

## Homebound: David Huffman's "Terra Incognita" at MoAD

In the main room of David Huffman's exhibition at Museum of the African Diaspora, a group of 4th graders are being introduced to paintings of an Oakland sideshow, a post-Katrina flood scene, and a variety of views of what might be outer space. To the docent's question of "what are these paintings about?" one child answers "terrigenesis." The child may have had in mind the science-based game TerraGenesis (now called Settle the Stars) in which spacesuited players terraform planets, but the answer is also a spot-on description of Huffman's activity as both a painter and a creator of searching narratives of "traumanauts" exploring lands both strange and familiar.

Traumanauts are Huffman's depictions of individuals of African descent who wear white NASA Apollo style spacesuits and populate his paintings. They can be found on basketball courts, in space, in the forest, in battle, at funerals, in Oakland, in Africa, and in New Orleans. Some of the larger paintings, like the masterpiece *Sideshow*, 2009, are expansive landscapes. In *Sideshow*, as the name suggests, cars spin, tires smoke, and the pavement is marked black. The traumanauts drive, ride, and observe in a landscape of trees and urban signage referencing both Oakland and Los Angeles. *Sideshow* offers up a narrative of freedom and connectedness, but even within this work, and more overtly in others, the presence of generational and immediate trauma is never far away.

These traumas are laid bare in the multi-panel work *Katrina, Katrina, Girl You're On My Mind*, 2006 in which the traumanauts inhabit the circumstances of the neglected victims of the failed response to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005. Unheaded, one traumanaut on a roof continues to wave a black and white American flag. Others wade or float face down in the flood waters next to churches and several versions of the human traffickers Price, Birch & Co. building used to imprison enslaved people. The building, with identifying signage, is also seen in the etching—*Remuneration*, 2007—hanging across from the Katrina painting.

As well as peopling landscapes, traumanauts appear in modestly sized portraits of the style of *Traumanaut #8*, 2009 and *Leon*, 2009. These portraits feature

sensitive renderings of a single Black face framed by a helmet and set against a neutral ground; they help put the viewer in touch with the idea of real people inhabiting the spacesuits of the traumanauts.

In preparing an environment for the traumanauts and in exploring the tropes of abstract painting, Huffman puts down stains, washes, fields of color, collage, glitter, and a range of types of brushwork. Huffman has stated that for many traumanaut works he would complete an abstract painting and then look at the work and wait for the narrative to come. One can see the importance of abstract painting as a goal within his process in works like *Katrina, Katrina, Girl You're On My Mind* and also in his less earthbound scenes like *Jimi Hendrix*, n.d. in which a lone spacesuit wearing guitarist, back to the viewer, stands on a cloud and plays for a tumultuous abstraction suggestive of the cosmos. Huffman's more recent work has gone even further down the road of emphasizing abstraction, color, and material, and in these works, figurative elements and, particularly, narrative have taken a back seat. Readers may want to look at work like *This Season's People*, 2021 made with acrylic, oil, African fabric, glitter, spray paint, color pencil and gouache on panel that was shown at Huffman's recent Berkeley Art Center exhibition *Afro Hippie*. Huffman emphasizes bright colors and varied and bold mark making while sphinxes, the patterning of the African cloth, patterning resulting from basketball nets being used as stencils, and other shapes become part of a deliberately cacophonous and meaningful abstract whole.

