

Sideshow, space basketball and COVID: How a Bay Area art show came together

Get an inside look at what goes into staging a museum exhibit

Marisa Keendall | 21 July 2022

They've played basketball in outer space, helped in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and most recently, spent an anxiety-ridden two years in storage, thanks to COVID and other unforeseen delays. Now, Oakland artist David Huffman's "Traumanauts" — a gaggle of adventure-seeking astronauts — has landed in a gallery near you.

Huffman's exhibition, "Terra Incognita," runs through Sept. 18 at San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora, which is located in the city's museum quarter South of Market, near the Museum of Modern Art and Contemporary Jewish Museum. Huffman's show, which touches on the themes of Black identity, trauma and the longing for



Elena Gross of the Museum of the African Diaspora stands by a display of David Huffman's ceramic figures, part of the "Terra Incognita" show that she co-curated in San Francisco, Calif.,

somewhere to call home, is full of robots, spaceships and other images from Afrofuturism. But Bay Area viewers will also see more familiar scenes, such as cars doing doughnuts and other tricks during an Oakland sideshow.

The exhibit is Huffman's largest to date — and it almost didn't happen.

Even at the best of times, staging a major exhibit isn't simply a matter of hanging art on walls — and these weren't even the middling-est of times. So how did it all come together? The MoAD staff gave us a behind-the-scenes look at what it takes to pull together a museum show during a global pandemic.

One of the masterminds behind the show, curator Elena Gross, had been interested in hosting a Huffman exhibit for some time.

"He's an artist who's had a very long career here in the Bay Area, but most of the work that he's known for is abstraction," she said. "There has been less attention paid to his Traumanaut series... It's such a very interesting, nonlinear narrative around these characters and these ideas that have had a prevalence in David's practice for a long time."



Treehuggers #4, 2008.

She started working on the project in 2019, with the goal of opening the show in March 2020 — so you can guess what some of the challenges involved. But let's start in 2019: Gross and co-curator Emily Kuhlmann began the process with countless conversations with Huffman about his work and how it would be displayed. They visited his studio and began picking out the pieces they wanted to use for the exhibit, so the art could be packed up by a professional shipping company and trucked over to the museum.

The curators wrote the blurbs that hang on the wall beside each work of art, as well as the larger, introductory paragraphs at the entrance to the show.

And they had the walls of the gallery painted a pale, mint green. It's a color Huffman calls "Oakland green," because as a child, he saw it frequently when he visited other people's homes in Oakland.

To nail down the exhibit layout, Gross and Kuhlmann took iPhone photos of the art and plugged them into a computer program alongside the gallery floor plan. When deciding on placements, they had to think about the story they wanted to tell, and how each piece fit together. Some of Huffman's larger, more recognized works would get a wall all to themselves at the front of the show. Deeper into the exhibit, multiple smaller paintings would fill a wall practically floor to ceiling in what's known as a "salon-style hang."

The curators made sure to give Huffman's "Sideshow" a prominent place of honor. The 2009 painting shows Traumanauts joy riding and spinning doughnuts in a parking lot, leaving plumes of smoke and spiraling skid marks in their wake.

To Huffman, the piece raises the question of why a practice that has become something of a cultural icon in Oakland is still relegated to the fringes of society.

"They have not created spaces for them to compete or safe places for them to do it," he said. "It's still a very dangerous thing, because people are doing it in neighborhoods and blocking freeways, just the craziest stuff."

The curators had already installed one of the exhibit's largest, most important works — Huffman's painting of Traumanauts in a flooded New Orleans — when news of a possible pandemic began spreading.

Then COVID hit. The world shut down, and Huffman's art went back into storage.

“For a long time, just given the unknowability of everything that was happening in the world, it was really unclear as to whether or not the show would go away altogether,” said Gross, who has worked for MoAD for three years.

The museum had reinstalled the show in late 2020, with the hope of opening it in early 2021, when another disaster struck. A leak upstairs in the St. Regis hotel sent water flooding through the museum ceiling — a development Gross called “devastating and disappointing.”

“I thought, ‘Oh, the work all got damaged,’” Huffman said. “That’s what I was thinking.”

Somehow, his work was spared. Only one piece got wet — a life-sized spacesuit Huffman had fashioned as a Traumanaut costume — but it was made of canvas, so the moisture didn’t harm it. Even so, the museum had to spend months repairing the building.

On March 31, two years after its original opening date, the exhibit finally opened to the public — no more delays, no more disasters, just art showcased against walls painted a luminous Oakland green.

The show’s stars include “Luxor DX” and “TraumaEve,” small ceramic statues of robots with wide, leering grins. The smiles are inspired by racist portrayals of Black people throughout history — such as in Blackface minstrel shows — where big, happy grins masked the trauma Black people were actually experiencing. Huffman, who is inspired by sci-fi and anime, used his robots to take back that racist trope. His grinning robots are, in a word, badass — TraumaEve can fly and shoot her fists at bad guys.

“They’re both symbols of empowering Black bodies,” Huffman said.

Huffman hopes that the show, which features work that dates all the way back to the ’90s, will help people recognize him as one of the early pioneers of Afrofuturism.

What else does he want?

“Hopefully, that people enjoy it,” he said. “That they find something compelling.”