

Fall 2001

## Afrotech and Outer Spaces

### If Sambo Were a UFO

By Arnold J. Kemp

Remember when you used to watch science fiction? How it was acceptable that there were no black characters because it was an imaginary world? Well, that didn't sit well with David Huffman, an artist who inserts the black subject into science-fiction narratives. His fantastic sci-fi images go so far as to suggest that the black psyche can be liberated by ultra-advanced robotics and military technology. Huffman's choice to portray black characters turning toward technology to escape inner and outer defects is full of implications. While his work deals with notions of race enforced by images in the entertainment media, it is particularly concerned with the psychological and physiological ramifications of our shared history and anxiety about blackness.

When I first encountered Huffman's artwork, I was organizing an exhibition focused on professional artists' and folk artists' concepts of outer space, UFOs, and paranormal phenomena. The idea for the exhibition *Above and Beyond*<sup>1</sup> was sparked by the actions of the UFO cult Heaven's Gate. Led by Marshall Applewhite, thirty-nine members of Heaven's Gate committed suicide in late March 1997. They believed that Hale-Bopp, an unusually bright comet passing our planet at the time, was a signal to shed their earthly bodies--"containers"--and join a spacecraft that they imagined traveled behind the comet. They were attempting to achieve a higher plane of existence which they had religiously studied in the television programs *Star Trek* and *The X-Files*.<sup>2</sup> Science fact and fiction and pop culture were combined to disastrous ends for Heaven's Gate members, especially for Thomas Alva Nichols, an African American man found among the deceased. Strangely, he was the brother of Nichelle Nichols, the actress who portrayed Lieutenant Uhura, the communications officer on the original *Star Trek*.

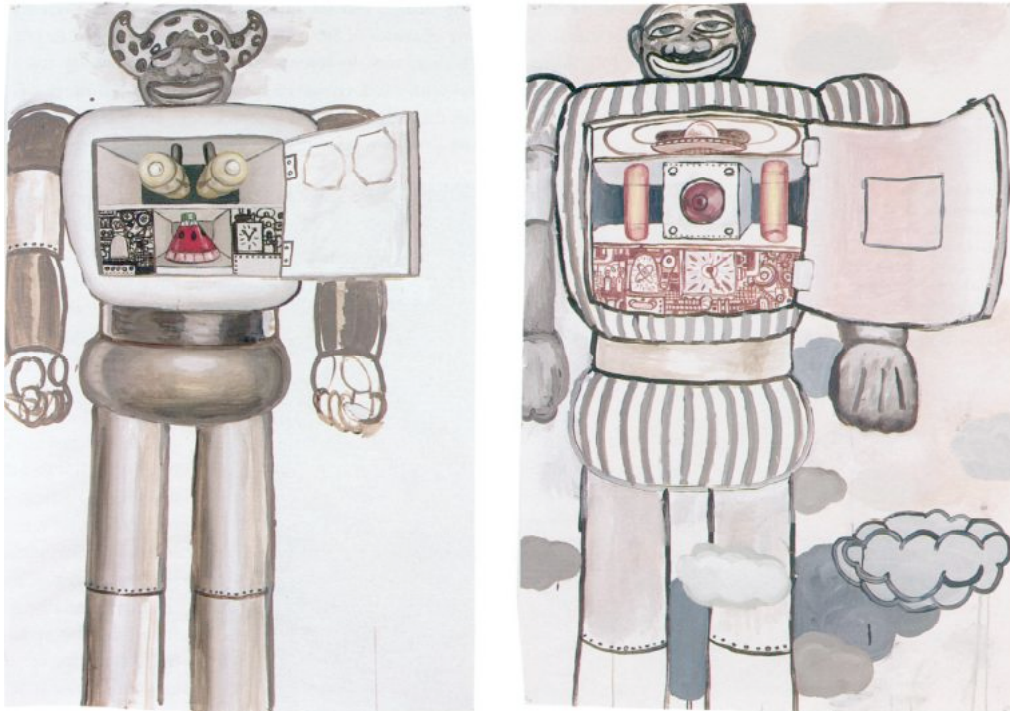
*Star Trek* first aired in the 1960s, during the height of the Civil Rights movement, and has continued to do so for more than thirty years. In the original episodes, Nichelle Nichols portrayed a beautiful, accomplished, intellectual black woman of the twenty-third century, and an indispensable member of the starship Enterprise's crew of brave space travelers. Her character was one of the first of many African American characters in sci-fi, fantasy, and spythriller action programs. These characters were always overdetermined, so that there was no question as to why they were there; they could never just be ordinary black people, and they were never written as leading roles.

