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**Art in America**

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**KEVIN  
BEASLEY**

Interview by Mike Pepi  
Studio Photography by Jonathan Dennis

**IN THE  
STUDIO**



An obsolete Akai x-1800SD reel-to-reel eight-track player stood in the corner of the back room at Casey Kaplan gallery. Nearby, a simple wooden cabinet held 52 reels, each containing around 40 hours of audiotape combining portions of record albums, personal recordings, audio books and music mixes. During the gallery's opening hours, the reel-to-reel was rigged to play both sides of the tapes simultaneously, emitting often incoherent combinations. Created by Kevin Beasley, this installation—titled . . . *for this moment this moment is yours* . . . and dated 2013—was shown at the gallery as part of a three-artist exhibition earlier this year. In the far corner of the same space was one of Beasley's sculptures, its purple hue and almost corporeal shape the result of a slow accumulation of resin, foam and cotton. Though the two works—one largely audio-based, the other a physical object—seem different in kind, both simultaneously emphasize and obscure their materials, suggesting the artist's view of our experience of the world as a combination of the immediately perceived and the partially concealed.

Beasley grew up in Virginia and currently lives in New York. He received his BFA from the College for Creative Studies in Detroit in 2007 and his MFA from Yale University in 2012. We met last spring at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where he was an artist-in-residence. In his studio there, we spent time handling his sculptures, which have an intensely haptic quality. They are heavy, molten-looking pieces—pregnant with items such as shirts, pillows and dresses, trapped in foam and resin. Even his sound pieces—whether focusing on icons of popular music or exploring the landscape of human emotion—maintain a strong sense of tactility.



Kevin Beasley: *Katie's*, 2014 Resin, altered carpet, muumuu dresses 18 x 8 x 8" / 45.7 x 20.3 x 20.3c  
Photo: Jean Vong

For *Movement I: DEF/ACHE/CRYSTALLINE/SLEEVE* (2014), performed in this year's Whitney Biennial in a gallery off the museum's lobby, the artist connected his sculptures to microphones, which amplified the sounds of the surroundings. He physically manipulated the sculptures, moving them around and placing them in different arrangements, allowing them to pick up new sounds and produce feedback. It was a typical work by Beasley, who claimed, in a 2012 interview, that sound is "just as physical, tactile and experiential as any other material."<sup>1</sup>

**MIKE PEPI** How do you choose the objects that your sculptures contain?

**KEVIN BEASLEY** Each item has some personal connection to me. It's really important that an object comes from me or at least someone close to me. I have some story of where everything came from and why. That's the starting point, and the work sort of opens up from there.

**PEPI** During an earlier studio visit, you showed me a video. In one part you're driving on a rural road at night, and then suddenly we see a burning ball with a beam of light shining on it. You also capture this scene in a photograph. Iconography aside, this immolation seems to be a counterweight to your sculptures, which deal with accumulation.

**BEASLEY** That image is from a very rural property in Virginia that has been in my family for a long time. Since my grandparents passed on, it has become a place for us to convene, really just to maintain it and keep it in the family. It's also where a family graveyard is. The property holds a lot of personal experiences and information, a sort of residue of my family in a way. I was spending time down there just trying to understand, in some way, what makes me: How am I here? What am I doing? Why am I making work?



**“ I am constantly thinking about the physicality of the content I use. I also ask what it is about sound that can get us so emotional, that can affect us so deeply.”**

So I got to thinking about these graves, the family members, the lineages, my connection. I was dealing with a lot of personal, internal questions. The interest in working there came from a project I had started when I was in graduate school, involving this antique cotton gin motor. The motor was used from the 1940s to the 1970s on a cotton farm in Maplesville, Ala., which is about 15 minutes from Selma [the historic civil-rights flashpoint]. I was in Virginia for a family reunion when I noticed that our property was planted with cotton. That was not only the first time I had seen cotton plants in person, but also the first time I had seen the property planted at all, and it seemed really strange to me. I couldn't figure out what the plants were at first. I had an emotional response, and felt like I had to deal with that in some way. So a lot of these photos and a lot of the work I was doing—involving this burning ball—were me trying, for the first time, to deal with this pent-up emotion. Whether I was deconstructing a thought or burning this thing to get my frustration out, I was putting myself in a vulnerable place and confronting something deep-seated. I am constantly chewing on those emotions, and it gave me a lot of material to continue to work with. I am still sort of forming it all, and I think that's why I haven't really been showing those images.

**PEPI** Viewers can't know everything that lies beneath the surfaces of your sculptures in the same way that the audience can't listen to all the recordings in . . . *for this moment this moment is yours* . . .

**BEASLEY** I'm interested in the ways in which small elements make up a whole. Even if you can't immediately perceive those elements, they're still critical to whatever that object is. There will always be information that you can't quite put your finger on but that somehow plays into your perception of the object. Your experience of an object involves taking in all that is accumulated within it—which might be reaching you by way of the object's surface qualities or the context in which it is shown—and forming it or making it into a different thing.

Since most of these works are shown in gallery or museum contexts, they are usually accompanied by wall labels or similar texts, and I actually rely heavily on the material lists. I think that type of information can be a way of understanding works, particularly if you can't actually see what they consist of. Whether someone chooses to delve into that information or not is totally a choice, just as it's a choice whether to spend time with a particular piece or to walk into a gallery in the first place.

1.  
Kevin Beasley, interviewed  
by Jerry Schlenzka, *Mousse*,  
no. 41, December 2013,  
[www.moussemagazine.it](http://www.moussemagazine.it).



Beasley during his performance *Movement I: DEF/ ACHE/ CRYSTALLINE/ SLEEVE*, 2014; at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Photo Paula Court.



