 1/2 inches (209.6 x 204.5 x 14 cm). © Kevin Beasley. Courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York. Photo: Jason Wyche.
7. Image Caption 2: Kevin Beasley, *Untitled (Jumped Man)*, 2014 (detail). Polyurethane foam, resin, soil, coat sleeve liners, and pair of Nike Jordan size 18 shoes, 2 pieces: 24 x 16 x 11 in. (61 x 40.6 x 27.9 cm) each. Collection of the artist. Source from: <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/2014-biennial/kevin-beasley>