Remember Barney Collier, the quiet, efficient electronics expert on *Mission Impossible*; Sergeant Baker, another electronics and mechanical genius on *Hogan's Heroes*; Valerie, the technical genius of *Josie and the Pussy Cats*? These character types were so prominently displayed in the television of my youth that as a child I associated them with the character of Mr. Spock, the Vulcan science officer on *Star Trek*. I paid special attention to Spock, reading his character as black, because he was overly logical, analytical, and scientifically gifted, like other black characters on television at the time. It seemed obvious that Spock was not played by a black actor because he was second-in-command of the ship; if something should happen to the captain, a black character could not become the main focus of the action. Still, I was sure of his blackness.<sup>3</sup>

But what was the reason for so many of the black science officers, inventors, and technically proficient operators of advanced computer equipment on television? Were they meant to be the

opposite of the minstrel—the other major television and radio role for blacks? If so, characters like Uhura or Barney Collier could not have come into being if the entertainment media were not paying attention to the political climate of the 1960s and compensating for the horrific caricatures of black people made popular in previous decades. Even so, heroic characters like Uhura were just new stereotypes, though different from bug-eyed, clowning spooks of the past. Watching their shallow development, one could not help but see the minstrel, the Uncle Tom, and the mammy as their fictional antecedents.<sup>4</sup>

It is out of the fragmented context of television's sci-fi adventure programs that David Huffman cobbles together an artistic identity. Born in 1963 in Berkeley, California, Huffman grew up with television that regularly aired programs like *Astroboy*, *Shogun Warriors*, and *Transformers*. He combines imagery reminiscent of these animated sci-fi series in painterly works on paper and freestanding ceramic sculpture. His muted colors and cartoonish imagery form a body of work that relates a narrative about a race of fictional black people whom he calls Trauma Smiles. The story is that Trauma Smiles have undergone the same degradation as actual black people, yet they have developed a perpetual grin, an evolutionary trait that came into being in the days when they attempted to perform the stereotypical roles assigned to them. In Huffman's mind, the grin was meant to subvert the pain of an unresolved history of playing at being an ethnographic commodity; thus the name Trauma Smile identifies a people of inner anguish, confusion, and a crippling lack of direction.



**Left:** David Huffman. *Inside Trauma Eve 1*, 1998. Acrylic on paper. 51 x 40 1/2 in. (122.4 x 97.2 cm). Courtesy of Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco. Photo: John Wilson White.

**Right:** David Huffman. *Inside Luxor DX*, 1998. Acrylic on paper. 60 x 40 1/2 in. (144 x 97.2 cm). Courtesy of Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco. Photo: John Wilson White.

To this already interesting tale that touches on genetics and social conditioning, Huffman has added the Trauma Bots, the powerful robotic servants of the Trauma Smiles. The Trauma Bots are giant robots based on animation and toy action figures originating in Japanese anime. Trauma Eve 1 bears a polka-dotted helmet and looks like an Aunt Jemima for the thirty-first century. She is a fighting machine equipped with nuclear-powered rockets that launch from her mechanical breastplate. Another Trauma Bot, LUXOR DX, named after the site of the great Egyptian temples, looks like a super-armored Sambo who fires a rocket-powered forearm with a clenched fist. Trauma Bots have docking areas in the rear of their heads, into which the Trauma Smiles navigate small vehicles shaped like wedges of watermelon. This action supposedly creates a

bond between Trauma Smile and Trauma Bot that allows the Trauma Bots to fly through space. The space they explore is unspecific, filled with vaporous, pastel-colored gases and objects that recall intestinal organs in an enlarged digestive system. Huffman's depiction suggests that the spiritually challenged Trauma Smiles, freed from the limitations of the physical body, use the Trauma Bots to go inward toward an unexplored space where they may find the key to correcting their deformed features. At the frontier of this inner space the Trauma Bots are further depicted as being in conflict with another creation of Huffman's, Mechaman. Seeking the extermination of the Trauma Smiles, Mechaman has no Trauma Smile in control of his actions. He is perhaps the creation of the damaged psyches of the Trauma Smiles, an enemy from within undermining the actions of his people. Anything seems possible in Huffman's images, where a purposeful ambiguity holds the interest of the viewer.

