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DAVID HUFFMAN

08.08.2008

David Huffman arranges rich compositions that explore identity and socio-political history in a futuristic world of metaphor. Some images are related to reclaiming African American icons, including historic ones like early slave trader buildings, and others are more recent, like basketball players. Still others are more personal, like astronauts, flying saucers, and even the local liquor store near Huffman's studio. But they all relate to Huffman's conscious and unconscious memories of childhood, art school, and growing up in a politically turbulent time.

Despite the cartoon-like realism of his imagery, there is a lot of in-between space for interpretation, for the depth of the individual viewer's experience. The unexpected brew of politics and the personal allows the viewer to finish the narrative that Huffman begins. When I came to interview him at Paulson Press, he was deep in discussion about what technique he should use to get the background he desired. When he finished, we spoke about his imagery and technique.

—Kenneth Caldwell

Q: How do you assemble all of these images?

A: I use lots of cutouts, which makes it easy to arrange narrative space. I treat these works like a stage.

Q: Can you tell me how you group the images?

A: They are symbols that are in my consciousness and unconsciousness.

Q: Is the liquor store a conscious symbol?

A: I go to Blue Bird Liquors store because my studio is near there. There is something about liquor stores in poor



David Huffman and Master Printer Cheyenne Sylvester working at Paulson Press in 2007

Basketball Pyramid, 2007

Color aquatint, spitbite, sugarlift, softground and hardground etching. 37 1/2" x 45"; Edition of 35



(left) **Ouroboros, 2007**
Color aquatint, spitbite, sugarlift and softground etching w/blacklight sensitive areas. 46 1/2" x 36"; Edition of 35

work is the real energy. He is just a fallible person who's gone. But his studio is still there. Now you have to take your shoes off to enter. It's like it's a sacred space. But it's a culturally sacred situation rather than sacred like nature.

Q: The astronauts – or traumanauts as you call them – show up a lot and they become basketball players.

A: Basketballs have become an icon of inner-city youth, African American youth in particular. Playing basketball has a sense of stability, a practice of sanity.

Q: Is it personal too?

A: If there were some problems at home, I would go to the park and play basketball until really late at night. There is something about focusing your energy on something that gathers you into more of a balanced state.

Q: But what about their faces?

A: What I've done is I used the paint, or ink, like stereotype blackface.

Q: Like minstrels?

A: Minstrel characters and Aunt Jemimas. Those are so heavy-handed, time-based, and stolen by time.

Q: What about the astronaut imagery? Where did that come from?

A: In graduate school I found myself reducing them down and putting them in spaceships, and playing on the idea of the UFO as a cultural object as well.

And then they would explore different worlds and do whatever they needed to do. You need space suits for stuff like that. I started putting them in space suits and treating them like they're this ultimate visitor. African Americans aren't a group that has been stealing their way into the United States. They came in a different way. This isn't about reclaim-

neighborhoods that seems to be a pit stop for enculturation.

Q: Enculturation?

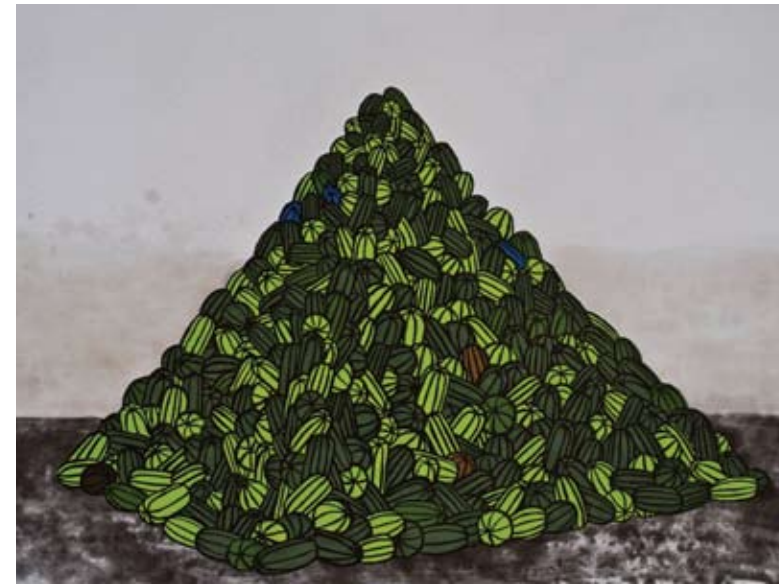
A: When I was growing up in the '60s and '70s, Chinese owned most of the liquor stores. Arabs own that liquor store now. On the news, there is one version of Arabs or other people that are new to the country – and then you actually meet people. Different groups come into a neighborhood and that's the way we start getting different people coming together. The idea it's called Bluebird Liquors is ironic because their affinity to bluebirds is probably zero.

