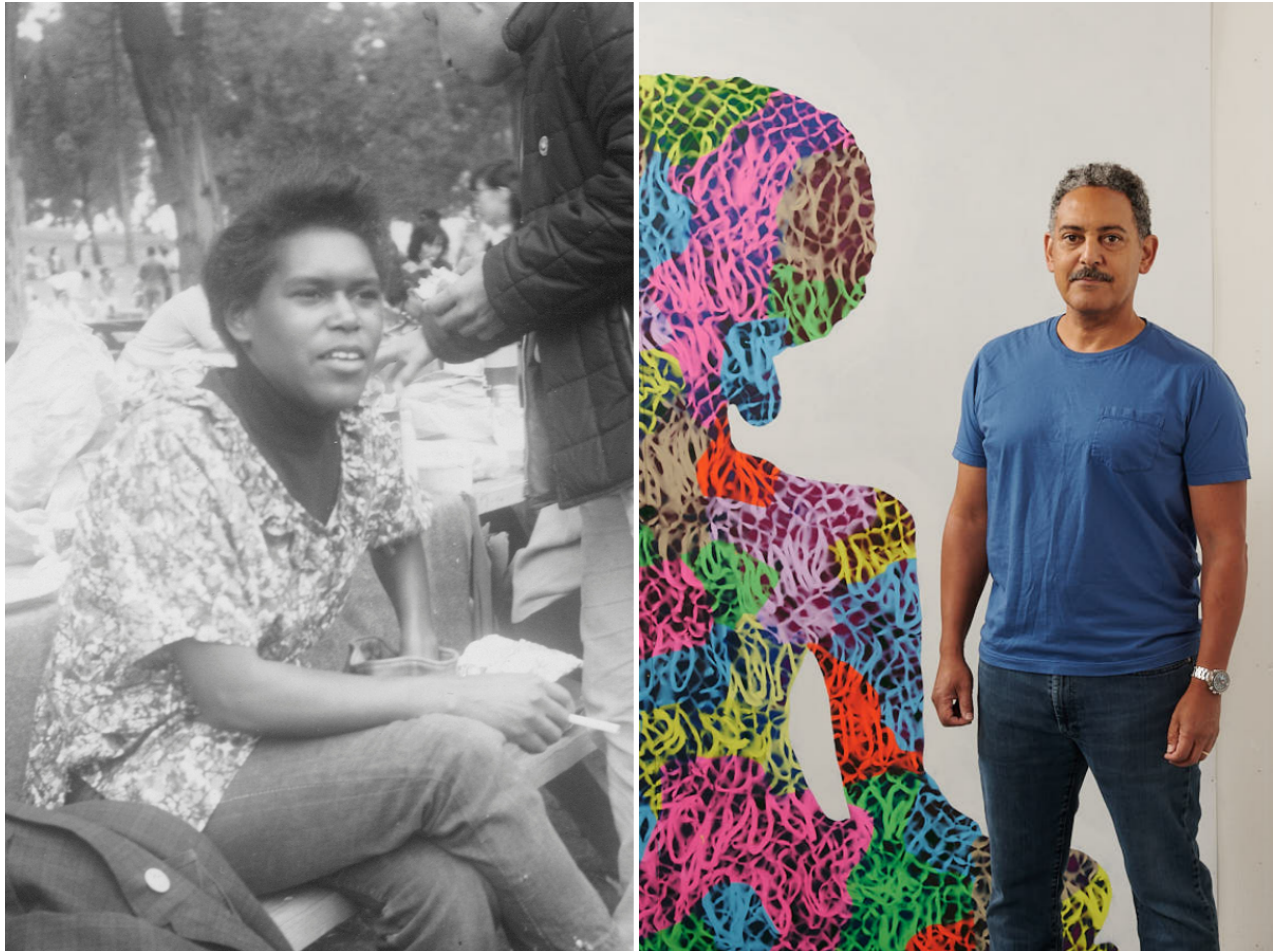


# KQED

"Berkeley artist David Huffman's new show pays tribute to his activist mother"

By Victoria Sung

August 13, 2021



Artist David Huffman's new show at the Berkeley Art Center is both a sentimental tribute to his activist mother, Dolores Davis (pictured in 1967), and an exuberant expression of the radical politics of the 1960s and '70s. Credit: Family archive and John White

In the Berkeley Art Center's first solo show in six years, David Huffman honors his mother, Dolores Davis, who picketed against racism in the streets and made psychedelic, otherworldly pastel drawings at home.