In writing about the "Terra Incognita" exhibition, MoAD emphasizes Huffman's connection to the Afrofuturist movement. Huffman's work has been shown in other exhibitions and written about widely in the context of Afrofuturism, but as Afrofuturism is a term used to discuss activity in many disciplines including performance, film, and music (Sun Ra is the progenitor often first mentioned) and science fiction writing (Octavia Butler is often first listed) and as serious scholarship into the movement is in its nascent stages, it will be some time before Huffman's trauma works are put into a proper Afrofuturist context. The MoAD exhibition goes a good distance in providing a visual record of Huffman as an early contributor to the style's manifestation in painting. Huffman's contribution to Afrofuturism is not only early but it is also distinguished by the humanity of his traumanauts. He is not painting cyborgs; he is painting survivors. The extraordinarily high leaping, basketball playing traumanauts in *Untitled (Traumanaut Basketball)*, circa 2009 are enjoying their freedom from gravity and

making the best of a hostile environment. Huffman's traumanauts particularly need their spacesuits' protection when forces are martialled against them, like in *Tribulations*, 2004 in which the traumanauts appear caught in a war zone. The traumanauts' spacesuits are a reaction to trauma, but the traumanauts' suited state might be temporary; they might find or create a world where they can take off the suits and touch skin to skin or even communicate with language. Also worthy of further discussion is how, in Huffman's worlds, communication takes place through somber action (carrying the dead, battling); in play (basketball, sideshows); through music (Jimi Hendrix); and even through hugging, but it doesn't appear to rely on the spoken word. Speaking is a form of pre-traumatic communication to which the traumanauts do not have access.

Of the earliest "trauma" figures in the exhibition are TraumaEve and Luxor DX. Huffman is an artist who easily, and not infrequently, moves from painting into other media and the 1999 works "TraumaEve," "Luxor DX," and accompanying "UFO 4" are glazed ceramics. The two standing figures with their boxy limbs and exaggerated grins have as heritage the Japanese tin toys Huffman has collected, the American minstrel tradition, and demeaning racist imagery popular and prevalent throughout the history of the United States.

One of the most recent works in the exhibition is the short video *Traumanaut Tree Hugger*, 2011. In this live action video, the viewer observes a figure in a forest wearing a spacesuit (a NASA reproduction of an Apollo spacesuit). In the five minute performance, the camera is stationary and the traumanaut enters the forested scene at some distance and slowly and exaggeratedly walks in the direction of the camera. As the figure gets closer and angles first one way and then another, this living traumanaut hugs, with slow deliberation and care, numerous trees before finally hugging the tree in the foreground and then walking out of the scene. That alienated humanity finds solace in a nature for which it is also an existential threat is even more timely in 2022 than it was in 2011.

The 2001 painting *Traumasmile with Mask* depicts an unsmiling Black man wearing a TraumaEve suit and holding aloft a TraumaEve mask with her signature grin visible. Huffman has stated that this is a transition piece showing how the traumanaut is an evolved trauma figure that has left behind the

traumasmile to pursue life on different terms. The viewer also imagines Huffman is making clear that the trauma is a lived trauma that takes its toll on real bodies.

The notion of trauma taxing the body is also emphasized in the backgrounds of the TraumaEve and Luxor DX paintings. What reads as outer space can also read as inner space, and what look to be planets and other cosmic formations are also organs of the human body. See the work *Exploration #3*, 1998 with spaceships flying among intestinal forms. Trauma's impact on the body is also a battle with one's self. TraumaEve, with missiles at her disposal, is a warrior robot, and the racism of her very origin is her enemy. In some paintings like *Untitled (TraumaEve with tank)*, circa 2009, she is seen battling tanks with turrets formed in likeness of her own head.

Deliberately reflecting on Afrocentric movements, Huffman includes in a number of his paintings, historical art and constructions made by Black Africans. In the painting *TraumaEve's Big Score*, 2006, in which both TraumaEve and traumanauts appear, a traumanaut can be seen emptying a glass in offering in front of a sculpture from Africa, and versions of these same sculptures may be seen in other works, even floating in the post-Katrina flood waters.

Huffman's work leads his traumanauts in exploration of a home that is just as likely to be found in space as it is in Africa or Oakland. And even if the home has been found, it has yet to be terraformed.

Erik Bakke

"Terra Incognita" is on view through September 18, 2022.

For more information and images please go to the  
Museum of the African Diaspora website:

<https://www.moadsf.org/exhibitions/david-huffman-terra-incognita>