

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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by Soraya Murray

David Huffman *Dig It!* And Jefferson Pinder *Afro Cosmonaut/Alien (White Noise)* Patricia Sweetow Gallery

What is perhaps most notable about the paired exhibitions of recent works by painter David Huffman and video performance artist Jefferson Pinder, is the series of convergences that occur. Both are African American, and both utilize the tropes of Afro Futurism as tools for metaphorical free-play in the kaleidoscopic psychological landscapes of Race and Progress in the United States. It is on the material level that their works diverge, though they are kindred in their conceptual underpinnings and potent in their post-Civil Rights address of history.

In the front gallery, Pinder presents a multi-channel video performance and a series of photographs. The numbered stills, entitled *White Noise* (2008) depicts roughly actual-sized headshots of the artist, as he covers his face with white paint. Over the succession of images, his brown skin vanishes against a stark white background and white shirt, until finally, with his eyes closed, he is utterly obliterated. His three-channel video installation, *Afro Cosmonaut/Alien (White Noise)* (2008) utilizes more than 3,000 still photographs taken while he performed against a white background. Painted and clothed in white, the artist's body became a screen, onto which he projected 1960s NASA rocket launches, Civil Rights and Black Power movement footage, and imagery from space exploration films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Apollo 13*. The resulting effect is a psychologically concentrated piece that meditates on the contemporary states of blackness, through a flashpoint of history that churns together the space race, whiteness, racial strife, psychic violence, nostalgia and trauma.

David Huffman's nine mixed-media paintings take a more playful approach, and continue his thematic use of fantasy worlds populated with Black minstrel astronauts (called "Traumanauts"). Primarily rendered in oil, acrylic and glitter, his Traumanauts, bedecked in full spacesuits with basketball uniforms on top, play on an emerald-green court against a starry sparkling sky. In his larger-scale work entitled *America* (2008), a flaming cross covered in Beatle's albums shoots across a mottled and turbulent atmosphere marbled in cerulean, green, ochre and greys. Below, the green court forms an artificial ground. The work makes reference to the now-infamous comment made by the Beatles that they were more popular than Jesus. Most notable is his continued marriage of abstraction and illustration, as can be seen in several works here including *Cosmic Watermelon Pyramid*, *Funky Soul Stop*, and *Nomenclature*. The latter, in particular, presents a swirling, irrational world of Traumanauts, multi-colored basketball pyramids, a gathering of elephants mourning one of their own, a black stripper with pink hair shaking her goods toward the viewer, stacks of dubbz, and Jackson Pollock. This is America. And on the furthestmost gallery wall: a small, unframed, portrait of Barack Obama in purposely naïve or "outsider" style acts as a punctum for the whole experience. Less than a week after his election, this presence of President-Elect Obama has a surreal, dream-like quality of a distant objective or dream—a future suddenly thrust into the now.