Huffman's production over the last three years mediates controversial images that he has inherited as an African American artist. We share some of his anxiety as he attempts to come to terms with a simultaneous attraction and repulsion to minstrel and mammy images. With friendly sci-fi imagery Huffman pulls us into pictures that depict a universe of anxiety populated by black characters suffering from a sense of shame and fascination with their own image, on an inward quest to escape their outward appearance. He is essentially lifting a clouded mirror that reflects an aspect of black reality—namely, the real desire of blacks to look for themselves, even in the unpleasant or unfulfilling images that society reflects back to them. Even with the best intentions, early episodes of *Star Trek* never satisfied the need to portray fully realized black characters. Its writers were not able to assuage our memory of the minstrel with black characters who, without a full range of emotion, were no more than highly skilled laborers. Still, for their time, *Star Trek* and other adventure programs provided the least offensive source of images of blacks. They also provided Huffman with the model of a cultural allegory based on a technologically advanced society.



David Huffman. *Watermelon UFO with Trauma Eve*, 1999. Acrylic on paper. 61 x 45 in. (146.4 x 108 cm). Courtesy of Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco. Photo: John Wilson White.

So what of Thomas Alva Nichols, an actual black man seduced by promises of a better life in a scientifically advanced society?<sup>5</sup> What was he looking for on the fringes of science and religion, when he found the unconventional practices of Heaven's Gate? It is natural to look toward the

future, hoping for answers to the frustrating puzzles of the mundane modern world. Some surviving members of Heaven's Gate have reported that their "away team" reached "the level above human."<sup>6</sup> If so, it is possible that they found a world like that of the Trauma Smiles, a world where science fact and fiction and pop culture mix to less disastrous effect.

Arnold J. Kemp is an artist and poet. His work was exhibited in the Studio Museum in Harlem's *Freestyle* exhibition in 2001. He is also Associate Curator at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco.

## FOOTNOTES

1. *Above and Beyond*, presented at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, February 26 to April 30, 2000 was originally titled "Above Human." It examined fringe belief systems in a culture saturated with representations of the paranormal, the extraterrestrial, and the metaphysical. Participating artists and organizations were the Aetherius Society, Dennis Balk, Jessica Bronson, Davis & Davis, Douglas Curran, Cameron Jamie, David Jarvey (in association with Harrel Fletcher, Chris Johanson, Elizabeth Meyer, and Alexis Hurkman), Chris Johanson, Corey McCorkle, John McCracken, Sun Ra Research, Ionel Talpazan, Mungo Thompson, Rubén Ortiz Torres, and Charlie White.

2. The details of the Heaven's Gate tragedy were sensational. The police described an eerily placid death scene. Applewhite and several of the cult members had undergone voluntary castration in the months before the mass suicide. The revelation that Heaven's Gate was comprised professional web designers used the Internet to win converts and spread their message, compelled me to examine my own role as a producer of esoteric events and exhibitions. I was grappling with how to evaluate my responsibility as a cultural producer to a culture in which bizarre events take on a daily basis.

3. My view of Spock as a black character is supported by the fact that Leonard Nimoy, the actor who played Spock, grew up in Dorchester--my neighborhood in Boston. He was also physically stronger than any of the other characters and could bear great pain. He had suppressed his emotions to the point of appearing emotionless, and he also had access to advanced forms of telepathy and mind control; when in heat, he was nearly uncontrollable. These last aspects of Spock's character connect him more closely to what we see in the characters portrayed by contemporary "gangsta" rappers, but in the late 1970s this type of character was just beginning to appear as a model for urban black youth. In my all-black neighborhood, I was used to seeing this extremely cool, Spock-like posture on street corners and in schoolyards.

4. If we can accept the speculation that Spock may be read as a black character, then we can accept that *Star Trek* actually touched on some interesting issues. For instance, Spock was a biracial or, more correctly, bispecies character: part human and part Vulcan. In society, he was mocked for being neither one nor the other. His intuitive, emotional, human side was at war with his unemotional, logical Vulcan side. He was often portrayed, as preferring the hardened Vulcan side of his genetic makeup, turning to scientific, mathematically precise thought processes as a way to escape the part of himself that he hated. He made a decision to protect himself from the little bit of pain that his humanity allowed him to feel. Subsequently, Tuvak, the Vulcan character featured in the later *Star Trek Voyager* series is played by a black actor.

5. One has to wonder what dreams were set in motion for Thomas Alva Nichols, the namesake of one of the America's most famous inventors, Thomas Alva Edison. What dreams were deferred by the fact of his race?

6. See the Heaven's Gate home page at [www.trancenet.org/heavensgate](http://www.trancenet.org/heavensgate).