

Glen Helfand on David Huffman's 'Terra Incognita'

Glen Helfand | June 8 2022

The works in David Huffman's exhibition at the Museum of the African Diaspora (MOAD) have some history behind them. The show, organized by Elena Gross and Emily Kuhlmann, features a selection of paintings, a few ceramic sculptures and a single video representing the artist's output from the early 1990s to 2009. During this period, Huffman worked with invented, science fiction-inspired narratives and archetypes that he named Traumanauts. They wear protective suits and space helmets and are intergalactic travelers, Black men (and one woman) who wander searching for "freedom and home," elements of which — houses, churches, firm ground — float on abstract backgrounds of various visual textures.



Untitled, 2005, mixed media on wood panel, 21 1/2 x 23in.

The theme of home is foundational for the artist. Huffman grew up in Berkeley, where he mounted Afro Hippy last year, an exhibition at the Berkeley Art Center inspired by his mother, an East Bay activist who worked with the Black Panthers. As an adolescent, Huffman became fascinated by the works of Isaac Asimov, Omni magazine and Emmanuel Velikovsky's *Worlds in Collision*, a "historical-cosmological" book postulating interplanetary myths of terrestrial and cultural conflicts. This combination of youthful interests and identity coalesced into works that embody Afrofuturist narratives. Reviewing the Afro Hippy show for this publication, Renny Pritikin wrote: "Unbeknownst to many, [Huffman] was also one of the earliest visual artists to define the emerging genre, the central impulse of which is to create a science-fiction world in which Blackness and Black culture can be seen, celebrated and investigated apart from white America's fraught past and present."

Huffman's work also appeared in *Mothership: Voyage into Afrofuturism* in 2021 at the Oakland Museum of California. *Terra Incognita's* expanded focus on this formative period positions Huffman as a progenitor (in visual art) of Afrofuturism, a term which only recently entered the popular lexicon. It was coined in 1993 by Mark Dery, a white writer, but its origins trace to the mid-1950s — to Sun Ra and a coterie of Black science fiction writers who later envisioned a technologically enabled future in which the Black diaspora might find refuge.



Traumanaut #8, 2009, oil and acrylic on wood panel, 18 1/4 x 18in.

Like the sequence in *2001: A Space Odyssey* in which an astronaut weightlessly drifts into silent space, Huffman's Traumanauts float through environmental and social distress, exuding a deceptive calmness that acknowledges key moments of systemic cultural violence. While the artist's oeuvre includes recent paintings that honor George Floyd and Breonna Taylor (not included here), it also contains many works that reach further back in time. Hurricane Katrina, for example, and the racial inequities it uncovered, occurred in 2005. Huffman responded the following year with *Katrina, Katrina, Girl You're On My Mind*, a mixed media painting on a freestanding folding screen. One of the exhibition's highlights, it shows a pale gray landscape accented with dark, washy blotches that resemble black mold: an abstract morass that has become a compelling hallmark of Huffman's work, functioning as the visual texture of disaster.

Huffman identifies inspiration in Chinese court paintings from the 17-19th centuries. He sees the panoramic, multi-panel works of that genre as "beautiful stages," akin to those originally done for emperors, except that in his hands, the orientation leans closer to theater or cinema, evidenced in backgrounds to which the artist, operating like a choreographer or storyboarding film director, adds figures and invented action. The show also includes small drawing studies of the uniformed figures that appear in the finished works.

In *Katrina*, the trees are leafless and stunted, like blunt bonsai, with houses and churches poking out from the flattened perspective. A few Traumanauts wade through the muck, while one stands on a flat-roofed building waving an American flag, attempting to rescue victims or summon help. *Sideshow* (2009), a mixed media collage, depicts squealing auto battles, defined by curls of burnt-rubber "doughnuts," a common sight on the streets of Oakland and LA, where the location of the action, denoted by trees and signage, unfolds. Huffman associates the curlicue tire marks with Brice Marden's paintings and graffiti, an outlawed creative gesture that in *Sideshow* reads like post-apocalyptic play.

Elsewhere, these same characters engage in more bucolic, though still contested, landscapes. In *Traumanaut Treehugger* (2011), a video, we see the artist in a space suit moving through a redwood grove embracing trees slated to be removed for fire abatement. The piece unfolds as a tender, eco-activist ritual. At the show's entrance, a mannequin wearing the same suit — which Huffman commissioned from NASA's commercial replica department — lends the exhibition the feel of a history museum devoted to Black heroes.

For those who've been following Huffman's work over the last 20 years, *Terra Incognita* provides salient examples of an artist coming into his own, revealing how time has caught up with a true visionary.