KQED

At MoAD, David Huffman's 'Terra Incognita' Explores Black Trauma Among the Stars

By Julian E.J. Sorapuru | 1 April 2022

David Huffman, *Yankee Trash*, 2008

When we think of a far-off future where humans trek about the 'final frontier' of space like an intergalactic highway, how do we envision those who travel the cosmos? Most science fiction paints them as nomads on the hunt for adventure and the spoils of mysterious new places.

But whose faces are inside those astronaut helmets?

David Huffman's exhibit at San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora, titled Terra Incognita, positions recurring images of Black people in spacesuits, whom he calls 'Traumanauts,' at the center of this question. In the exhibit, which runs through Aug. 18, Huffman uses interstellar imagery to call attention to Black Americans' search for identity in our all-too-real society grounded here on Earth—a society that has stripped them of their ancestral history and culture.

'The no therapy for Black folks after slavery, and just letting us figure out how to deal with it ourselves, becomes problematic in a sense of the continuity of health for a whole culture of folks,' the Berkeley-born visual artist tells KQED.

'In a way, we're working out our own places of health,' Huffman adds. 'So for me, these paintings cite these moments of trying to find health—like digging through some of the dirt, digging through some of the hard stuff—but also recognizing a sense of reflection.'

The Traumanauts' journey takes place outside of space and time. But Huffman's own use of the characters spans three decades and many mediums: from ceramics he sculpted as a graduate student at California College of the Arts in the '90s to a live-action short film titled Tree Hugger that he shot in 2011. Pieces from each of these eras are present in the exhibition, though it leans heavily on paintings he created in the mid to late 2000s.

The human subjects provide the throughline, drawn in minimalist, precise, linear boundaries. Huffman grew up watching classic sci-fi movies, but notes that his style was inspired more by 1960s Japanese manga like Osamu Tezuka's 'Astro Boy'; Walt Disney's animations of the same era; and ancient Egyptian wall art.

David Huffman, *Katrina, Katrina, Girl You're On My Mind*, 2006

These figures are positioned against abstract, horizontal landscapes. At times, Huffman paints in silhouette. At others, he uses models to create more defined recurring imagery like basketballs, watermelons, burning churches and barren trees meant to evoke Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit,' according to the artist, who now lives in Oakland.

This mixing of techniques also extends to the application of paint to canvas. Huffman created his otherworldly atmospheres using a variety of techniques: stroking, blotting, dabbing, jabbing or dripping with his brush; layering his canvases with multiple generations of paint including oil, acrylic, watercolor and even glitter.

In doing so, Huffman says, he seeks to 'fracture the continuity of time' in order to create 'unencumbered spaces' for his Black cosmic travelers to 'work some of their own issues of trauma out.' The Traumanauts do this in a host of ways: they play basketball, or wage war against their oppressors. They also hug trees, create music and tend to one another's injuries.

David Huffman, *Treehuggers #4*, 2008

Some of these works undoubtedly come from a place of deep despair, such as 'Untitled (Katrina Studies),' a collection of images created by Huffman in 2006 accented only by insidious blots and swirls of paint in ominous shades of black, gray and white. In scenes reminiscent of famous photographs from Hurricane Katrina, the Traumanauts' spacesuits don't look out of place in Huffman's post-apocalyptic approximation of New Orleans.

'I wanted people to see this as an otherworldly landscape, because there's not fully a map of the place, New Orleans, but it has leanings toward it,' Huffman said. 'For me, Katrina signified a real urgent, hostile moment on Black culture and I wanted to show some of the absurdities and connections.'

David Huffman, *Sideshow*, 2009

By contrast, Huffman's work 'Sideshow' stands out as a positive piece, populated with healthy trees, a colorful blue-green landscape and a scattering of Traumanauts exalting in the spectacle of cars burning rubber at a sideshow. Huffman positions his Traumanauts amidst bygone landmarks of both Oakland and Los Angeles—the Kwik Way Drive-In, the Crenshaw Hand Car Wash—while they do donuts, ghost ride their whips and post up in front of their cars, all without the threat of police presence to shut it down. Huffman created the piece to celebrate the 'acrobatic delivery of the car,' he says, because if 'you keep it illegal, you keep it dangerous.'

For the painting's inspiration, Huffman went looking for burnt rubber marks near his studio in Oakland, as well as Los Angeles, and photographed them for inspiration. 'I was like, 'Whoa, this isn't an Olympic sport yet?' he said of sideshow culture. 'To me, it's an unsung creative act, because Black folks are thriving so well with so little… The idea that you can do it without funding is generally what we have to deal with all the time… so I do see this as a possibility of healing.'

On a personal note, Huffman hopes the exhibit will help showcase his career as 'an originator of some of the components of Afrofuturism in contemporary art.' But he'd also like audiences to walk away with new ideas about the ways Black people find a sense of self.

'We've been separate from the larger sense of inclusion in society,' he said. 'But we've always been extremely present and creative about it.'"