

FRIEZE

"David Huffman's Traumanauts Seek More Peaceful Galaxies"

By Theadora Walsh

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Main image: David Huffman, Sideshow (detail), 2009, acrylic, oil, glitter and collage on paper, 137 x 313 x 6 cm (framed).

Courtesy: the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; photograph: Phillip Maisel

An astronaut plays a pastel blue piano. Perched at the bottom right corner of a large canvas, he's dwarfed by a terrestrial sludge: whirls of paint in mouldy hues that interrupt a patterned field of basketballs and contour lines. The painting, David Huffman's *Whenever I'm Around You* (2025), is on view in his solo show 'A Brilliant Blackout' at Jessica Silverman in San Francisco. Informed by Afrofuturism, this show of 'Traumanaut' works – many of which the Bay Area artist painted in the past year – depict Black astronauts who wander through space, as if leaving Earth-bound troubles for more peaceful galaxies. The gallery is packed with paintings; large canvases line the walls while smaller works hang, like panels in a comic book strip, along the half-walls framing the entrance. From a distance, the collisions of colours evoke a tub of rainbow sherbet, or the planet Jupiter. Up close, each discrete work is a world unto itself – with lines that wave and bend with a mysterious sense of purpose, evoking, at times, the motion and scale of Helen Frankenthaler's brushstrokes.

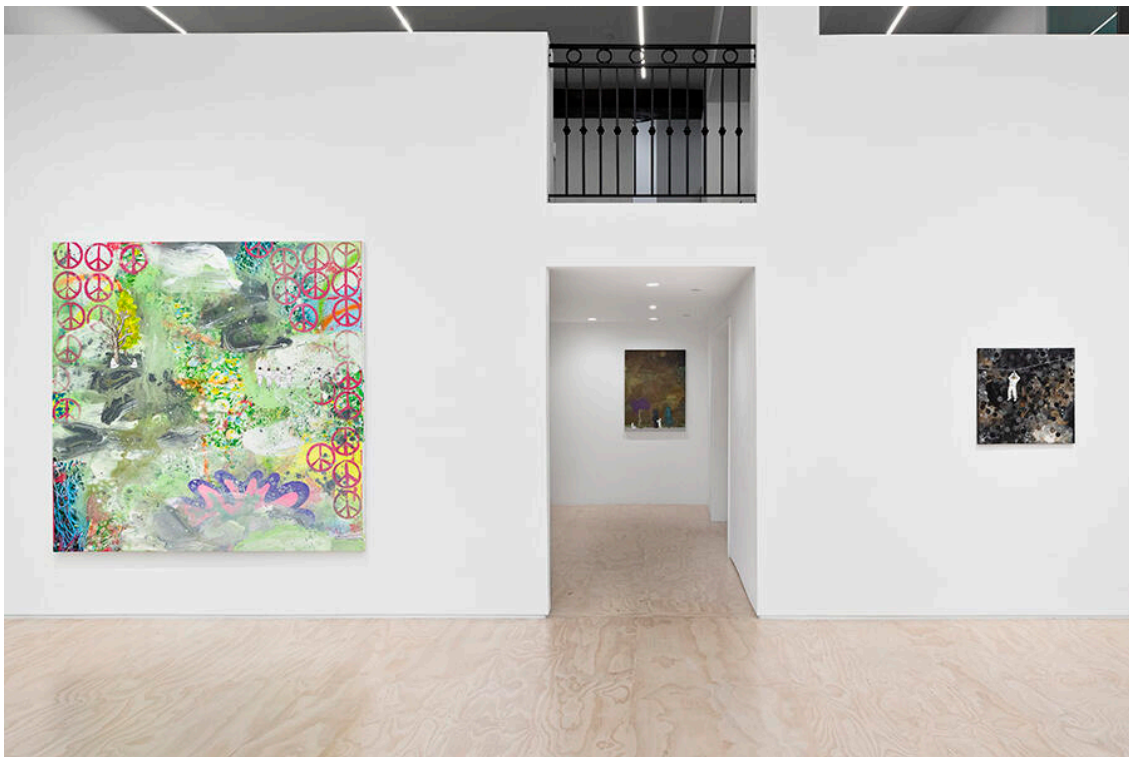
Combining abstraction and figuration with psychedelic flair, Huffman gives an intergalactic backdrop to terrestrial elements like plants and animals, real and invented African sculpture and, everywhere, the Traumanauts. Dripping pastels, geodesic patterning and non-ironic peace signs metabolize Berkeley in the 1960s, knitting together the countercultural collectives of People's Park with the actions of The Black Panther movement (for which Huffman's mother, the activist Dolores Davis, designed a logo). These scenes are rendered through an array of media: acrylic, oil, gouache, colour pencil, spray paint and glitter, as well as collaged elements made of paper, textiles and photographs.

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David Huffman, *Whenever I'm Around You*, 2025, acrylic, oil, and gouache on canvas, 1.8 × 1.5 m. Courtesy: the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; photograph: Phillip Maisel



David Huffman, *'A Brilliant Blackout'*, 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; photograph: Phillip Maisel

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Cast in various narratives, Huffman's voyagers appear mid-action, as if in film stills. In *Together We Are More* (2025), four Traumanauts wander a green, white and black plane in which paint has been laid atop a paisley print. Similarly boxy in their suits, these figures hover together over the untethered abstraction of this strange landscape. Their neutral expressions suggest a kind of weariness, a kind of resolve – and a remove that is not synonymous with alienation. The image recalls the intergalactic physicists in Phillip K. Dick's novel *Ubik* (1969), who move backwards in time after a lunar explosion triggers their own disintegration, deteriorating with such speed that they can only be with one another in their eclipsing, shared present.

Hanging in the gallery window is Huffman's *Sideshow* (2009). Traumanauts, gathered on a strip of concrete, put on a show by shredding the tires of Chryslers, Cadillacs and Oldsmobile sedans, leaving circles imprinted on the ground. Clipped photographs of signs advertising car washes, payday loans and the fast-food staple Jack in the Box are collaged into the painting to locate the scene in East Oakland. In Boots Riley's 2023 miniseries *I'm a Virgo* – another fictive sideshow by an Oakland-based maker – a nearly four-metre-tall Black teenager rolls a car on its half axis, producing an image of freewheeling joy that is both recognizable and surreal at that scale. Similarly, Huffman's scenes of extraterrestrial pleasures are simple interventions that require the use not of cutting-edge technologies, but of experimental thought.



David Huffman, *Eden*, 2025, acrylic, gouache, African cloth, crayon, spray paint and photo collage on canvas, 196 × 196 × 5 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; photograph: Phillip Maisel

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While Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) predicted a future California that has reinstituted slavery through indentured servitude and runs rampant with pyromancers, Huffman proposes a future in which cosmic technologies are untethered from the dominant power structures of the present. Often, the time-travellers he depicts idle in nature – that other, older intelligence – suspended in an alternate world bound to this one only by the presence of humanity. The speculative future, Huffman suggests, is not fixed, and may look quite different from how we imagine.

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