

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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Artweek



David Huffman, Dig it!, 2008, mixed media on wood, 48 x 90 inches

David Huffman at Patricia Sweetow Gallery Reviewed by David Buuck

David Huffman's latest exhibition at Patricia Sweetow Gallery showed the Oakland-based artist expanding his repertoire, with new figures and themes entering into his signature landscapes of futuristic dreams and humor. Against backdrops of ecological decay and cosmic debris, Huffman's primarily African-American space travelers venture into realms both surreal and uncannily close to home, as if the Afro-futuristic Mothership had crash-landed in a funky netherworld.

Here Huffman's normally dark palette includes fresh streaks of blue and yellow, brushed and poured acrylics and generous applications of glitter. The result is a more expansive field of color and texture, if no less dreary for being psychedelic and playful. Throughout the exhibition, Huffman's continued mastery of his medium matches his witty and deeply engaged thematic concerns with African-American culture, both historical and post-historical – both here on Earth and off traveling in outer space.

In *Cosmic Watermelon Pyramid* (2209), Huffman's signature watermelons return, this time piled high in a kind of inert minimalist sculpture against a teeming sky of bursting browns and blues. In the wondrous *Nomenclature* (2007), the pyramid shape is revisited in piles of colorful basketballs, like cultural totems for some new post-apocalyptic Egypt, where elephants hover around a Church's Chicken sign and teams of black astronauts stand between a rack of tire rims and an iconographic female dancer, her body on display. Paintings like this one and *Funky Soul Stop* (2008) show Huffman exploring vernacular black culture without resorting to cliché or romanticized images and instead posing unsettling questions about what kind of future might survive the ecological disasters his paintings seem to portend.

The strange combination of images, hovering within landscapes both other-worldly and familiar, pulls Huffman's outerspace fantasias back to an earthly realm of ecological trauma. In his series of *Tree Huggers* paintings, the black cosmonauts engage in a number of rituals with the few remaining trees in Huffman's world, pressing sheathed and helmeted bodies against those vital

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sources of oxygen and biological renewal. Whether as tokens of a dying planet or nostalgic monuments to an imagined future-past, these trees function as shelter for Huffman's figures, possible counter-habitats for an uncertain future, while also suggesting new forms of planetary consciousness beyond the urban realm in which stereotypical images of black culture tend to remain stuck.

Indeed, urban basketball seems to function as an allegory for just this kind of potential transcendence in many of Huffman's new paintings. *Rebound* (2008) portrays a scene of astronauts playing basketball on a green court in a low-gravity space-scape, with some players ascending to the height of the extremely high basket in the upper right corner of the canvas. Here, as in other basketball-themed paintings, Huffman plays with the aspirational nature of mainstream African-American culture, where sports is sometimes seen as an escape route from more prosaic pursuits. In *Dig It* (2008), however, the limits of such dreams present themselves in the form of a blond referee admonishing one of the players, who holds his hands up in front of a glittery landscape of trees, rocks and shacks, suggesting a more menacing backdrop for the kinds of futuristic games at which Huffman hints. Even more ominous is *America*, a large canvas in which a giant cross, studded with LP's and album covers burns against a dark sky, composed of violent brushstrokes and glitter, over a now-empty basketball court.

One work stood out as different from the others in this exhibition. A very straightforward portrait of Barack Obama, painted on wood in a realist manner, seems to suggest another possible Afro-futurism, or at least a hopeful horizon for alternative kinds of dreams for African Americans. Indeed, as one black Southerner was quoted as saying after Obama's victory on November 4, now African-American boys can aspire to be something other than rapper or sports figures to be recognized as successful in America. Though the least visually interesting work in his show, Huffman's *Obama* still had a quiet and compelling resonance when matched with the otherwise ambiguous visions of the future on view in this stunning exhibition.