

DATEBOOK

David Huffman: "Review: S.F. gallery showcases otherworldly works by 2 Bay Area artists"

By Tony Bravo

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Installation view, "Pae White: Slow Winter Sun" at Jessica Silverman. Photo: Phillip Maisel

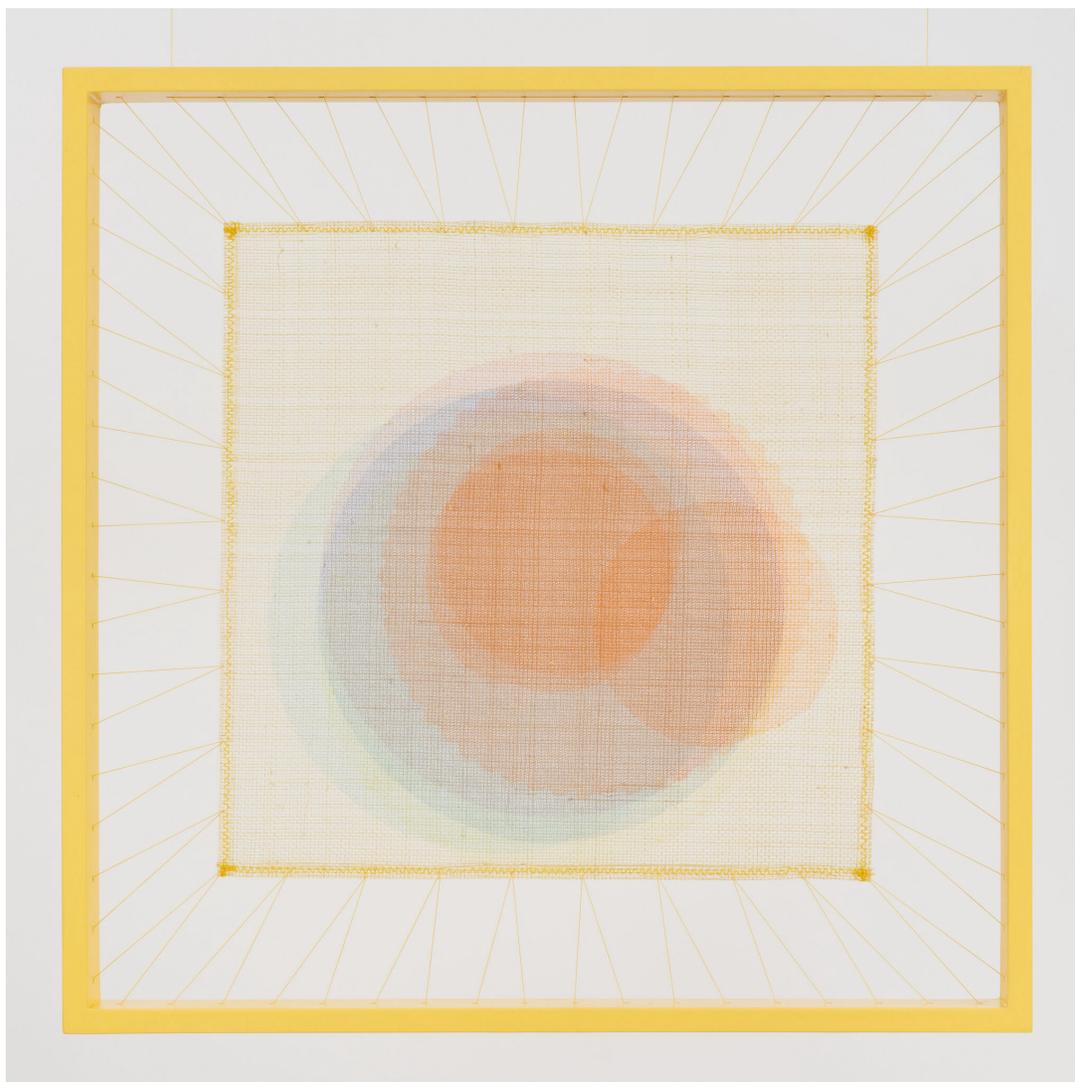
I have never wanted to climb inside a tapestry as much as I did when viewing Pae White's show "Slow Winter Sun."