Installation view . . . *for this moment, this moment is yours . . .* 2013, wood, cassette tape, Akai x-1800SD reel-to- reel player and mixed mediums.



*Untitled (Jumped Man)*, 2014, polyurethane foam, resin, soil, coat sleeve liners and a pair of Nike Jordan size 18 shoes, 24 by 16 by 11 inches. Photo Adam Reich.



*Untitled (Queens, NY. November 21, 2013)*, Photograph.

**PEPI** In one of your Whitney Biennial works, you “activated” the sculptures by hooking them up to audio equipment. In another, you used processors and microphones for a piece composed of dissonant sounds and accompanied by a movement performance by Leon Finley and Christian Diaz. The latter work in particular seemed to explore a vast range of nonverbal communication. You’ve spoken about how it was an attempt to express the ineffable.

**BEASLEY** The purpose is not the materials in themselves, or even the process. It’s really about how all of those things actually connect, and then how we sort of react and respond and negotiate.

People experience the world in so many different ways. I try to parallel that in my practice. I can sometimes limit myself, working in certain ways or with certain materials. And I always try to push against that, to try other ways. Even if I am failing and it’s not actually getting to what I want to say, I am going to try.

The Whitney performances were the first time I felt like I was really conscious of my body and my movements because I was relying so much on them. I felt really vulnerable because there are so many precedents for using your body in that kind of space.

**PEPI** The biennial also included a foam and resin work titled *Jumped Man* [2014]. It consists of two almost rock-like pieces, placed on the ground, with very recognizable and prominent objects affixed to them—two Air Jordan basketball sneakers. Does the title relate to a narrative of any kind?

**BEASLEY** The work comes from a photograph I took in Queens. There was an abandoned pair of Air Force 1s, just sitting on a grate, and the spacing between the two shoes was really odd. It felt like they belonged to somebody, as opposed to being just some sneakers discarded on the street. I wanted to do a piece with shoes in some way because I am always working with the relationship of a thing, including the body, to its extremities. But I kept thinking about it, and it evolved into an interest in this ownership, this missing body, an interest in disembodied experience—and in trying to find a connection. This led me to the industry developed around these shoes. Everything about the brand is really absurd. Maybe it was cool in the early '90s or something, but by now it’s just a ridiculous industry that doesn’t address the problems of violence that surround it.

**PEPI** I did detect a sense of violence in the work. Maybe because it evoked an image of someone’s shoes getting knocked off while getting jumped, given the way the shoes are askew in the sculpture.

**BEASLEY** I don’t think that the work is ambivalent. Jordans are specific. If you’re a young black male, then they are very specific. I had a tough decision in the studio while I was making this work: should I get generic Jordans or the really serious ones? In the late '80s, a few years after the original Jordans were released, a young man was killed [for the shoes] and his body left in the woods. Recently, when the Air Jordan 11 Gamma Blues came out, there were news reports about similar killings. I finally realized that my intention was not to single out a specific style of Jordans but rather to call out the presence of the brand, which carries its own weight.

So I feel like that violent narrative is there in the work or that understanding is there. For those who are in tune, that's a quick read. I am interested in addressing the disparity that the shoes represent, or at least in having the work contain some element of that.

**PEPI** What attracts you to working with analog media—like the tape and the reel-to-reel player—in addition to digital tools?

**BEASLEY** It's funny because I didn't actually anticipate working with tape. Prior to . . . for this moment . . . , most of my sound works were digital; for example, *I Want My Spot Back* [performed at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2012] was driven by software. It's kind of beautiful how today you can merge analog and digital—how you can combine a turntable from the early '70s with software that was put out a year ago.

I am constantly thinking about the physicality of the content I use. I also ask what it is about sound that can get us so emotional, that can affect us so deeply. That's not just about the sound itself. It's about where that sound is coming from and our personal histories. The tape was really me thinking about the physicality of walking into a space and hearing something. When you're listening to something, there is a physical process that is happening—not only in the movement of sound waves, but also in the act of being present.

There was so much tape in that work that there was no looping. I was really specific about not having a loop, or at least about having the time of the loop be so long that no single viewer would experience repetitions. So the physical qualities of the tape allowed people to walk into the space and experience something really particular that they wouldn't experience again, at any other point during the exhibition.

**PEPI** Would you say there was an element of "analog purism" there?

**BEASLEY** I am very interested in analog media as a physical, tactile thing, but I'm not necessarily a purist. I think all ways are adequate. When you speak about a purist, the question is always, "A purist of what?" You could say that electronic sound is a bastardization of analog technology, but you could also say that analog technology is a bastardization of acoustic instruments. Last night I was thinking about the Beatles' tape edits and how invested the group was in coming up with different sounds in postproduction. It's about the emotion and the feelings that are elicited when you combine disparate elements, or try to expand the medium or push it beyond what is given to you.

**PEPI** Take me through your thinking regarding the wooden cabinet holding the reels in the Casey Kaplan installation.

**BEASLEY** If I am thinking about the sort of sculptural quality of tape and sound, then I'm interested in any opportunity to demonstrate that, and so that's how the cabinet came in. The different shades of brown in the tapes recall wood grain and wood furniture. That relationship is very physical and succinct. I'm interested in the aesthetic and formal properties, but also in the practicality of being able to see all of the tapes there. You're not listening to them all, but they're all present; you're experiencing them in some way. You can even count them if you'd like. There's a closeness and tactility to that. And that is how the work begins to reveal itself.

*CURRENTLY ON VIEW Works by Beasley in "Cut to Swipe," at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, through Mar. 22, 2015*

*MIKE PEPI is a writer living in New York.*