

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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Funk Upon a Time

By Arnold J. Kemp

...Cro-Nasal Sapiens and the Thumpasorus Peoples lived side by side in P[each].

But soon there arose bumpnoxious empires led by unfunky dictators. These priests, pimps and politicians would spank whole nations of unsuspecting peoples — punishing them for their feelings and desires, constipating their notions and pimping their instincts... The descendants of Cro- Nasal Sapiens fell in line, for their credo was “Get over by any means necessary.” They slicked their hair and lost all sense of the Groove.

The descendants of the Thumpasorus Peoples knew Funk was its own reward. They tried to remain true to the pure, uncut Funk. But it became impossible in a world woo’d by power and greed. So they locked away the secret of Clone Funk with kings and pharaohs deep in the Egyptian pyramids, and fled to outer space to party on the Mothership and await the time they could safely return to refunkatize the planet.

From *Prologue to Funkencyclo-“P”-dia* by Chervokas and Blass

Enter David Huffman. His stories are not the same as those of his peers, a group of young, internationally active artists exhibited in *Freestyle* at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2001. Those artists have been described variously as postmodern, post-Civil Rights, post-feminist and post-black. How Huffman might fall within the constraints of these terms is arguable, but in common with other *Freestyle* artists is his unwavering sensitivity to the marginalizing factors of cultural differences and an open, experimental practice. Raised in Oakland, California in close proximity to locally organized Black Panther rallies in opposition to war and for workers rights, Huffman narrates a multifaceted story that figures a strong interest in black identity and identification with historical and contemporary black figures and events.

Huffman works with metaphorical figures—outta-this-world protagonists in a project of grand, speculative history. His Traumasmiles are a homeless, individually alienated people who seem like kissing cousins to the legendary Afrofuturist, Afonaut and musician George Clinton. The leader of the band Parliament/Funkadelic (a.k.a. P-funk) and its offshoots, such as the Brides of Funkenstein, Clinton raised the roof on a radical Afro-terrestrial invasion in response to the American police state that grew around movements for rights and justice in the late '60s and early 70s. With tunes such as *Mothership Connection* and *Chocolate City*, Clinton hid astute social commentary in interplanetary funkmanship, i.e., self-styled spaceships, colorful, silverized and furred costumes, rainbow colored face paint, mutli-leveled hairdos and big, fun, seemingly harmless dancepop. P-funk, the direct link between hip hop culture and the legacy of black music and political struggle, effectively intervened in major record labels' attempts to whitewash the sound and content of '70's black music. David Huffman works in a similar sense of cosmic psychobabble that, for all its good humor and high feeling, attempts to recapture the radical politics of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers.

Huffman began his project around 1995, at a time when 1 in 4 black men had a relationship to the prison industrial system. That percentage is now 1 in 3, and starman Huffman has recently felt the effects of the terror of September 11, 2001, the inadequate response to the disaster of hurricane Katrina in 2005, unabated global warming, genocide in Darfur, and the occupation of Iraq that continues despite international pleas for its immediate end. Things are worse for us all. Huffman reacts by making larger, more complex, more politically toned work, as if in direct communication with Clinton's martian-mack-daddy Dr. Funkenstein who says: “The bigger the headache the bigger the pill.”

Beneath personalized, subjective, figurative imagery, appropriated from non-art sources, Huffman paints watery ambiguous space a muted black/blue/brown/grey. It's like the deep cultural bruise that gives name to the Traumasmiles. In this space, laws of time and physics are warped around futuristic technologies, inter-planetary life, cybernetics and super advanced robotics existing alongside artifacts of slavery as it was practiced on blacks in the USA from 1619 until 1865. Just as present is the aftermath of abolition as it leads up to the Civil Rights era of the

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1960's. Huffman depicts black people in space suits, stylized Egyptian pyramids (i.e. pyramids of basketballs), country churches, contemporary prison industrial complex watch towers, classical slave quarters, historical transatlantic slave trade corporations, roadside liquor stores, trees used for lynching, and trees augmented at several heights with multiple basketball hoops. Traumas miles are playing basketball or meditating as if they were the same thing in what could be zero gravity. Huffman's deceptively cool graphic style is simultaneously messy and rife with angry contradiction. It swings dramatically, emotionally and entropically. In short, it's so funky that one wonders if those black-blues represent the remains of a disastrous crude oil spill or a decidedly dark spot in Huffman's emotional relationship to the plane of here.

The psychological and conceptual undertones in Huffman's project are amplified in titles such as *Earth Blues (a prayer for the rejection of the anti-lynching bills)*, *Get Up and Get Down*, *Imhotep's Dream*, and *Juju's Dakar*. It's about getting somewhere other than this funky up plane of existence and doing it as a painter, like it used to be in the daze of the Funkapus when the earth was on the One and funk flowed freely and freedom was free from the need to be free. Huffman reclaims the pyramids and releases the funk that is hidden there, to worship at the altar of P[ainting] and P[olitics]. So pay attention because you can't afford free speech, and you got to shake it when you "P"!

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August 1, 2006