

David Huffman
"Dig It!"
Patricia Sweetow Gallery
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reviewed by David Buuck

David Huffman's latest exhibition at Patricia Sweetow Gallery showed the Oakland-based artist expanding his repertoire, with new figures and themes entering into his signature landscapes of futuristic dream and humor. Against backdrops of ecological decay and cosmic debris, Huffman's primarily African-American space travelers venture out into realms both surreal and uncannily close to home, as if the Afrofuturistic Mothership had to crash-land into a funky netherworld inhabited by all sorts of strange visions of "the funk."

Huffman's palate is usually quite dark; these new paintings showed fresh streaks of blues and yellows, acrylics both brushed and poured, along with much more generous applications of glitter, resulting in a more expansive field of color and texture, if no less dreary for being more psychedelic and playful. Throughout the exhibit, Huffman's continued mastery of his mediums matches his witty and deeply engaged thematic concerns with African-American culture, both historical and post-historical, both here on Earth and off traveling in outer-space.

In "Cosmic Watermelon Pyramid" (2008), Huffman's signature watermelons are back, though this time piled high in a kind of inert minimalist sculpture, against a teeming sky of bursting browns and blues. In the wondrous "Nomenclature," the pyramids return, as piles of colorful basketballs, like cultural totems for some strange new post-apocalyptic Egypt, where elephants hover around a Church's Chicken sign, and teams of black astronauts stand between a rack of tire-rims and an iconographic black female dancer, her body on display. Paintings like this, and "Funky Soul Stop," show Huffman exploring vernacular black culture without resorting to cliché or romanticized images, instead posing unsettling questions about what kinds of futures might survive whatever ecological disasters his paintings seem to portend.

The strange combinations of these images, hovering within landscapes both other-worldly and familiar, pull Huffman's outer-space fantasias back into an earthly realm of ecological trauma. In his series of "Tree Huggers" paintings, our black cosmonauts engage in a number of rituals with the few remaining trees in Huffman's world, pressing their sheathed and helmeted bodies against those vital sources of oxygen and biological renewal. Whether as tokens of a dying planet or nostalgic monuments of an imagined future-past, these trees function as shelter for Huffman's figures, possible counter-habitats for an uncertain future, as well as suggesting new forms of planetary consciousness beyond the urban realm that stereotypical images of black culture tend to remain stuck in.

Indeed, the urban game of basketball seems to function as an allegory for just this kind of possible transcendence for Huffman in many of his new paintings. In "Rebound" (2008), we see a scene of astronauts playing basketball on a green court, in a low-gravity space-scape, player ascending up to the extremely high basket in the upper-right corner of the canvass. Here, as in other basketball-themed paintings, Huffman plays with the aspirational nature of mainstream African-American culture, where sports is sometimes seen as an escape route from more earth-bound pursuits. In "Dig It" (2008), however, the limits of such dreams presents itself in the form of a blonde referee admonishing one of the black astronaut basketball players, who holds his hands up in front of a glittery landscape of trees, rocks, and shacks, suggesting a much more menacing backdrop for the kinds of futuristic games Huffman hints at. Even more ominous is "America," a large canvass in which, ascending above a now-empty basketball court, a giant cross studded with LPs and album covers burns against a dark sky of violent brush-strokes and glitter.

The lone work that stood out as different in this series was a very straightforward portrait of Barack Obama. Painted on wood in a realist manner, this work seemed to suggest another kind of possible Afro-futurism, or at least a hopeful horizon for alternative kinds of hopes and dreams for African-Americans. Indeed, as one black Southerner was quoted after Obama's victory on November 4, now African-American boys can aspire to be something other than rappers or sports figures to be recognized as successful in America. Though the least visually interesting piece in his show, Huffman's Obama still had a quiet and compelling resonance when matched with the otherwise ambiguous visions of the future displayed in this stunning exhibition.