

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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Dig It!

Lately I've been thinking a lot about allegory. And history. And David Huffman.

Which also means I've been thinking a lot about elephants and their bones, astronauts and afros, hoops and spaceships, referees and pinups, Masonic temples and chicken shacks and auction houses, about churches both as places and as a fast-food place that sells chicken. In other words, I've been thinking of the nomenclature of America.

In Huffman's hot hands, this has meant turning to outerspace. In this he is not alone—particularly in the African American tradition we both find ourselves in, Huffman's desire to go beyond the bounds of the world, into a space beyond the beyond, is one shared by Sun Ra, John Coltrane's *Innerspace* and arguably, the Negro spirituals that sang "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel" and knew that life was more than what it seemed.

In a word, they saw this world, the here and now, as allegorical—singing songs that were not heaven-bound in the sense of pretending that earthly lives weren't worth living in freedom, but from knowing that the very real yet conjured freedom of their song was as important to them as water and air.

You could say, in this way, their experience was one of both liberation theology and double meaning—one in which singing "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" was both a code signaling *Let's run away, Tonight*, but also in which "Go Down, Moses" indicted their very slaveholders who often saw the songs as mere useful distraction.

It is in this radical and rich tradition that Huffman's work is best understood. Particularly in his new paintings, we find a spirituality missing from much of

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contemporary art: I see this chiefly in his backgrounds, those swirling cosmos of color, which on their own, would be lovely compositions. In earlier works, such as with Huffman's untitled composition from 2005/2006, the paintings were sometimes chiefly abstractions (the figures seen later, often in outline, half-hidden). For Huffman, however, this cosmic background now seems just the start, or stars from which his paintings chart their way.

This way is filled with color and, especially in his new work like *Dig It!*, with a boldness of composition that is refreshing and redeeming. In the previous work, from around his 2004 *Tribulations* show, figures almost floated, his signature Traumanauts left in a kind of no man's land, mourning, carrying wounded others, gathered around trees, heads lowered in prayer. A year or so later Jimi Hendrix made his appearance among them, providing both titles (*Are You Experienced?*) and as an example of, and escape from, funk. Throughout these paintings and works on paper many a river flowed, both Langston Hughes's "Negro Speaks of Rivers" and Huffman's own "River Bling Bling." In still earlier compositions, from around the turn of the millennium, the Traumanauts seemed engaged in a kind of millennial struggle with a figure that was part robot and part Aunt Jemima, the mothership as mammy automaton. Her name was **Trauma Eve**. Space here seemed a kind of blackness writ large, at times threatening.

With the new work, space seems more like home—and Huffman seems at home with the iconography he has created. The result seems a near-perfect balance of ballers and bawling, of humor and history, of the visceral and unexplainable. You can see it in the faces, which used to be mere masks, often identical (and in that way anonymous), or referred directly to minstrelsy (in what he called Trauma Smiles). In the new work, the Traumanauts' faces vary, at least in contrast to each other, still mostly stoic but other

times almost expectant—like saints in Byzantine painting or heads in African barbershop signs. In *Dig It!* the very ground is a golden cosmos of sorts, alluding to Florentine painting and its praise; the foreground is a bright green of a basketball court as idealized, idyllic lawn.

Throughout roam a panpoly of figures: the Traumanauts now wear b-ball jerseys and hi-tops over their spacesuits. In a way, they are both sleeker and more burdened than before. The uniforms oddly make them more unified and also identifiable, less a mass or congregation than a team. In the foreground of *Dig It!* a uniformed Number 10 raises both arms—as a sign of fisted victory, or is he putting his hands up as if this is a stick-up? Instead of a crook, or the cops, it's a referee aiming a finger at him—or is it the referee as crook, stealing the game? The ref is figured as pinkish white, tow-headed in his zebra-striped uniform. These two iconic if not stylized figures remain outsized, enacting the drama that the rest of the painting hints at. They loom tall as the trees that litter the middle and literal ground behind them, with some in bloom, others evergreen, others palm trees, others seemingly shorn of leaves. Are they dead or just fallow?

This seems a larger question in Huffman's work—and indeed in this painting, with its figures stretching in preparation for cosmic basketball, others hugging the leafless trees, and yet another in a hammock, hibernating. “Please, a definition: A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more covert action,” in the words of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Such a wish for playing possum or lying-in-wait doesn't fully explain the elephant prone beside a shorn, cactus-like figure, the giant mammal more than dormant, wounded if not dead. (It even looks stuffed.) The pachyderm is fittingly the same grey as a building beside her, labeled “QUEENS” with above the door “AUCTION NEGROS.” In a lovely triangular structure, in the background, almost to the stars, stand

two structures on opposite sides of the work: one, whose shape and faux-pink color reminds me of less a Moorish temple than a Masonic one; and on the left, a roadside church with a wonderful blue wash, information or other sayings written on its side in a fashion found in the South. This is a bit of realism amongst the allegory, which is to say, in other hands, this blue church would be the whole of the painting, pointing to not just a folk past but a folk present, the spirit I see moving in the smallest things: the neat hedge out front, the blues.

