

ARTFORUM

David Huffman

MUSEUM OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

by Maria Porges | September 2022

“Terra Incognita” is the first museum show to focus on painter David Huffman’s deeply engaging “Traumanaut” works: a meditative action series—if such a thing were possible—that he began in the early 1990s. This extended walkabout through the artist’s Afrofuturist-inflected narratives features Black men in NASA-style space suits encountering a variety of landscapes and situations. Even Huffman himself makes an appearance in a video, wearing a replica suit and gently hugging trees.

Born in 1963 and raised in Berkeley, California, Huffman grew up attending Black Panther rallies while simultaneously witnessing the apex of the American space program via the historic 1969 moon landing. Later, as a young artist, he found himself considering the “happy darky” imagery of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: a beaming Aunt Jemima, for example, or the tooth-baring grins worn by blackface figures in minstrel shows. He began making works in a range of media—painting, prints, even ceramics—investigating what this “traumasmile” (to borrow the artist’s term) really meant. For him, this grimace was not an expression of happiness or conciliation, but rather a survival strategy adopted in response to white hostility and racism.

Huffman’s explorations have a context within the larger body of work by Black artists who have foregrounded the existence of such imagery in American culture. Landmarks range from Kara Walker’s monumental sugar sphinx (*A Subtlety*, 2014) and Betye Saar’s Aunt Jemima sculptures, to Robert Colescott’s code-switching send-ups of



David Huffman, *Katrina, Katrina, Girl You're on My Mind*, 2006, mixed media on panel, 80 × 108”.

canonical Western artworks and Ellen Gallagher’s abstracted grids of goggle eyes and smiling lips borrowed from images of minstrelsy. But the NASA astronauts were still on Huffman’s mind, as they represented an escape from the gravitational pull of racism and the possibility of traveling to new worlds. The artist’s figures quickly evolved, from the *Astro Boy*-esque aesthetics of *TraumaEve*, 1999, a ceramic sculpture with cylindrical limbs and a mesmerizing polka-dotted head wrap, to the neatly limned and slightly more realistic depictions of men in space suits he created during the following decade—via paintings, prints, and drawings—which make up the majority of the show here.

Often, Huffman’s Traumanauts seem to be intervening in one grim situation or another. In a panoramic three-panel screen, they slog through Hurricane Katrina’s hellish floodwaters, trying to save each other. Sometimes, they are fighting

in mysterious wars or traveling through blasted landscapes. Even in *Untitled (Tightrope)*, ca. 2009, in which four Traumanauts sit cross-legged on their own individual clouds like serene bodhisattvas, the explosive skeins of black surrounding them suggest sumi-e painting as filtered through a bad LSD trip. This notion is further reinforced by the drippy eruption of Pop colors that cascade from the canvas's top edge, seemingly ready to envelop another space explorer as he attempts a rope crossing. The situation is bleak.

As a cultural aesthetic, Afrofuturism reconnects the Black diaspora to its African heritage, addressing the monstrous depredations of slavery and colonialism through technofiction. Maybe Huffman's Traumanauts are on a perilous journey to a place where both home and history can be found. There, healing can truly begin, as evidenced by the aforementioned video *Traumanaut Tree Hugger*, 2009, whose eerie soundtrack can be heard throughout the show. But recuperation can also occur through play. In two works, Traumanauts wearing red and green uniforms hustle to score in vividly depicted games of basketball. In *Untitled (Traumanaut Basketball)*, ca. 2009, the court seems to be in outer space: Distant nebulae and specks of glitter in the dark background suggest faraway stars and planets. The players float up, up, up to an impossibly high basket, heading toward a moment of cosmic slam-dunk triumph.

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