"Day Flowers" is one of five large tapestries that are part of White's show on the first floor of Jessica Silverman, which also showcases fellow Bay Area artist David Huffman's "Odyssey" through Feb. 25. The piece seems to glow as you approach it. The woven tree limbs and scarlet foliage vibrate as it catches the light. White's tapestries were carefully woven in textile capital Ghent, Belgium, from cashmere, cotton and metallic threads. The iridescent purple clouds of "Broken Rain" and the luminance of the fireflies in "Night Flowers" are simultaneously energizing and transporting.

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Tapestries have often been used to commemorate historic events — wars, rulers’ reigns, religious holidays — but White uses them in this new body of work to mark nearly invisible moments in the natural world like the journey of a snail or the first buds of spring.



Pae White, "Low Winter Sun," 2023. Sinamay, acrylic, string and wood. Photo: Phillip Maisel

"I'm always surprised when people say that California doesn't have seasons," said White, 60. "There's a shift; it can be something really small, like something that blooms. Why can't that be celebrated?"

"Slow Winter Sun" is inspired by the state's environs, according to White, who lives in Sea Ranch and Los Angeles. The multimedia artist's best-known work in the Bay Area is probably the hanging installation "Noisy Blushes," consisting of more than 12,000 colored stainless steel disks, commissioned by the San Jose Museum of Art for its 50th anniversary in 2020.

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Pae White, "Langston, Bertha, Solomon, Miguel, Stefan, Flo, Barnaby, Oswald, Esther," 2023.
Glazed ceramic with particle vapor deposition and walnut pedestal. Photo: Phillip Maisel

In addition to the tapestries, the new show features ceramics like the glistening snake sculptures in the "Undoing Done" series, which further the Garden of Eden feeling of the show. A number of intricate paper-clay paintings evoke weaving with their fine detail, yet also feel topographic, especially "Blue You" and "Platonic." Fiber art hangings including "Chief with Blushes" and "Notions" are paired with the tapestries, making viewers wend their serpentine way through the arrangement like a maze. It's a show that easily sweeps the viewer into a kind of heightened elemental sensuality, a perfect reflection of the state that inspired the work

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Upstairs at the San Francisco gallery, Huffman's "Odyssey" features equally immersive paintings and works on paper from 2004-09, many that had long been in storage. I had to go back and check the dates when I saw the work, which feature his "Traumanaut" Black astronaut characters as they navigate dystopian scenes and intergalactic travel. It's a series that feels so contemporary — with its discussions of violence against Black bodies, militarization, decolonization and protest — that it's easy to forget they were created more than a decade ago.

But being ahead of the rest of the culture is just part of being an artist for Huffman, and the bite of Huffman's Afrofuturism is apparent beyond the clever "Traumanaut" name.

The painting titled "Traumatank With Virus Bomb" is jarring with its use of a stereotypical mammy head topping a war tank, firing starbursts of virus. The more you sit with all the layers of meaning and notions of racially weaponized imagery, the more you get the wit of Huffman's take.



David Huffman, "Make Love Not War," 2006. Acrylic and gesso on door panels. Photo: Shaun Roberts.

"I was working out these narratives of healing, which I felt like was needed since the rupture of slavery," the Oakland artist explained. "There's this nomadic sense of identity and sense of place and home. I felt like these stories (in the works) were a way to grasp that reflection and sense of self to allow this healing to occur."

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The show's centerpiece is the artist's 2006 double-sided three-panel screen "Make Love Not War," a work that shows the Traumanauts protesting for peace on one side and being gunned down in battle on the other. The work was inspired by feelings the Iraq War evoked in Huffman that reminded him of protests over the Vietnam War in the 1960s and '70s. Beyond combat, Huffman added that "Make Love Not War" also focuses on the wider issues of violence, pointing out a burning church in the piece that "hearkens back to the civil rights era of church burnings." In the burning of the church, Huffman also sees a destruction of a symbol of colonial architecture, yet another layer of meaning.

Even though these acclaimed artists' visions and statements are radically different, the shows pair thrillingly with their unique approaches to world-building.



Installation view, "David Huffman: Odyssey" at Jessica Silverman. Photo: Phillip Maisel

"Pae White: Slow Winter Sun" and "David Huffman: Odyssey": 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Both shows on view through Feb. 25. Free. Jessica Silverman, 621 Grant Ave., S.F. 415-255-9508. www.jessicasilvermangallery.com

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