For Huffman the blue church is just another element of his near-epic composition, which also includes a futuristic blue tubular structure you have to see to believe, but that instantly somehow evokes the River, the Road, and Beyond. One element that seems equally disharmonious is what appears to be—yes, isn't that—a pin-up in the corner, a naked lady *dropping it like it's hot*. And yet, somehow, amongst his male Traumanauts, his painterly stormtroopers, his previous Eves, the pin-up is the closest female equivalent: as the ballers are somehow sexless or at least infertile in their uniforms, the pinup is all sex, her options both as limited and liberating and unsexy as the rocks she poses on.

The Pin-up reappears in another of the large paintings in this show, *Nomenclature*. Here her hair is pink, shoes red, as she poses against what appears to be less a stripper pole than a Emergency Pull in Case of Fire pole. She is always looking over her shoulder like someone on the run. The landscape evoked in *Nomenclature* is more urban and less epic (which is to say historical): Liquor Stores, Church's, cop cars, and rims on a rack. "A wheel within a wheel." The Traumanauts, here without basketball uniforms, stand about, conferring or waiting, beneath a wash of blue. Are they like the elephants beside the Church's sign, sniffing at the bones of their kin? Is the nomenclature of this place—disembodied, more treeless than *Dig It!*—enough? To keep the Pin-up

company are three colorful basketball pyramids—and Jackson Pollock, whose work is not only evoked in the abstract underpainting, but literally and playfully as a balding figure behind much of the action, doing an “action painting” as it were.

This could appear chaotic if that wasn’t exactly the point, if the composition was less a golden triangle than pyramidal: triangle after triangle build up the work, keeping interest and also movement. Where earlier canvases did some of this, with this new show Huffman has gathered steam and technique in his nomenclature—even his off-rhymes sing. He pays homage to his contemporary African American artists—his pinups remind me of Mickalene Thomas and her retro ladies with titles asking *Can’t We Just Sit Down and Talk it Over*—and the outbuildings are somewhat familiar. But such references are in all the stew of what he’s seeing and painting.

Huffman is also riffing off early-Renaissance painting and its use of multiple planes to tell a story. In the past, this serial yet simultaneous nature Huffman created through literal panels (such as in 2006’s *It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue*), or in sequences such as 2004’s *Tribulations*. The palette once was more black and white, with some brown and dayglo color; the subject was often war, *Demolition* or finality, with the back of the painting *Baby Blue* containing Traumanauts as protestors, picket-signs saying “Unite in Peace” and “Free the Humans.” But in the new work it isn’t just the human he is interested in. With the large paintings manages the kind of simultaneous sequence found in such enigmatic work as *Thebaide* (circa 1418), attributed to Fra Angelico. This 15th century work found in the Uffizi, with its scope and twisting river among rocks, trees and monks, seems to tell a story that appears lost to us. It is much the same with Huffman’s work, which references a story we know but haven’t been told. In this way,

it's much like he said in a 1999 interview: "The narrative is an underground setting. It's like a sacred mystery."

Indeed, one of the tales being told is about race—about blackness—which, Huffman seems to assert, is not so much a set of associations found in his witty references (to watermelon pyramids, basketball pyramids, chicken joints and booty videos) as a journey. And one that may take us to great heights. Even if it is just to *Rebound* or slam dunk as his Traumanauts do, or, as in one of my favorites, *Free Throw*, when we are essentially the goal being aimed at, or above.

In this Huffman also plays off of David Hammons, whose work *Higher Goals* lifted his own handmade goalposts in a site uptown, the title and composition parodying the often-false promise basketball has held for urban youth. Why not dream big, Hammons and Huffman seem to say, Huffman's lonely red basketball goal seeming to tick down on an invisible clock. It is the reverse of Hammons's work and of Huffman's own *Free Throw*, which (while) asking large questions about race and expectation in an arena both public and playful.

In this way, the work (paintings are) is allegorical—something I've begun to see at work in the best of the black artists working today, whether Ellen Gallagher, Laylah Ali, Kojo Griffin or others. Unlike and yet prompted by the art of the generation before, the work is less interested in realism, or of fantasies of direct protest, as in fantasy and abstraction as a form of resistance. While Huffman continues that earlier Black Arts tradition—after all he explodes the Auntie/Automaton Eve who is our visual progenitor, in much the way that Faith Ringgold gave Aunt Jemima a gun to do more than butter them flapjacks—he does so while also embracing not just ambiguity but the very icons

themselves. Or maybe it's that his earlier work was about the fall from paradise, about expelling his Aunt Jemima-like Eve from the garden.

Now he seems interested in, if not paradise, then a “garden of earthly delights,” some of them deadly, some excessive, some purely playful. A watermelon pyramid may after all be an exercise in precision—whether a necessary reaction to excess, a covert op, or a prime vantage point from which to see into the beyond, into whatever beckons.

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