

frieze

Maya Stovall Illuminates Black American Regional Histories

At White Columns, the artist presents a series of neon works that highlight 'critical moments in US history' from 1526 to 2019

BY WILL HARRISON IN REVIEWS | 01 DEC 20



Upon entering 'LUX', Maya Stovall's first New York solo exhibition at White Columns, we are confronted by a solitary, bright-white, wall-mounted neon sculpture that reads, simply, '1526'. The number is of great personal significance to the artist, since it marks the year of the first rebellion of enslaved people, which took place in north America's first European settler colony, San Miguel de Gualdape, in what is now South Carolina. Stovall's ancestors, who lived in the region before resettling in Detroit, may well have participated in the uprising.



Maya Stovall, 'LUX', 2020, exhibition view, White Columns, New York. Courtesy: the artist and White Columns, New York

The 15 other neons in 'LUX' all indicate different years and hang in chronological order. Accompanying the sculptures are a series of postcards that gallery-goers can take, which provide information about the dates in question. For example, 1934 (1526 NASDAQ: FAANG), no. 18 (all works 2019) references the National Housing Act of 1934, which, according to the card, established 'racist residential mortgage practices' that excluded Black Americans 'from housing markets [and] credit markets'. Trained as an anthropologist, Stovall is a diligent archivist, but she also has a nose for the uncommon. These works – which document what the artist describes in the gallery press release as 'critical moments in US history' – gesture toward a communal Black American history that also makes room for more regional stories, such as the release of Detroit duo Cybotron's (a collaboration between musicians Juan Atkins and Richard Davis) first single, 'Alleys of Your Mind', which later helped spawn techno music, and is remembered here in 1981 (1526 NASDAQ: FAANG), no. 31.

Influenced by the Light and Space movement, as well as by conceptual artists such as Glenn Ligon, Stovall claimed in an interview with The New York Times this year that she favours art which is 'aesthetically cold, almost heartless-looking'. This is underscored by the fact that – in an overt reference to the stock-market value of tech giants Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google – the neon sculptures are part of a series called '1526 (NASDAQ: FAANG)' (2018–ongoing). But Stovall doesn't seem to be reflecting the icy authority of capitalist society so much as she is reclaiming it. In Double America (2006), Ligon covered two neon 'AMERICA' signs in black paint, leaving just enough cracks and abrasions for the light to shine through in flashes. Stovall's project functions as a poignant inverse: bright light forcing its way into the fissures of the past to create enlightening and enduring counternarratives to US history.

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Gallery Hours
Wednesday–Saturday
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