

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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Mixing painting and identity politics with 'traumabots'

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Painting and identity politics do not mix easily. Bay Area painter David Huffman has found his own path among their mostly incommensurable values: the sensuous and the topical, pictorial richness and persuasive force.

Huffman's recent paintings at Patricia Sweetow extend the cryptic personal allegory of his work, an idiom whose tone most viewers will get more readily than its content.

Huffman populates his pictures with cartoon-like figures he calls "traumabots" and "trauma smiles." He relates these ciphers to minstrelsy as stylized metaphor for the African American experience of grinning and bearing the ordeals of racism, especially unacknowledged ones. The figures appear in astronaut gear, an ironic mark of their heroism and their immersion in hostile environs.

His eccentric characters let Huffman keep open channels of enigmatic reference to his own life and to the broad social condition of African Americans and the rest of us, as he perceives it.

But these quirky figures might doom his work to silliness did they not also re-choreograph our attention to what goes on in a painting. For unlike many contemporary artists who formulate an eccentric figurative language, Huffman uses his to interrogate tensions that arise as we try to read meaning in paintings.

Huffman's previous series treated our vague, uneasy knowledge of the body's insides, and thus the analogy between paint and flesh that culminates in the work of masters such as Willem de Kooning and Lucian Freud.

The new work appears to respond to the mess created by the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and the massacres that started it all. Huffman continues to use a palette that evokes non-white skin tones. Several pictures wear sandy hues reminiscent of desert camo gear.

He has varied his painting technique to strengthen the formal and referential values. In "Tribulations No. 22" figures stand and climb among painted areas that vary from clouds or summits of comic-strip crispness to feathered and splashed passages evoking explosions and expressionist painting's powerlessness to describe them.

Whatever its private meanings, Huffman's work shows us the dilemma of painting today, nourished by a rich history of its own but baffled about how to respond, if at all, to the course of events.

A related exhibition, "Dark Matter: The Art of David Huffman," runs at the de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University through Aug. 1.