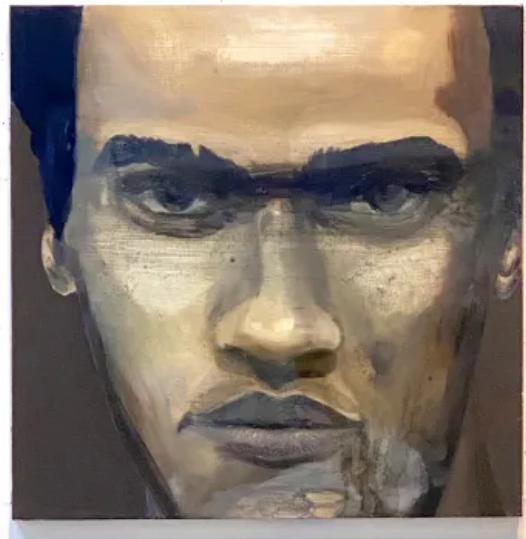
**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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

Berkeley artist David Huffman recalls sitting with his mother, Dolores Davis, as she designed a stylized version of the Black Panther Party's logo — a slinking silhouette of the iconic big cat that she silk-screened onto "Free Huey" flags and clothing during the campaign to liberate party co-founder Huey Newton from prison.

Huffman, 5 years old in 1968, took issue with the shape of the panther's paws.

"I was into Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer at the time so I was drawing a lot of reindeers," he said. "I remember ... helping her figure out the feet."



(Left): A reproduction of Davis' "Free Huey" flag. (Right): Huffman's 2009 portrait of Huey Newton is included in *Afro Hippie*. Images courtesy of the artist

Huffman, now 58, is opening [his first ever solo show](#) in his hometown on Saturday, Aug. 14, an eclectic exhibition that is both a sentimental tribute to his activist mother and an exuberant expression of the radical politics of the 1960s and '70s — the Black Power and Free Speech movements, as well as Berkeley's fringier psychic community — that shaped his childhood and have informed his artistic practice.

*Afro Hippie*, the Berkeley Art Center's first show in six years featuring the work of a single artist, will include nearly 20 new and never-before-seen works by Huffman in painting, sculpture and video from the 2000s to today alongside family photographs and other mementos.

Known for his densely layered "social abstractions" — large-scale paintings combining socio-political themes with abstract mark-making — Huffman's presentation at the Berkeley Art Center is the most personal of his career.

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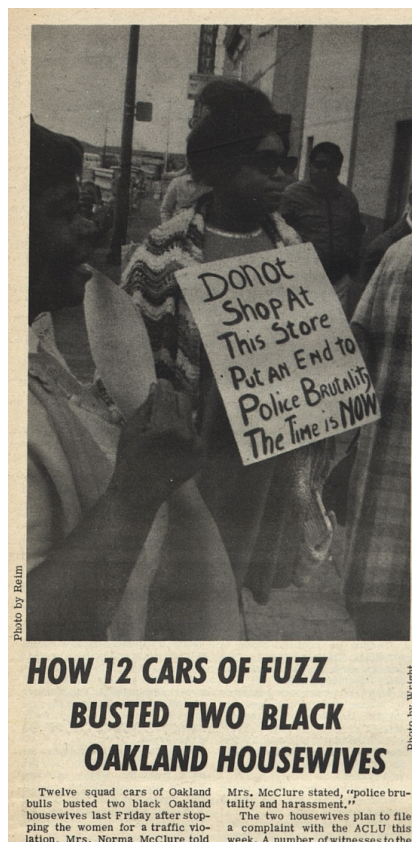
"He's exposing the layers ... and putting the influences out on the wall more explicitly and directly than he's ever done before," said Daniel Nevers, the art center's co-director who curated the show.

## 2 sisters striking for justice

While sitting in his Oakland studio last month, Huffman recounted stories of weekends spent protesting in the East Bay with his mother and his aunt Norma McClure.

The Davis and McClure sisters started the organization Black Strike for Justice in 1968 and made picketing a family affair. Huffman remembers how the two women would pile their children into a station wagon and drive out to different East Bay businesses to protest police brutality, racist hiring practices and abysmal living conditions.

They'd hold up rubber rats outside of Oakland's Social Security Office to catch the attention of local TV stations. Housewives Market (later relocated to Swan's Market), which had no Black employees, was another target. At times, Huffman acknowledged, he was too young to comprehend the daily struggle for social justice. "I was 5 years old and holding a picket sign every Saturday when, it's like, 'I'd rather watch cartoons,'" Huffman said.



The June 14-20, 1968, issue of the Berkeley Barb, page 5.