Q: What about the profusion of natural images?

A: They lure people into a space. Nature is extremely seductive. It's so monumental and vast that you just take a deep breath to get more of it. If it were all an urban setting, I think it would turn people off, because urban settings aren't harmonious settings, they're like a hybrid of various strata of struggle.

Q: What is this building? It looks familiar.

A: Jackson Pollock's studio. His studio is where all the work occurs. The



(left) **Watermelon Pyramid, 2007**
Color aquatint, sugarlift and spitbite aquatint etching with glitter. 29 1/2" x 35 1/2"; Edition of 25

(right) **Remuneration, 2007**
Softground and spitbite aquatint etching. 23" x 23"; Edition of 25

ing the space program, but about giving that "visitors" quality to them so they're always looking for home.

Q: But then how did they get into basketball?

A: I started looking at our history. I was watching *Hoop Dreams*, which was this really great documentary, thinking about my personal experience playing basketball, and this kind of like jackpot idea, so there's a heavy load of African American boys where basketball is on their mind. It seems like there's nothing else on the table but basketball or rap music. I realized that since the suit represents a psychological aspect of these guys that whatever they do they'll still have the suits on. I thought, why not have them play basketball in these suits as well? So there is a kind of baggage with the suit, there's not a perfect freedom. There seems to be a kind of cultural projection of what you should be doing. The suit is like being encumbered. But basketball is also a very beautiful, athletic event.

Q: And in a weird way, by adding the astronaut suit you stripped away the kind of stereotype.

A: I hadn't thought of that, but you're forced to deal with the suit.

Q: What about the pyramid imagery?

A: I have a re-contextualized read on the object of pyramid. I was trying to reclaim the heritage of the pyramid structure because as more time goes by, the more African Egypt becomes. There are a few layers of reclaiming. Of course, there is an absurdity of just putting basketballs and stacking them and making any form.

Q: And a pyramid of watermelons?

A: It's just a form. I don't really have a strict read on it, but we know what watermelons signify and that's pretty simple. But, believe it or not, there are a lot of people who think that watermelons are just watermelons. I'm trying to make a little bit of a point of the significance of that pyramid form.

Again, it's kind of absurd. It naturalizes it for sure, – if they were real watermelons they'd be rotting.

Q: What about the dream-like space between all of this imagery?

A: I try to treat my background as tenuous spaces that can be solid or soft and extremely malleable. It could be a mental mist. You can read it hard-edged in one area, but then you get to turn it into like a very watery substance in another.

Q: In painting, the background often gets worn down, but you don't quite have the same opportunity in printmaking.

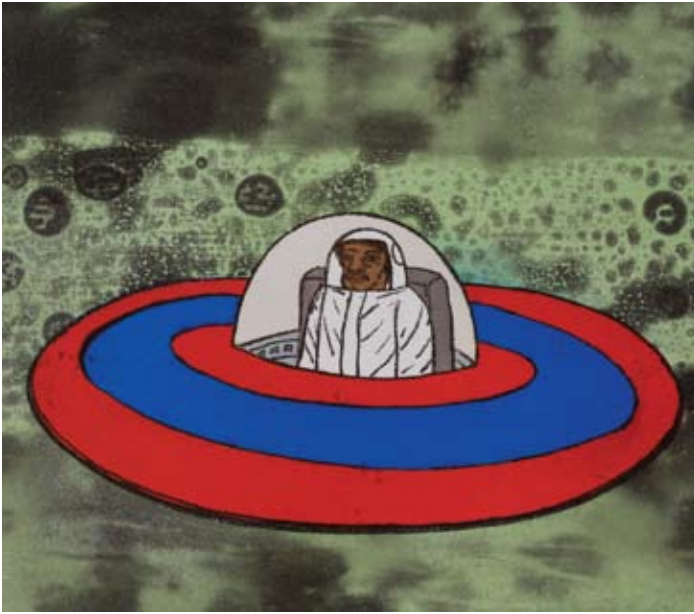
A: I don't wear things out, but I give layers. I use washes. You look at a cloud; you see a big smiling face, or a gang of horses. I'm very interested in having a kind of triple read.

Q: It's tricky with aquatint. Do you know how it is going to look?

A: It's still guesswork. It looks one way on the plate, but then once it gets etched, then it's another thing with the ink.

Q: It's like ceramic glaze that way.

A: That's probably the best comparison. It's all very mysterious.



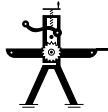
UFO, 2007
Color aquatint, softground and spitbite etching with glitter. 14" x 16"; Edition of 25



Hoop Dreams, 2007
Color softground and spitbite aquatint etching. 21" x 23"; Edition of 25

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