

ARTFORUM



View of “Vaughn Spann,” 2019. Foreground: *Who shall be held accountable?*, 2019. Background: *Lost in the cosmos of black bodies (we love you, we will always remember you)*, 2019.

Vaughn Spann

DAVID CASTILLO GALLERY

Vaughn Spann’s “Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep” is a two-part arrangement: two series and one suite of works are on view at David Castillo Gallery, and three pieces are installed at the Miami River Armory, an enormous former hangar. The artist’s first foray into sculpture produced hulking monuments; in such a large space, they look spare and purposeful. For the young painter, a Yale graduate who had once intended to study science, this is a good thing:

Assemblages of his work have been mistaken, he has said, for group shows. He veers between dense abstraction and figuration—and these days between two and three dimensions—with pleasure.

The exhibition takes its title from the children’s bedtime prayer (“If I should die before I wake / I pray the Lord my soul to take”), in which sleep is tenuous and life is fragile. When I spoke briefly to Spann, who is a husband and father, he described the image the verses conjure for him—a child kneels in prayer, safe and slumberous—and referred to the “delicacy and temporality” of his roles, given his “subjectivity as an African-American male, considering the everyday lived trauma for all people of color.” This exhibition serves as an homage to Spann’s delights and terrors while raising children, and as a memorial to the families that have been fractured by racialized violence. It presents a demand for accountability, and a hope, too, that such a demand could be met.

On a wall at the Armory hangs *Lost in the cosmos of black bodies (we love you, we will always remember you)* (all works 2019), a massive, eighteen-foot-wide diptych. Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin, Kayla Moore, Tamir Rice, and others killed by police are pictured candidly being kissed by their relatives or smiling for school portraits. Interspersed throughout are Spann’s own family photographs, arranged in a grid pattern bordered by polymer paint and terry cloth. Spann often employs this fabric, a material reminiscent of the towels he’d fold alongside his grandmother. The work might be read as a soft, dense photo album, though the images are sun bleached and overexposed; Spann’s background is in abstractionism, and his figures are never blatantly depicted. One must delineate them with care.

Nearby is the fourteen-foot-tall *Who shall be held accountable?*, one of Spann’s two sculptures, a concrete mass that seems to have emerged from the ground. It is shaped like a makeshift lighthouse, or a basketball hoop, long and tubular. A rocky boulder at the base holds a snaking cylinder that bottlenecks into a sign, where the title is written in steel. At the top, an orange light beckons, or becomes a beacon. The work is reminiscent of protest signs but asks its titular question at a height human arms cannot reach. It would be even better if the light shone brighter, becoming unavoidable.

At the gallery, the centerpiece suite is also titled *Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep*. Polaroids of Spann’s home life—featuring his wife, children, and dog, the last looking mightily incredulous—are layered onto sculptural blocks, wooden panels whose altered surfaces texturally resemble bubbled asphalt, colored red, black, or seafoam. In the photographs, Spann’s wife cuddles their baby, a bouquet of sunflowers droops, and watercolors by his daughter are proudly

displayed on a refrigerator. Mostly, the images are of his children, who are typically sleeping, yawning, or curled on their sides. Always the photographer, the artist is nowhere to be seen—but a similar individual work, in which more scenes from home appear on wooden panels, is named *Portrait of an artist*. Those whom you choose to protect and love: they comprise a portrait of you, too, don't they? In a bid to foil the fragility of which he spoke, Spann preserves his loves, memorializes them. He is generous in allowing us these sweet, momentary glimpses.

Elsewhere, there are more cluster compositions. In *We used to play amongst the fireflies*, Spann assembles cardboard, terry cloth, and a preternaturally glowing yellow paint into shapes that recall not fireflies themselves, but the sunsets that summon them. *Study of a chokehold (surrounded by spectators, fearful and hopeless)* employs the same materials, but adds an ooze of bluish-white paint to the canvas, alongside a distinct black shape. I don't want to demand narrative from Spann's material abstractions, but I'm grateful that they suggest, at the very least, a slippage between childhood memories and grown-up fears, between life and death. In *Transmitting frequencies to the ancestors*, a painting that is mostly opaque black, blots of color peek from beneath the polymer; the conversation between this realm and the ancestors' feels private. The paint appears to shine with the asphalt-like material Spann uses in other works—something resembling bedrock, perhaps implying roots—and it crackles with possibility, even devotion. Like the source of its title, “Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep” is a kind of prayer.

— *Monica Uszerowicz*