

The Guardian

Rashaad Newsome: "In the Black Fantastic review – spectacular from first to last"

By Laura Cumming

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'A future-shock time warp': Sedrick Chisom, *Medusa Wandered the Wetlands of the Capital Citadel Undisturbed By Two Confederate Drifters Preoccupied by Poisonous Vapors That Stirred in the Night Air*, 2021. Courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias, London

Hayward Gallery, London

Wild imagination unites 11 artists from the African diaspora, including Nick Cave and Kara Walker, as they address racial injustice through myth and fantasy in this never less than magnificent show

An extraordinary sight opens this show: giant chains cascading all the way down from the double-height ceiling, vast as the links behind Isambard Kingdom Brunel in the [famous photograph](#). But these are black and cast from human forearms. Each hand is propping up the next elbow – or so it

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

seems. Look up and they appear to be rising, helping each other forge upwards. Look down, however, and they are clinging to each other and falling, lying like manacles on the ground. The nuances of striving and suffering are endless, and irreducible. *Chain Reaction* invokes black history more powerfully than any sculpture I have ever seen. It is by the American artist [Nick Cave](#), born in Missouri in 1959, a visionary of dazzling versatility.



Concealing costumes or sparkling sculptures? Nick Cave, Soundsuit, 2014.
© Nick Cave/courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

The Hayward has several of his celebrated [Soundsuits](#), a sequence of lifesize costumes begun in response to the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police in 1991. These reverberate to the motion of whoever wears them. One is stitched all over with shining buttons and gems, an outlandish combination of pearly king and carnival queen. Another has a vast sieve for a head, sprouting twinkling, multicoloured fibres. A third rises in an African basket headdress with sequins out of Walmart. Brilliant disguises, concealing everything from race to class to gender, they are also coruscating sculptures.

Cave is extremely famous in the US but not so much here, though this will surely change with the Hayward's new show. [In the Black Fantastic](#) is a magnificent experience, spectacular from first to last. It presents S, all of whom share what might be described as a way of seeing.

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The premise is succinct: to unite artists from the African diaspora who use fantasy, myth and fiction to address racism and injustice. Apposite literary quotations appear on the walls, from [Frantz Fanon](#) and others. But there is nothing theoretical or doctrinaire about the work.

All of the art is wildly imaginative and ambitious, from American artist Rashaad Newsome's mesmerising video [Build or Destroy](#), in which a trans CGI figure vogues as the city burns and collapses in the background, to Hew Locke's post-apocalyptic horsemen riding ever onwards on their steeds, festooned with emblems, who might equally be wise men or tyrants of the future.

Each artist is given the equivalent of a solo show in a separate space, painted in the richest glowing colours. And each artist has some prodigious flight of fantasy, which very often involves light projections, glitter paint, diamante, polished bronze, even 24-carat gold. The whole show twinkles and glitters.



Red/ Meridian, 2021-22 by Lina Iris Viktor. Photograph: © 2022. Courtesy the Artist and Hayward Gallery

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SILVERMAN**

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The Liberian British artist [Lina Iris Viktor](#) is showing a series of self-portraits in which she appears, regal, masked and hieratic, as the Libyan Sibyl, a prophetess from Greek mythology who foretold the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. It is a startling combination of theatrical performance, captured on camera, and then fused with gouache, pastel, raffia, gems and gold leaf to create sumptuous hybrid paintings.

The Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu uses collage to devise lifesize figures that might be goddesses or guardians, sometimes in powerful mid-stride. Horn and soil, stone, gourds and shells are incorporated, literally and metaphorically, into papier-mache sculptures. Mutu also works in two dimensions. [The screamer island dreamer](#), to give the full title of one painted collage, refers to the Nguva from east African folklore, a female spirit that wanders the coast charming people into the sea. It is a fabulously wry invention.

[Sedrick Chisom](#), born in Philadelphia, and one of the younger artists here at 32, paints scenes that hold their secrets like haunted landscapes. But he uses the most gorgeously appealing palette – scarlet, crimson, flame red, gold and orange. You find the figures by looking deep into the heat.

Medusa Wandered the Wetlands of the Capital Citadel Undisturbed By Two Confederate Drifters Preoccupied Poisonous Vapers That Stirred in the Night Air is the sardonically literary title of a painting that shows each of these instantly recognisable figures – real and fictional – in a kind of future-shock time warp. Chisom imagines a post-apocalyptic world in which all people of colour have chosen to leave Earth, and all that is left behind is a barren landscape of (so to speak) colour on fire. He makes his own myths.

The show is beautifully curated by [Ekow Eshun](#) to give each artist space to breathe, and to sing, but his judicious selection also allows for echoes and connections throughout. The black hands of Cave's sculpture are seen again in Mutu's images, waving through the waters, and again in Newsome's photocollage of a powerful mahogany, gold and ebony fist.

Most seductive of all are the aquatic visions of the painters [Chris Ofili](#) and [Ellen Gallagher](#), which swim together very perfectly in the upper galleries. Gallagher has a gorgeous hanging garden of flowers and amoeba, and several underwater scenes in which silver sci-fi heads, resembling African statues, drift among the liquid currents. This is based on the [Drexciya myth](#), in which the unborn children of pregnant enslaved people thrown overboard during Atlantic crossings live on for ever in their own black Atlantis.

Ofili, too, takes up the myth of Odysseus and Calypso, painting the figures in lush embrace and translucent blues, translated to the waters of Trinidad where the artist lives. These are images of ecstatic disorientation, where it is impossible to tell what is sea and what is sky, which way is down, and whether Ofili's black Odysseus is a captive or willing lover.

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Rashaad Newsome, *Stop Playing in My Face!*, 2016, at *In the Black Fantastic*. Photograph: Rashaad Newsome Studio/Jessica Silverman, San Francisco

he ultimate connection between all the artists in this show is their overwhelming passion: a force of feeling that translates into vision, music, poetry, ethos and form, and in the most original ways. The context, explicit or otherwise, is the narrative of black history.

So that it seems only right that *In the Black Fantastic* should end with the staggering climax of [Kara Walker](#)'s latest shadow-play film. Using nothing but black, white and red cut-paper silhouettes, Walker tells several interconnected stories, from the Oklahoma City bombings perpetrated by the white supremacist Timothy McVeigh in 1995 to the horrific racist murder three years later of the African American James Byrd, dragged to his death from the back of a pickup truck in Texas.

It is only the smallest tribute to Walker's gifts to say that her marvellous graphic precision is both as delicate as a ballet and yet unforgettably tragic. Its score, by the Minneapolis musician [Lady Midnight](#), fusing ragtime, rock, funk and soul, is tuned to perfection. And the film ends with what might be the most hopeful image in this unmissable exhibition: a young black girl raising her hands to the skies to take back the solitary star of Texas.

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