

T The New York Times Style Magazine

TRUE BELIEVERS

A Retelling of American History — in Neon

Maya Stovall, known for her dance performances in public spaces, shares a new artwork.



Maya Stovall's "1526 (1526 NASDAQ: FAANG), no. 1" (2019). Photo by Clare Gatto. Courtesy of Reyes Finn

By Maya Stovall

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In this new series, *The Artists*, an installment of which will publish every day this week and regularly thereafter, **T** will highlight a recent or little-shown work by a Black artist, along with a few words from that artist, putting the work into context. First up is a piece by Maya Stovall, who is best known for her dance performances in public spaces, as documented in her "Liquor Store Theater" video series, which will screen this summer as part of the citywide digital-art exhibition "Art Mile Detroit."

Name: Maya Stovall

Age: 37

Based in: Los Angeles

Originally from: Detroit

When and where did you make this work? "1526 (NASDAQ: FAANG)" began as a research project in 2018 and continues as an ongoing project. Over the course of a year, I gathered United States historical archives and volumes. From tens of thousands of pages of research, I developed a series of dates, from 1526 to 2019, that reflect critical moments in U.S. history. I am obsessed with words, numbers and time. I thought that neon, which I've considered working with for a long time, would be a way to emblazon these dates and facts into collective memory. The research for this work was done in Pomona, Calif., where I'm an assistant professor at California Polytechnic State University, and also in San Francisco, where I spent quite a lot of time in 2019. The neons are these tiny little dates, in buttercream with a soft glow. Postcards accompany the neons. They summarize the actions and events associated with each date.



The postcard that accompanies the corresponding neon date as part of the artist's "1526 (1526 NASDAQ: FAANG), no. 1" (2019). Courtesy of Reyes Finn

Terese Reyes
terese@reyesfinn.com
310 487 5436

Bridget Finn
bridget@reyesfinn.com
313 204 7814

1500 Trumbull Ave.
Detroit, MI 48216
www.reyesfinn.com

Gallery Hours
Tuesday–Saturday
12pm–6pm

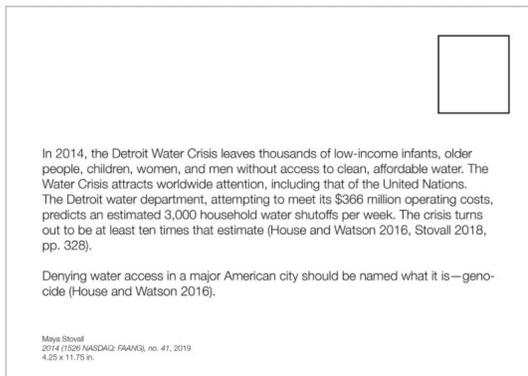
Can you describe what's going on in the work?

The work links the past to the present and attempts to unhinge our minds from the mythology we've been fed. And neon is fun. I like data and information, and that is happening, too. I don't have an interest in emotions or feelings. I like facts. These works reflect that. For instance, in xxxx year, something monumental happened. We look at screens constantly, and increasingly our economy is dominated by technology stocks — of course Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google are among the biggest. From where did this outrageous accumulation of capital emerge?

Well, certainly from the ongoing exploitation of people, markets, circuits and flows. The works move through significant but quite varied moments in U.S. history, ranging from petitions to end human trafficking and genocide ("1661"), to a woman human-trafficking and genocide survivor writing a letter to an abolitionist journal scaffolding feminist theory ("1827"), to Adrian Piper establishing conceptual art ("1968"), to the Detroit mass water shut-off crisis, which continues to the present day ("2014") and more. There are 44 dates in the first iteration of the series.



Stovall's "2014 (1526 NASDAQ: FAANG), no. 41" (2019). Photo by Clare Gatto. Courtesy of Reyes Finn



The postcard that accompanies the corresponding neon date as part of the artist's "2014 (1526 NASDAQ: FAANG), no. 41" (2019). Courtesy of Reyes Finn

What inspired you to make this work?

Imagine if Germany, for instance, taught its schoolchildren that Nazism was an economic system that, over time, was abolished, and that Nazism truly had ideals of hope and freedom that were simply never realized. Imagine if Germany called Nazism's victims slaves rather than survivors. Here in the United States, unfortunately, our collective brains have been glued to such hegemony that we actually teach schoolchildren such lies — for instance, the lie that we have a country built on democracy, freedom and liberalism. This great big lie that must be upended if we are ever to move forward. There is no democracy, freedom or liberalism in the United States. The way Americans have been taught to think about United States history is, in a word, criminal.

Today, Americans are victims and survivors of legalized human trafficking, genocide, rape, murderous policing, exclusion from credit markets, job markets, education, unjust incarceration policies and more, spanning every aspect of existence — from philosophy to city life. There has yet to be a reckoning where the U.S. government, history books, popular narratives, etc., reflect reality. The people protesting in the streets across the country and the world now, as a global pandemic intersects with police brutality, know these realities, on some level, and they are exasperated. The philosophy, the history writing, the history-telling, the language, the marketing — everything absolutely must change about how we think if this country is to right its murderous wrongs. There is nothing emotional or up for debate here. These are facts that require much organization, documentation, discussion, correction, and this series is interested in that.

What's the work of art in any medium that changed your life?

There are many works with which I have an intense relationship, but the first that came to mind at this question is the work I'll share. I am thinking about conceptual artist DeShawn Dumas's ongoing series of Glock-shot glass paintings called "Ballistic Testimonies." The series is this feedback loop or networked array of risk, calculation and violence. The artist shoots his work with a Glock firearm through these laminated glass Rothko-like monochromes that he first paints. The works are monuments to victims of police murder, one of whom is the artist's brother Derrick Conner. When I saw the work for the first time, I was devastated and moved by it. I am attracted to quite intellectual and conceptual, aesthetically cold, almost heartless-looking work. For me, think: Larry Bell, Mary Corse, Eva Hesse, Glenn Ligon. Dumas's works come off like this, and yet the series has an erotic, painterly quality and crystallizes the construction of the simultaneous logic and illogic of violence that courses through policing, through murder and through walking down the street. This work changed my life in some of the most profound ways you could imagine.