

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

77 GEARY STREET MEZZANINE SAN FRANCISCO CA 94108 415.788.5126 F 788.5207

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David Huffman, "Katrina, Katrina, Girl You're on my Mind", 2006, mixed media on panels, 80 x 108 inches, courtesy of Patricia Sweetow Gallery

Interview with David Huffman

Things that Can Happen Under a Beautiful Sky

The weathered sign, hanging above a heavily-gated door, indicates that David Huffman's studio inhabits what was once the American Burial Casket Company. A McDonald's burger-wrapper blows across the West Oakland sidewalk, lodging in a patch of brown weeds, as I step from the car. Inside, the walls of Huffman's studio are covered with his impressive paintings. Five foot by six foot canvases and four foot by ten foot works-on-paper dominate. Grey speckled washes dissolve and flow, meld into softness, conjuring moody skies. Then the paint resolves into splatters and strokes, forming caves, hills, and plateaus. Small figures in spacesuits occupy these mysterious landscapes. Their diminutive black faces peer from within space helmets. On one wall

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are several portraits. These ambiguously somber faces are also black, also encased in space helmets. Huffman refers to these black astronauts, which populate his work, as “traumanauts”.

Jennine Scarboro: You’ve invented a character for your paintings, which you refer to as a “traumanaut”. What does this figure mean to you?

David Huffman: The traumanauts are the psychological personalities coming from the rupture of slavery for Africans. I would label them a TRAUMANaut, rather than an astronaut, because of this traumatic rupture of existence. From being captured, brought to America and parts of Europe, as workers, as slaves, there’s a cultural identity that’s been decimated. The traumanauts are constantly looking for a location, for home.

JS: In the large paintings, we view the traumanauts as if from a distance. It’s their activities, and the sites they explore, which compel us. What’s going on in these epic works?

DH: The terrains are basically material, not being solid and not being clearly specific, they are strategies to evoke various experiences. So, whether there’s an atmospheric experience that I want to push, or a topographical kind of earth experience, or if I want an outer space /inner space quality, I’ll use the material in that way. Those three different interpretations create the conditions to perform the narratives that might excavate some of the concerns that I have for the traumanauts.

I might think, specifically, that I would like to do a piece about a political notion, or some kind of event, but the way that I use the wash is to have the qualities of the wash be like Rorschach psychological spaces. They can lean toward solid spaces or vaporous atmospheres and I like the idea that those two things could be negotiated either/or in the same space. You could see a solid surface or you could see it as a vaporous moment or atmospheric moment that doesn’t have a surface. That gives me more flexibility to put things in, and to be more open about what kind of narrative could occur there.



David Huffman, "Justice", 2008, mixed media on panel, 24 x 40 inches, courtesy of Patricia Sweetow Gallery

JS: So there’s a combination of painting concerns and of narrative concerns happening. Do your material explorations and your narrative interests evolve in tandem? Or how does that work?

DH: Yeah well, the thing about the materials for me is, I’m a painter...I’m not thinking out an idea and then I try to illustrate it, I’m discovering attributes with the materials that lean toward ideas. I’ll put down a painterly space that evokes certain concerns, and that might tell me what narrative should go there.

In "Katrina, Katrina, Girl You're on my Mind", about the Katrina disaster, that painting was about trying to dig up some of the, I guess, horrors of the event. The work has a lot to do with the washes and splashes and Abstract Expressionist leanings, so that the material really evokes chaotic weather systems like hurricanes and winds. It looks tumultuous.

JS: The washy/abstract areas in your paintings are very beautiful...very lyrical, in the way they evoke an ambiguous space in the materiality of the paint itself.

DH: Well, it's always been the case that the paintings are like real states of nature, which is that, you can have a holocaust occur on a beautiful day. It doesn't mean nature's just going to change, because people are being brutal. What I mean by that, is that, visually, things can look beautiful but if you get up close you might find that there's: a slave trading company, or a liquor store, or a burning church. There's various things that can happen under a beautiful sky, and though there is a kind of beauty, there's also a kind of hostility and unknown.



David Huffman, "Traumanaut", 2009, oil on panel, 24 x 24 inches, courtesy of Patricia Sweetow Gallery

JS: Recently, you've also been working on portraits of the traumanauts. These two seem pensive or...worried, are they looking out at hostility in an alien world?

DH: Yeah, I mean he's alien, himself, in a world that has no morals, ya know? The one on the left here, is taken from an image of a pre-lynching moment where the person is really looking at the guy with the camera in a way that searches you, and at the same time there's disgust. He's stumbled onto this horrific site. People demean him and beat him, just for being the color that he is, they will kill him for that. He doesn't understand it. It's beyond reason. There's nothing he can do to stop it. But...how does he...what thoughts can he have?

JS: What is the worst that the traumanauts find in their explorations? The traumanauts seem to travel through time, is it our, American, history?

DH: Well, I mean that's the thing about it, the rupture isn't pronounced in American history very well, or very thoroughly. Never has the country ever apologized for the horrors of slavery upon black people. It's like any other damaging psychological state, that if it doesn't have the proper recognition, or apologies, or whatever healing process, it festers. It becomes warped and sticks in ways that are unknown to the perpetrator and to the one that has been perpetrated on. There's an unconscious state of horror. There's a memory there, but as far as race goes it's more about the rupture for me. The traumanauts are basically unknown to themselves because, unlike any other group in the United States, African Americans are most unique in that we are the only ones who don't have the culture that we brought to America. We don't have food that we brought to America. We don't have language that we brought to America. We don't have the list of everything, that in other ethnic groups remain unique and identifiable. Those attributes, for African Americans, have been decimated. We have been severed from those connections. How do you connect to your past? There's no way to do it. You can take on the culture of an entire continent, Africa, it's very impersonal to do that, but nevertheless that's what people have done. But since our native cultures have been eradicated we have to fend, in a strange way, for ourselves, and not be contributors, and we stand out a little bit differently. That is a very alien-like place to be, trying to figure out "Where is your footing?"

JS: Are there also hopeful moments that come out of the discoveries the traumanauts make in their explorations?

DH: For me it's beautiful to come to grips with oneself, to find language, like the immediate language of the traumanauts. There's a beauty in gaining access to a conversation that isn't brought up much and they do get an opportunity to find Paradise at times. I am interested in Paradise and Eden-like domains, places of peace and togetherness.



David Huffman, "Hendrix", 2009, mixed media on paper, 50 x 60 inches, courtesy of Patricia Sweetow Gallery

JS: This painting of a band in the forest, with Jimi Hendrix? Is that related to what you're saying about Eden-like places?

DH: Yes it is. Jimi Hendrix is a person who I believe found...broke through the mold of the stereotype black man.

JS: And, in this painting, he's playing the guitar and there are people dancing around him in the trees.

DH: Yes. They're black people nude. They've taken off their suits, the traumanauts are back to themselves. They've found who they are and they're free and unencumbered by repression. Outside repression, so they can dance freely without worrying. It's a place of abandonment that's been difficult to arrive at. Black folks are probably one of the most cautious groups you'll see and so I'm thinking about finding freedom in different ways. Not freedom from slavery, that's a different kind of freedom. That's like being let out of jail, you're still back into the world that hates you. This is like...freedom to feel your body connected to everything around you, to be in nature, and loving it, feeling the music in a way that takes you deep inside, and nature cares



"David Huffman in the Studio", courtesy of the artist

Jennine Scarboro is a critic, writer, and painter based in Oakland, CA.