

What is Afrofuturist Art?

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Those in the Bay Area need to check the paintings of David Huffman. They are a powdered chocolate universe of scifi radiation clouds, peopled by tiny, black astronauts confronting and ultimately controlling forces much bigger than themselves. Huffman knows a secret: when Buck Rogers finally makes it to the 25th century, there's going to be a whole lotta black folks there. And we're going to be running shit.

Those in Atlanta need to drop in on the art of Charles H. Nelson. His vibe is different: more hip hop, but no less fantastical, digital and futuristic. In a dizzying spiral of reference, self-reference and counter-self-reference, his current work involves projecting digital images of his own paintings onto blank backdrops — hip hop inspired paintings that once upon a time he had installed in Atlanta's Marta stations and nightclubs and invited regular folks to have their pictures taken in front of. Now he's inviting folks to have their pictures taken in front of the projection of those paintings that were once backdrops for other photographs. It's like holding two mirrors up to each other and trying to see where the reflections end. It's also brilliant.

Huffman and Nelson fit into a larger art world phenomenon dubbed Afrofuturism. For the unschooled, let me break it down: Afrofuturism is not a school of art, a movement, or a dogma. Instead, it is a way of looking at the world. It is a process of figuring out the intersections between technology and blackness and finding the artistic expressions that reside in the places where they overlap. It's a way of looking at art that acknowledges the blackness in technology and the technology of being black. That break down should actually be credited to Alondra Nelson as according to her 2000 essay "AfroFuturism: Past-Future Visions." Nelson is one of the leading voices of Afrofuturism and may be its de facto queen. She was certainly one of the first on the scene to offer a definition and she continues to be one of its most vocal and most articulate proponents.

Once you realize what Afrofuturism is, you realize it's everywhere. Afrofuturism is all those brothers and sisters using digital technology in their remixes, sampling, cutting-and-pasting their way into the future. It's Missy Elliott. Yes, the lyrics she spits, but also the vision of her in that puffed-up, garbage bag outfit looking all freaky and, well...futuristic. Afrofuturism is David Huffman's spacemen making it clear that black people belong not just to the past and the present, but to the future as well. And that's a radical thought.

Afrofuturism is not an easy term, however. It's not like "impressionism" or "hip hop," which has a group of folks who go around calling themselves hip hop artists or impressionist artists, or whatever. No, when you call a visual artist an Afrofuturist, generally the person most surprised by that label is likely to be the artist herself. Take Mendi+Keith Obadike. They are conceptual artists working almost exclusively in the digital realm. Their website houses a number of projects, including internet operas and pieces commissioned by the Whitney Museum and other prestigious art outlets. They have problems with the term Afrofuturist. "We've seen it used as a catch-all phrase for practices and aesthetics of progressive black artists, but that usage is rather ambiguous. We haven't noticed any kind of significant engagement with many contemporary

African artists. Artists like Nigerian digital photographer Fatimah Tuggar, Ethiopian digital painter Acha Debela and Congolese sculptor Bodys Kingelez, who uses everyday objects such as toilet paper rolls to build cities of the future, are every bit as futurist as black American artists but are routinely left out of the dialogue. This article is guilty of that very sin.

On the other side of the coin, many who embrace the term Afrofuturist don't necessarily consider themselves artists, even though they make visual culture. Experimental filmmaker Cauleen Smith, for example, avoids calling herself an artist, at least not in that uppity, shush-we're-in-a-museum kind of way. She is the director of a number of science fiction shorts and her energy is entirely different from that of the stereotypical "serious" artist. Smith proclaims between cigarette puffs (she's been trying to quit for months now) that what she really wants to do is make more sci-fi films. Big ones. And karate movies. We art snobs tend to look down on stuff like that. But Smith also talks about roller skating through museums and filling her films with a high "joy quotient." When we see art, she contends, it shouldn't be like going to a mausoleum. Art is ours. We should take it and have joy when we encounter it.

Perhaps Afrofuturist art and its close relatives have the potential to get a whole lot more folks interested in "high art" than have been before. It might take the form of Charles Nelson's "regular people" getting their picture taken within a digital projection. Or it might mean the untold thousands who logged in when Keith Obadike put his blackness up for auction on Ebay as a conceptual art piece. If there's any art that got right down to the business of getting people to consider art, technology and blackness in a new way it was Obadike's conceptual Ebay piece. Brilliantly, it got around the museums, the galleries, (it even got around the online "galleries") and all those places folks feel too bored or intimidated to walk into. It got right into people's homes through an interface we all know and understand. When we saw that Ebay auction listing the benefits and warranty exclusions on Obadike's blackness, we knew just what it meant. We got it. And not a lot of conceptual art works that well these days. By the way, Ebay wasn't having it and shut down the project within a few days.

All of this points to the fact that the term "Afrofuturism" doesn't come from within the art world. It's applied to the art world after the fact. Having been at the short end of the stick in terms of technologies being used against us throughout the black diaspora, black artists were already turning that around and using technology to envision how we exist today and how we will exist in the future. Academics came along and gave it a name — Afrofuturism — but we were already doing that stuff long before, creating visions of ourselves as space aliens, astronauts and cyborgs.

According to Valerie Cassel Oliver, Associate Curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, the historical precedents are numerous. Sun Ra claimed to be from outer space. And in the visual arena, themes of transcendence, the future and utopia have long been mainstays of black folk artists. "It makes perfect sense," says Cauleen Smith. "The history of black people in this country is one of alienation, like being from another planet, and science fiction is the perfect vehicle for expressing that." Which is to say, it's not just about escaping into a fantasy world. It's also about exploring our present and where we've come from. When the slave ships came from Africa, the mother ship had landed and spilled her alien children onto a distant planet simultaneously full of treacherous circumstances and new technologies. Within Africa, alien invaders landed and transformed those societies, transmogrifying the original inhabitants into aliens in their own lands. We have been living with various forms of alienation ever since. Afrofuturist art is like experiencing three time dimensions and various spatial dimensions all at once. Charles Nelson calls this kind of time travel "living in the future-present." It carries thousands of years of history, bridges continents, looks to a cyber-enriched, technologically advanced future and comments on where we are right now all at the same time. And what could be more important right now than to acknowledge our past while imagining our own survival, envisioning our own flourishing?