

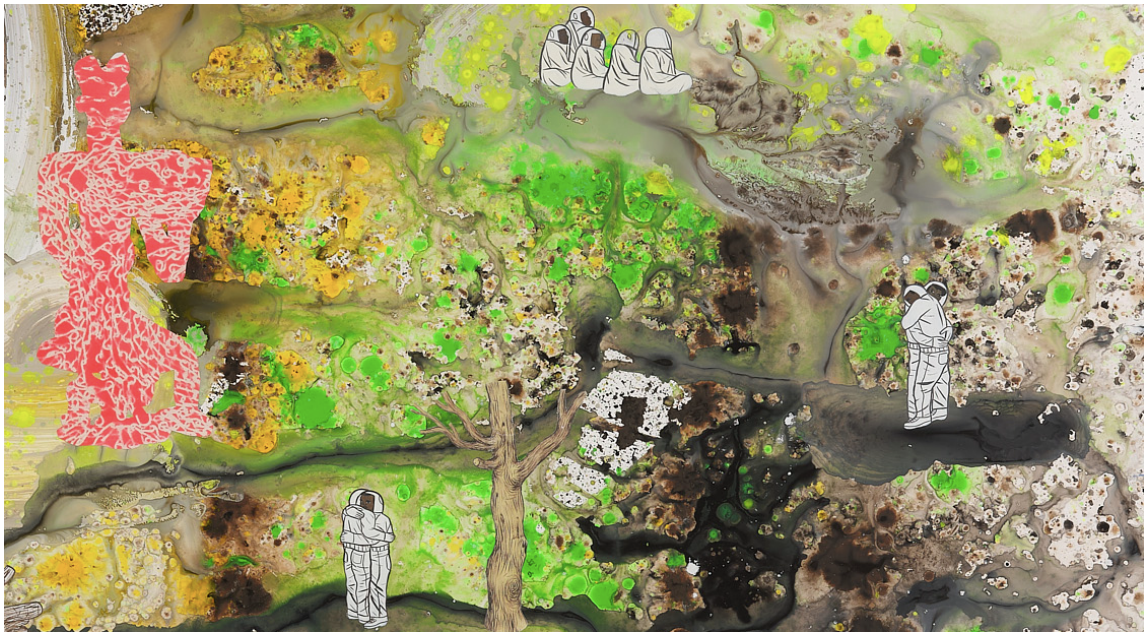


ROBORANT REVIEW

"David Huffman, A Brilliant Blackout, Jessica Silverman Gallery"

By: Hugh Leeman

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Ancestors of the Ascending Self (detail), 2025 | Acrylic, gouache and collage on Yupo | 88 x 64 x 3 inches

David Huffman's *A Brilliant Blackout* at Jessica Silverman Gallery expands on the artist's visual narrative of journeys of healing as the artist's Traumanauts, black astronauts that serve as metaphors for transcendence, make their way through abstract environments, allowing for a merging of social commentary on a dark past with a speculative future and autobiography.

Huffman says, "Social abstraction is my term for the work that I do. I lean toward the political; that's what I was used to growing up, going to Black Panther rallies. Art should carry an element of social relevance." [1] His artworks contribute to Afrofuturism, a multidisciplinary creative movement that originated in the 20th century, combining African diasporic history, science fiction, and technology to reimagine dominant narratives by picturing optimistic futures that transcend contemporary cultural constraints.

The artist's Traumanauts, rendered in minimal linear form, evolved from Huffman's graduate school thesis in the late 1990s. Before donning their space suits, they were cartoon-like minstrel figures with giant smiles that he referred to as Trauma Smiles. Their grins embodied the black body and the social mask developed to conceal inner suffering. Over the years, the Trauma Smiles became black astronauts; gone were the grins, now they were on an intergalactic journey of healing. [2]

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Sacred Space, 2025 | Acrylic and gouache on canvas | 11 x 14 x 3/4 inches

The Traumanauts carry forward aspects of modern African history through Zambia's Afronauts. Amidst the Cold War's Space Race of the 1960s, Edward Nkoloso launched the Zambian Space Program, proposing his program would send not astronauts but Afronauts to space.[3] The project was initially viewed as absurd at best by the international media and world powers, including UNESCO, the United States, the USSR, and others, who rejected its funding petitions. Yet, beneath the surface, Nkoloso was illustrating that, amidst billions of dollars spent on going to the moon, there was a phenomenal need on earth. By situating black Africans in an optimistic future of space exploration, set against the backdrop of poverty experienced in the colonial sphere, Nkoloso challenged perceptions while highlighting the traumas endured by Africans.