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SILVERMAN**

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

On June 14, 1968, Davis and McClure were pulled over for a traffic violation while on the way to a Black Strike meeting, an incident [memorialized in a Berkeley Barb headline](#): "How 12 Cars of Fuzz Busted Two Black Oakland Housewives." According to the article, they were "handcuffed, searched, hit, held in solitary confinement, and then booked for resisting arrest."

McClure was the more outspoken of the two sisters, gaining the nickname "Big Mama," according to Huffman. "She used to walk around with her breasts hanging out as a feminist in the '70s. As a kid, it's like, 'I'm not old enough to understand the power of this. I'm just embarrassed.'"

Davis, who is 90 years old and still resides in Berkeley, was quieter but no less resolved in her fight against inequities. She dated Huffman's father, a white man, at a time when interracial relationships were illegal in Berkeley. She raised her children in a home a block off of Telegraph Avenue, and Huffman recalls watching her open their door to protesters fleeing from National Guard troops as she wiped tear gas from their eyes.

Though she wasn't a member of the Black Panthers, Davis ran in similar circles and was friends with co-founder Bobby Seale. Huffman has a visceral memory of visiting the Panthers' headquarters after it had been ambushed by Oakland police. "I remember seeing bullets on the ground and picking one up and, you know, just like [feeling] the tactile connection to death," he said. A large-scale reproduction of a family photograph, which will be on view in the Berkeley Art Center exhibition, depicts Seale with his arms around the shoulders of Huffman and his older brother Robert.



David Huffman (right) and Black Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale, flanked by Huffman's brothers Robert (left) and Ronald (far right). Credit: Family archive

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SILVERMAN**

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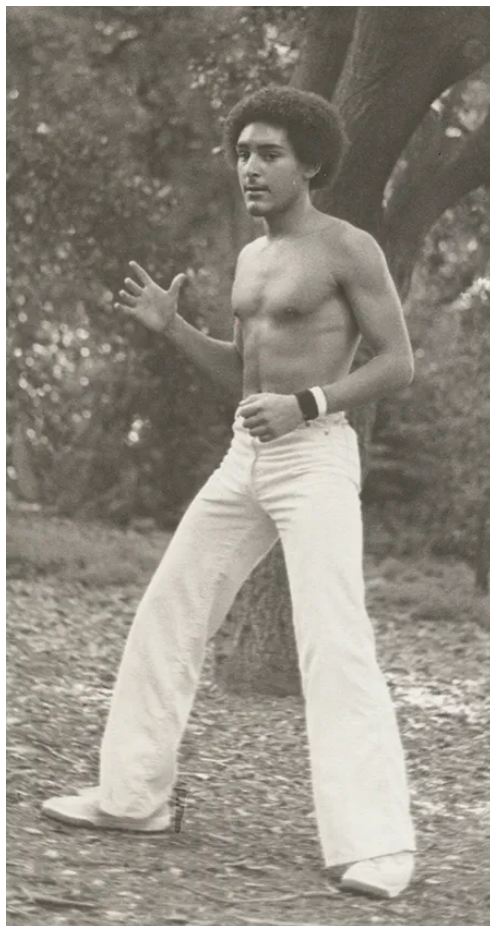
Davis, a practicing Buddhist, would also take Huffman to group meditations at UC Berkeley and throughout the Bay Area. He remembers a childhood filled with potlucks, rallies and impromptu concerts in Provo Park and Live Oak Park (where the Berkeley Art Center opened in 1967).

*Afro Hippie* brings together the different strands of Huffman's childhood — Black Power and spiritual awakening, the distinct vibes of Berkeley and Oakland, his multiracial upbringing — under one roof. "The work that I've been doing [over] the last three years has been kind of a nod to that very eclectic space and trying to converge all those sensibilities in one place," Huffman said.

### From martial arts to fine arts

Huffman never thought he would become a visual artist.

He grew up the youngest of five children, all of whom engaged in artistic pursuits. His mother would sit at home making large pastel drawings populated by figures she called "nevers" — described by Huffman as "psychedelic, kind of otherworldly characters." Art making, he said, was central to how his family expressed itself.



David Huffman practices martial arts in 1979 on the Cal campus. Credit: Family archive

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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

An early childhood fascination with comic books soon gave way to an interest in martial arts, and Huffman studied the discipline for a number of years, eventually training to become a tournament fighter. “[My cousin] came to pick me up for a tournament. I was, like, 14, and had been dreading it for months,” he said. “I said, ‘I’m not going, I’m making art instead.’ He called me every name in the book, but it was the art that I liked, not the violence.”

