



"Artist David Huffman blends Afrofuturism, abstraction, and activism at SF's Jessica Silverman."

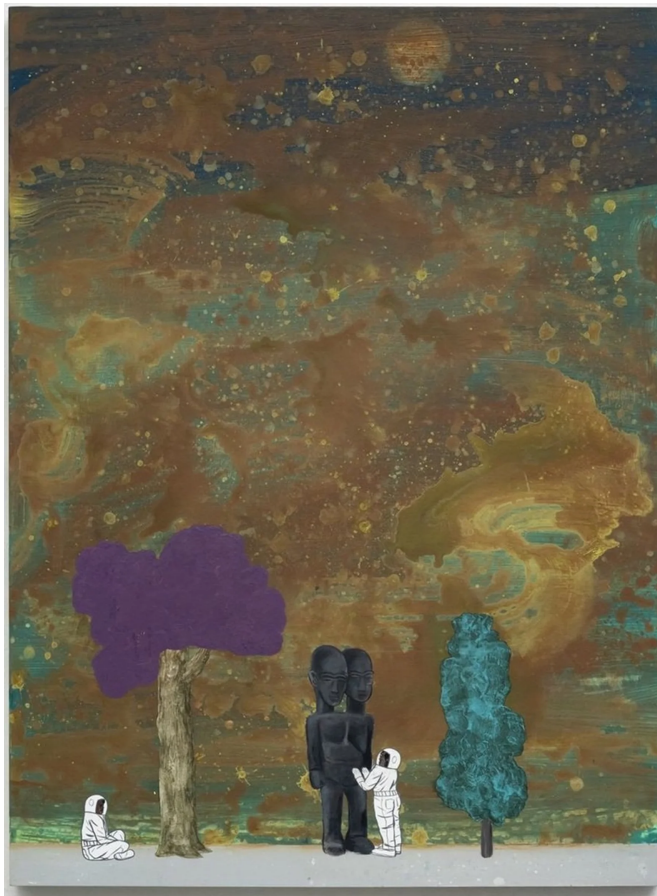
By Emily Wilson

July 28, 2025

We could all use some freedom and joy right about now.

That's what artist David Huffman is offering in his new solo exhibition at San Francisco's Jessica Silverman, *David Huffman: A Brilliant Blackout*.

The show features new paintings from his *Traumanauts* series, Black figures in white space suits he started painting in 2005, places where Black people didn't have to hide their inner suffering.



'Not Separate From This,' 2025 by David Huffman (Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; photo by Phillip Maisel)

"It all started from the rupture of slavery and trying to find a sense of healing and a sense of real, true self, rather than to be labeled as the happy darky," Huffman said at the Chinatown gallery at the opening night of the exhibition. "A lot of this was trying to connect to what was disconnected."

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For the last dozen years or so, Huffman has been focusing on abstract art. (One of the last *Traumanaut* paintings he made—*The Black Hole and the Traumanauts Uncertain Journey*, which was acquired by SFMOMA—he painted himself as a Traumanaut entering a spaceship that goes through a black hole, from which he emerges as an abstract painter.) In *A Brilliant Blackout*, he incorporates the Traumanauts into the medium.

Huffman grew up in Berkeley. His mother, who was friends with Black Panthers leaders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, made the logo for the party, and he helped her with the panther's paws. As a little boy, Huffman marched in protests with her, and in the sparkly blue *Soul Mother Earth*, he incorporates her at the bottom of the painting as a Traumanaut holding a flag proclaiming "LOVE."

Prince is another new Traumanaut, appearing with a piano in two paintings, *Whenever I'm Around You* and *Fell in Love When I First Saw You*. Huffman says the musician was a creative force who had an impact on him.

"When I first saw him in concert from the *Controversy* album, it just blew my mind. Being an artist, you attend to art that is profound if you can be receptive," he explains. "I was really receptive when I first saw a Raymond Saunders bird painting. That painting changed my view on art. Because I think when an artist or anyone is looking for new creative plateaus, these signposts create permission for you to do something."



'Eden,' 2025 by David Huffman (Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; photo by Phillip Maisel)

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Trauma Eve, one of the first Traumanauts Huffman created, appears in two paintings in the exhibition: at the bottom of the large red *Eden*, and with a spiritual advisor in the narrow vertical *Gia*. Huffman says he conceived of her as a combination of Aunt Jemima turned into a super robot and the first woman, Eve, who was blamed for kicking humans out of Paradise. He wanted to give the character strength in this timeless, alternate reality.

The paintings are "the future, the past, and the present, all intertwined," he says. "I think the atemporality of it is the most important part because within the atemporal space, all things can happen, all possibilities are available"—something he started to consider after seeing an exhibition of Chinese court paintings back in the early 2000s.

"They were watercolor and silk, and they were astounding," he said. "There would be a celebration of the emperor or some kind of yearly festival, but all of it happened on one continuous strip. It blew my mind because it's like, 'Oh, I can put whatever I want on this, and it doesn't have to be the same actual time. They can be together but also be separate.' It was just an aha moment."

Part of the reason Huffman says he's bringing the Traumanauts now is that they're needed. Growing up in an activist household in Berkeley, he saw change happen and gains made in civil rights, but some of that is slipping away.

"Now we see this lunatic running things," he said. "I think the radical position I'm taking now is not so much the picketing in front of stores that we used to do and the marches—which were all important and necessary and still are—but this idea of self-joy, this idea of perceiving depths of love and caring and, to me, that's where a lot of the radical energy needs to be right now."



'Whenever I'm Around You, 2025' by David Huffman (Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; photo by Phillip Maisel)

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