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# An Artful Ode to an Undersung Chemist

By ANN BINLOT NOV. 6, 2015

As a child growing up in Nassau in the '80s, the installation artist Tavares Strachan got most of his information about the world by a means that's now all but obsolete: encyclopedias. "There were so many inaccuracies, and there were so many things left out, because the process of creating encyclopedias is all about editing and curating, really," Strachan says. He became fascinated by the figures forgotten by history — like Matthew Alexander Henson, the African-American explorer who led Robert Peary to the North Pole in 1909. (Strachan took inspiration from Henson when he represented the Bahamas at the Venice Biennale in 2013.)

For his new exhibition, "Seeing is Forgetting the Thing that You Saw," at Anthony Meier Fine Arts in San Francisco, Strachan turned to the world of science. He discovered Rosalind Franklin, an English chemist whose X-ray diffraction images aided in deciphering the helical structure of DNA, helping Watson and Crick determine their groundbreaking model in 1953. "I was particularly fascinated by the idea that she worked on a project that was surrounding invisibility and DNA — something that can only be mined through a lot of technology — and in the process, she sort of became a second-fiddle player," Strachan says. "There's an energy and personal connection that I have."

Strachan explored the idea of creating a portrait of someone who was invisible. He set out with a challenge: "How could I create something that had light that could illuminate an entire space as if it was coming from the inside of the character's body?" He conceived of a neon sculpture of a human skeleton and cardiovascular system, emanating pulsing lights that mimic a heartbeat and the waves of energy it

sends traveling throughout the body. He also created a collaged portrait of Franklin's face, comprised of about 10,000 fragments of imagery he found thematically resonant: from pictures of Winston Churchill and Jimi Hendrix to Vietnam iconography and butterflies. The exhibition also includes a series of works titled "The Invisibles," which use scientific principles to address issues of exposure and concealment. "I make half the objects in glass, then I fuse them in the original object, and they sit in mineral oil," he explains. The mineral oil and glass are both refracted, "Which is a really fancy way of saying two objects that have the same speed in which light passes through them," he continues, "and then you create a certain level of visibility." Some of the objects include lab shoes, a microscope and a cricket ball and bat — all items connected to Franklin. Strachan considers the nine works in the exhibition to be different parts of one piece.

"The exhibition is not necessarily about giving voice to someone I consider to be voiceless," Strachan says. "I think it's more about creating a platform for us to think about what we consider to be important and why and how, and who gets to decide those things."

"Tavares Strachan: Seeing is Forgetting the Thing that You Saw" is on view from Nov. 6 – Dec. 11 at Anthony Meier Fine Arts, 1969 California St., San Francisco, [anthonymeierfinearts.com](http://anthonymeierfinearts.com).