In 1981, Huffman enrolled at the California College of the Arts and Crafts (now California College of the Arts) in Oakland, where he has taught painting and drawing for the past 20 years. Through the school’s affiliation with the Alliance of Independent Colleges of Art, he spent a semester at the New York Studio School in Manhattan. It was during this program that Huffman recalls meeting Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat at their 1985 two-person painting show in SoHo. He’d never heard of Basquiat and wasn’t a fan of Warhol but decided to check out the show. “All of a sudden this ghost comes in the door and it’s Andy Warhol wearing a white jacket [with his] white hair,” he said. But Huffman recalled being more struck by Basquiat’s inventive and unfettered use of Black cultural iconography.

After finishing his undergraduate studies, Huffman moved to Los Angeles for eight years before returning to the California College of the Arts for his master’s in fine arts in 1996. He has lived and worked in the East Bay ever since.

Drawing on his interest in comic books, Huffman’s “traumanaut” series from the early 2000s depicts Black astronauts in space suits inhabiting imagined, surrealist landscapes — the paintings create an uneasy atmosphere that holds in tension the country’s fascination with the futuristic space race and its painful legacy of slavery and racism. One of these paintings, *MLK* (2007), which depicts a group of traumanauts leading the Civil Rights leader’s funeral procession, is currently on view at the Oakland Museum of California.

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MLK (2007) depicts a group of "traumanauts" leading the Civil Rights leader's funeral procession. It is currently on view at the Oakland Museum of California's group show "[Mothership: Voyage Into Afrofuturism](#)" (on view through Feb. 27).

Courtesy of the artist

Huffman's more recent paintings represent a shift from his narrative-based, figurative works to a looser, freer form of abstraction. His large-scale "hoop net" series, started in 2016, employs found basketball nets as a sort of stencil. After laying down lengths of netting, Huffman uses spray paint to create an almost ghostly, lyrical pattern across the surface of the canvas. The artist's material choices are laden with symbolism. "The netting became an unlikely, urban kind of vernacular to express abstract ideas and pain," Huffman said, alluding to professional basketball's exploitation of Black bodies.

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## A Sphinx, a pyramid and an egg

*Afro Hippie* will include two of Huffman's most recent paintings, finished just this summer.

*This Season's People* represents the complex, multi-layered nature of his "social abstraction" paintings. The 6-foot-tall work demonstrates the artist's fluency with the formal language of abstraction – from sections that feature his innovative "hoop net" technique to hard-edged geometric motifs, looser brushstrokes that reference the Abstract Expressionist gesture and collaged textiles including Ghanaian kente cloth. The top portion of the painting bears a stamped pattern of a Sphinx-like figure in three-quarter profile. Huffman said he created the stamp by superimposing his mother's face onto the head of the mythical creature in reference to a family joke about her Sphinxlike gaze.



The stamp at the top of *This Season's People* (2021) is a reference to a family joke about Dolores Davis' Sphinxlike face. On the lower left, you can see Huffman's technique of spray painting basketball nets to create a tessellated pattern on the canvas. Courtesy of the artist

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References to ancient Egypt appear in more than one place. Upon entering the Berkeley Art Center's gallery, a newly commissioned 10-foot-high silver pyramid — constructed on site and titled *Cosmic Pyramid* — will anchor the space, along with five small-scale paintings on paper from 2007 that feature psychedelic explosions of color in pyramidal form.

Also on view will be Huffman's "psychic portraits" — paintings that take as their starting point defaced Egyptian statues whose features he reconstructed in an "intuitive, forensic" process. Huffman said the portraits, made in 2008 and 2009, were a way to "connect to African history [and] find a sense of Blackness in Egyptian sculpture."



From Huffman's series of "psychic portraits" made between 2008 and 2009. Courtesy of the artist

Huffman's mother can also be credited with introducing the artist to this history at a young age. Davis was deeply involved with Berkeley's psychic community and decorated the family home with small-scale architectural structures that evoked the pyramids of Giza.

"My mom had a bunch of [pyramids] around the house and we had one big one in the living room," he said. Davis' constructions came out of her interest in the paranormal. "People were trying to get cosmic energy from the pyramids and one of the things was to put an egg in the middle to test if the energy was right."

The materials of *Cosmic Pyramid* in the Berkeley Art Center show: "foil, wood, African textiles, video projection with sound, ceramic dish, organic egg."

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Huffman sits inside *Cosmic Pyramid* while installing his show at the Berkeley Art Center. Courtesy of the artist

"David Huffman: Afro Hippie" is [on view at the Berkeley Art Center](#) from Aug. 14 to Oct. 15.

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