

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

77 GEARY STREET MEZZANINE SAN FRANCISCO CA 94108 415.788.5126 F 788.5207

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Huffman in his stride

By Kenneth Baker

Some years ago **David Huffman** began populating his canvases with what he calls "Trauma Smiles," figures that enact aspects of African American experience in the materialist dream space of painting.

They wear astronauts' suits and helmets, protective gear for hostile environs that ironically makes them white on the outside. They allow Huffman to handle grave issues with the light touch of a comics artist, while keeping "space" -- a defining term of the painter's art -- continually before our minds. Inner and outer space, in their many senses.

I did not expect the "Trauma Smiles" to have the staying power they display in Huffman's new work at Patricia Sweetow.

Perhaps their durability reflects the persistence of the racism that gave rise to them as figures for black alienation. But that gives Huffman too little credit for successfully working them and other symbols into a free play with figure, substance and illusionary scale that once seemed to belong exclusively to abstract painting. Even now, densely bespattered, spatially nuanced canvases such as "Basketball Pyramid" (2006) and "Get Up and Get Down" (2006) can look like carefully defaced abstractions.

In "Basketball Pyramid" a pyramid floats within a landscape that looks one moment like a smoky explosion, the next like a night sky panorama. The pyramid's reference flickers between African American men's dim hopes of scaling a social pinnacle and the enduring and universally known monuments to ancient Egyptian -- read African -- civilization.

Nearby the pyramid stands a leafless tree. Other pictures in the show confirm the viewer's reluctant intuition of it as a lynching tree.

Other symbols -- prison watchtowers, ghetto liquor stores, slave quarter cabins -- make their first appearances in Huffman's recent work. And in one large piece, his technique of washing pigment onto canvas proves a ready way to activate memories of the calamity of Hurricane Katrina and the bungling of disaster relief that followed.