Together We Are More, 2025 | Acrylic, oil, gouache, fabric, color pencil, glitter and spray paint on canvas | 77 x 77 x 2 inches

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Over the past 60 years, Nkoloso has inspired numerous artists worldwide. Huffman's art contributes to international discourse with creators inspired by Nkoloso's *Afronauts*, such as Ghanaian filmmaker Frances Bodomo's *Afronauts* (2014), a sci-fi retelling of the story, Canadian artist Kapwani Kiwanga in her performance lecture *Afrogalactica* (2011) or Belgian photographer Cristina de Middel's series *The Afronauts* (2012), situating Black Africans wearing components of space suits within desolate African landscapes, or more recently, Zambian artist Aaron Samuel Mulenga's *The Afronauts* (2020) series, treating this history.

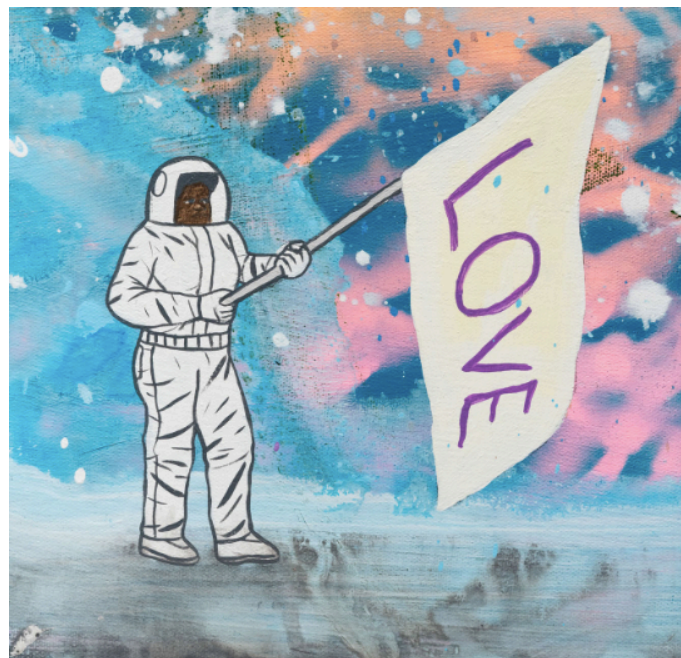


Celestial Amnesia, 2025 | Acrylic and gouache on wood panel | 24 x 30 x 1 3/4 inches

Huffman's unique voice in the Afrofuturist genre draws from elements of African American culture and his youth growing up in Berkeley, California. A recurring theme in his paintings and previous museum installations is the presence of basketballs, basketball hoops, backboards, and basketball courts, as seen in *Celestial Amnesia* (2025). He has even used the game's inner-city chain net to create undulating designs by employing the chain as a sort of stencil for spray paint. Huffman links this to his experiences growing up playing basketball in his urban community, which he relates to African-American identity and culture, referring to it as an urban vernacular. The artist describes the court as an enchanted space acting as a portal within the concrete urban landscape. Of this portal, one can pass through to another space, of which Huffman relates, "African-Americans where I grew up didn't go into nature much. We did because my mom insisted on it." [1]

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The nature that his mother insisted on manifests through abstracted landscapes incorporating a multitude of media, visually situating the healing journey and highlighting the act of painting that Huffman sees as healing in and of itself. As tenured faculty at CCA, he shares this with his students: "We explore what painting can do. It's more than becoming a known artist with a gallery; it's about a path of the soul, a kind of fulfillment that you're not missing out on life. If you get that practice down, you really get something in your life." [4]

