

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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ARTFORUM

December 2006

DAVID HUFFMAN

**Patricia Sweetow Gallery
San Francisco**

By Glen Helfand



David Huffman, *Get Up and Get Down*, 2006, mixed media on paper, 50 x 97".

Striking a balance between actual catastrophes (particularly those relating to racial inequity in the US) and a richly stylized comic-book world has been painter David Huffman's consistent strategy for some time now. For his 2004 show at Patricia Sweetow Gallery, he created an army of black astronauts called the Traumasiles who wielded bulbous missiles and vats of toxic sludge in a battle against one another. Expressionistic explosions abounded. Code word: Iraq. But while the subtext of these works was clear, the paintings themselves were elusive, narratively speaking, portraying ambiguous skirmishes rather than battles with clear victors.

In his most recent work, Huffman alludes to ancient Egypt, to lynching, and to basketball as a means through which black men may improve their economic status. But the ten paintings in his show "Pyramid Dreams" primarily address the racially skewed devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. Huffman frequently employs abstract forms that suggest ethereal landscapes: In the astronaut paintings, puffs of flat color evoke meteor dust, toxic gas, or rain clouds, while these new ones are full of inky swirls, dripped passages, and gray splotches that resemble clumps of mold. We have clearly moved from outer space to the deluged terrain of America's Gulf Coast.

The title of a key three-panel work makes this explicit: *Katrina, Katrina, Girl You're on My Mind* (all works 2006). The piece is a freestanding screen that mimics classical Chinese landscape

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painting in format and composition. Here, Huffman conjures a narrative of rescue, death, and cataclysmic change. Churches, low-lying office buildings, cars, and a gas station are nearly submerged in the brackish murk through which Traumasmiles slog. A few of them float facedown, dead in the water. The figures are clad in protective white suits, but these outfits are more Hazmat than NASA: This is the cleanup crew charged with the virtually impossible task of mopping up after a disaster both natural and social.

Most of the works in the show, like *Katrina, Katrina*, contain a thick sup of diverse elements, rendered in such a wide variety of ways that some appear to have been made collaboratively. The array of styles and allusions befits the subject of flooding, a phenomenon by which distant elements are moved, forcefully, into close proximity. Defoliated trees are articulated with dense lines, monochrome silhouettes, or marbled paper cutouts. The supports (paper, wood, and canvas) are sometimes punctuated with splatters of turquoise and pale washes of glitter that suggest viscous slime. Images of African masks, several of which poke from the water and one of which is worn by a Traumasmile, are painted with cartoonlike graphic strokes, as are the recurring piles of basketballs.

In the panoramic *Get Up and Get Down*, one group of Traumasmiles is playing a game, jumping to make slam dunks into multiple hoops attached to a tree. Elsewhere, similar characters are meditating in Buddha-like poses. Guard towers loom over them, and identical shacks, perhaps slave quarters, and taller buildings (similar to those identified in other works as the offices of notorious slave traders Price, Birch & Co.) are tucked into the landscape like miniature Monopoly houses. With such elements, Huffman choreographs chaos with an epic sweep. His narratives include no tidy denouements, only the rich, compounding effects of continuous action.