

# PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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## Flash Art

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DAVID HUFFMAN, *Tribulations no. 16*, 2004. Mixed media on wood, 122 x 122 cm. Courtesy of Patricia Sweetow, San Francisco.

### DAVID HUFFMAN

Patricia Sweetow

By David Spalding

For the past several years, David Huffman has created paintings that fuse elements of Japanese anime with figures that evoke the legacy of blackface and the myth of the happy plantation slave. In Huffman's compelling world, grinning cyber-minstrels (called the Trauma Smiles) operate giant robots and watermelon spaceships in a zone that is both biological and astronomical. Imagine fierce Shogun Warriors in do-rags, flying through a knot of intestines toward a space station.

In "Tribulations," Huffman's newest series of paintings, black astronauts struggle to find their footing as they navigate the stratosphere of a desert planet. Encased in their space suits, they walk gingerly atop the clouds or dangle from cables, clearly dislocated and uncertain of their purpose. Elsewhere they engage in combat, firing an oversized rocket launcher toward an unseen enemy. Without gravity or ground to stand on, the dwarfed figures seem confused by the futility of their mission.

The most remarkable thing about these paintings is not the narrative they suggest, but the gaseous, unstable environment they depict. Combustible cloudbursts in dusty reds and earthen browns sit like decals on the surface of the canvas, defined in the black outline of a child's coloring book. Translucent washes and explosive watermarks open onto a luminous depth of field that recedes and dissolves with the fragility of a classical Chinese landscape. "Tribulations" represents a major breakthrough in Huffman's skill as a painter, while his elaborate storytelling has contracted into something more elegant and affecting.

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