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Under the Sun and Moon (2025), 60" x 60" x 2.5"

The artist's social abstractions can feature peace symbols or a flag waved by a Traumanaut with the word "love" written on it, layered atop collaged wallpaper. In *Under the Sun and Moon (2025)*, cartoony flower blossom wallpaper reminiscent of a Takashi Murakami painting has an inner child unleashed on it through scribbles and sketches in crayon that become obscured by puddles of marbled paint. The puddles flow like tributaries of rivers, breaking into splatters and drips to create a geography of visual depth, accented by detailed tree trunks topped by painterly bundles of foliage. At times, the trees are of colors found in nature; at others, his trees evoke the vibrating colors in a Richard Mayhem landscape, the artist's Traumanauts carrying a narrative throughout the ambiguous environments to which they have arrived on their journey that dually references one of healing and being brought across the Atlantic to a foreign land.

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Depths of Time (left), Many Rivers (right), both: 2025, 18 x 24 x 3/4 inches

The concept of the transatlantic journey is best conveyed in *Depths of Time* (2025) and *Many Rivers* (2025). In both paintings, the Traumanaut rides a horse. In the former, the experience is in solitude amidst a celestial skyscape, while in the latter, the Traumanaut sees an African elephant in the distance. The symbolism of the horse and the migratory nature of elephants convey the concept of a transformational journey, as the horse, in its current form, was introduced to the Americas during European colonization, altering the course of history.



Lobi, 2025, 12.25" x 16.75" (left), Initiation (right) 12" x 12"

The painter connects his imagined futures to a West African past through Traumanauts who honor the animistic spirits found in Lobi art. The Lobi have inhabited the borderlands of Ghana, the Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso for centuries. "Lobi" is an umbrella term applied to seven distinct cultural groups [5], marking the name and the place with scars of colonization. In a piece titled *Lobi*, a Traumanaut sits between neon trees backdropped by a marbled color field of leaf green, sitting in a meditative lotus posture, the Traumanaut looks honorably toward a Thil dorka [6], a powerful Lobi deity capable of seeing in all directions, akin to Huffman's paintings showing a past, present, and optimistic future. In *Initiation* (2025), the artist alludes to generational healing as a standing paternal figure lovingly places his hand on the back of a Traumanaut youth who kneels in reverence to a West African deity sculpture. These elements and their changing environments are a synthesis of an inner journey of healing.

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Boundless, 2025 | Acrylic, oil, glitter, fabric, color pencil and spray paint on wood panel | 20 x 16 x 1 inches

Beyond West African culture's art, a deep reverence for nature is conveyed in Huffman's painting, *Boundless* (2025), in which a Traumanaut raises his arms, venerating a tree, as if collecting energy from its neon-orange foliage. The painting's reverence for nature also honors pop culture as the Traumanaut and tree are backdropped by vertical striped fabric that has the feel of a summer picnic blanket stretched over the canvas's top half onto which the artist has repetitively stenciled the glittered words *Soul Train* from the show's logo, creating a visual rhythm of the overlapping letters honoring the T.V. series that for more than 30 years did as author Nelson George says "the 'Soul Train' dancers had the afros, and those crazy colors. I mean, one thing that you really saw when you saw 'Soul Train' was vibrant - the set was vibrant, the colors of the dancers was quite dynamic, it was California-style brought into homes in New York, Detroit, Atlanta and affected everything." [7]

David Huffman's paintings pull at the threads of pop culture, stretching across America and into autobiography, to weave a tapestry that extends iconographically to the distant shores of the Atlantic, tethering history to futuristic journeys of the Traumanaut. *A Brilliant Blackout* celebrates Afrofuturism's creative optimism, which the artist shares from a place of vulnerability, highlighting his talent to transmute trauma into artistic treasure, all part of a healing process further shared into the future through Huffman's passing this creative practice on in his classroom.

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