

DAVID HUFFMAN'S SOCIAL ABSTRACTIONS

By Derek Conrad Murray, PhD

Recalling the dismissive American response to his 1968 novel, *A Bear for the F.B.I.* (*Un Ours Pour le F.B.I.*), the acclaimed African-American filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles quipped: "When I sent my book to American publishers, they said, 'It's very good, but it's not black enough.' I said, 'What does it mean, it's not black enough?' 'Well, we don't feel your anguish of being black. And furthermore, give us some lynching in there.'"¹

Un Ours Pour le F.B.I. was an autobiographical novel originally written during Van Peebles's time in France. The bitterness of the iconic filmmaker's recollections suggests an acknowledgement of the perilous terrain of black representation (and the predicament of the black cultural producer). "You see," he explained, "one thing that's usually expected of a black man in America...you can yell, you can scream against the American system. But the one thing the white man wants is to show you're in pain. Show that the system has made you suffer."²

My recent writing on contemporary African-American art has been concerned with the very conundrum Van Peebles articulates: that is, the need (of the black artist) to speak against the perniciousness of racism, while also contending with a cultural thirst for images of black deprivation. What happens when blackness is embodied and represented? How does it function within the very culture that produced it? What is its role? Who owns blackness? There has always been a perilous tension between recognition and fetishism, between ennobled representation

and the degradation of stereotype. But how are black artists to negotiate for themselves a representational space of dignity when their fortunes are controlled by the interests of a largely Eurocentric culture industry, and a confining set of scripts?

My effort to untangle the reasoning behind these formulations has been informed by the work of David Huffman, an artist whose production has always wrestled with the complexities of content vs. form. When pondering the above quote from Van Peebles, I often recall the evolution of Huffman's enigmatic artistic practice. The artist's early work often played with the history of racial stereotypes. His mixed-media painting *Trauma Eve 2* (2003) is in many respects a tribute to the infamous Betye Saar assemblage *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972). Saar's controversial work inverted one of the most damaging racial caricatures, Aunt Jemima—the sexless domestic worker whose life was defined by degradation and servitude. Saar's envisioning presents Aunt Jemima as a revolutionary, mop in one hand and rifle in the other. Huffman's *Trauma Eve* is part blackface mammy, part futuristic robot. Her melancholic glare is contrasted by the physicality of her body, as she stands ominously above the wreckage and detritus of a futuristic and dystopian landscape. Behind the figure is a kind of murky and otherworldly sky that is evocative of Abstract Expressionism's grand gestures. The combination of the racial signifier and nonobjective formalism creates a peculiar dynamism that is both unexpected and alluring.

I have previously written about how Huffman reconciles the tension between abstraction and figuration, interweaving two modes of image making that have been historically and theoretically codified as antithetical.³ Abstract Expressionism, and artistic formalism in general, have traditionally been positioned as politically benign and beyond the politics of identity—despite the prominent role postwar American Jews, who were battling the persistence of anti-Semitism in the West, had in its creation. I have always been fascinated by the positionality of nonobjective art as a visual expression that is more elevated and resists grousing about social ills. The brilliance of postwar Jewish American abstraction (like the traditions of African-American jazz) is precisely its gesture toward universality and

expressive freedom, in the face of ethnic animus. These expressive forms emerge out of societal intolerances and structural bigotries designed to constrain certain constituencies—essentially trapping them within their *Othered* bodies. Perhaps abstraction is about freedom, self-determination, and transcendence: a means to express an interiority and complexity that can only be articulated via the intangible. Is it possible to speak beyond the confines of one's skin, so to speak? In other words, can black artists transcend the racial fantasias and reductions that so often restrict the expressive potential?

The tension between racial legibility and the emancipatory creative gesture encapsulates Huffman's work—as he wrestles with the varying demands and minefields of being an African-American artist. Huffman was raised in Oakland, California, by a mother who was an artist for the Black Panther Party, and one can see the conflicting dualities of racial fidelity and the mythical universalism of abstraction in his painterly works. Many of his earlier paintings depicted astronaut-like figures that the artist terms “traumanauts.” These futuristic, minstrel-like characters are often dwarfed by ominous and surrealistic landscapes that allude to the visual language of formalism. The built-up surfaces, densely layered textures, and tonal washes of color give these works a rich three-dimensionality, while iconographic and allegorical references are also utilized. *Black Hole* (2008), is a mixed-media work on canvas that interweaves formalism and narrative representation. The painting's formalist backdrop is beautifully rendered in densely applied layers of oil and acrylic paint. Its muted tonalities of murky greens, dark yellows, ochres, reds, and blues give the painting an almost gloomy and threatening feeling. Along the bottom right of the composition is a carefully rendered capsule-like structure. In some respects, it appears to be a cylinder-shaped building with a dome ceiling, but it also looks like a kind of futuristic space station. At its base is a traumanaut figure, replete in white space suit, entering the mysterious structure from a small door. Despite its otherworldliness, *Black Hole* brings to mind the subtle layering of Chinese landscape painting.

As Huffman's work has evolved, both the figure and the artist's more didactic allusions and iconography have begun to dissipate. The use of racial signifiers has

receded in favor of a more direct engagement with formalist abstraction. *Blue Ice* (2013) is large-scale abstraction from Huffman's "Dark Matter" series, a body of paintings that draws its inspiration from astrophysics. "Dark Matter" explores the formal nuances of darkness, while simultaneously evoking the cosmic netherworlds that serve as backdrops for the artist's more illustrative traumanaut paintings. The figure tends to haunt the works in this series. *Blue Ice*, with its densely layered applications of acrylic, oil, spray paint, and glitter, reads like a psychedelic cosmos in some yet-unexplored region of space. While it nods to the history of American abstraction, it also feels entirely new and unexpected, as if intent on pushing the boundaries of nonobjective art beyond its romantic distancing from social engagement. Atop its richly applied layers and drips of blue paint, are cylindrical forms that, at first glance, appear to be stars and planets in dense configurations. On closer inspection, these forms are actually basketballs, complexly arranged like hieroglyphs. The basketball has long had a metaphorical relationship to African-American culture, but as a formal gesture, Huffman has managed to create an iconographic sign system that is nonfigurative, yet still engaged with the social-political realities of the African-American experience. The manner in which Huffman has injected sociopolitical concerns into a formal language is as stirring as it is inventive.

Huffman's series of pyramid sculptures, constructed from colored basketballs, are compelling in their three-dimensional realization of key aspects of his two-dimensional works. The found-object works concentrate key ideas from his paintings. For example, his *Liberation* (2019) features 650 basketballs, strikingly arranged in an Afrocentric formation of red, black and green, with a sound element containing a 10-minute loop of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech combined with sound files of Ganymede, Jupiter's largest moon. The balls themselves are fraught emblems of the purported athletic (though not intellectual) prowess of black men. The pyramid signifies the greatness of African antiquity, monumental structures of cultural aspiration and achievement. While basketballs conjure the exploitation and objectification of black bodies in professional sports, the pyramid shape evokes references from his video and paintings to Western culture's conspiracy theories around alien intervention as the only possible

explanation for the technological skill of the ancient African cultures that build such impressive structures. With their pungent odor of rubber, which strongly recalls a particular kind of embodied play, the basketball pyramids are complex: both lighthearted and symbolically burdened.

Even as Huffman strays further away from watermelons, minstrels, or traumanauts, his work continues to be politically engaged—playing with even more challenging forms of social symbolism. Recent works have begun to utilize screen-printed images of cotton gins, basketball nets, and chains, carefully applied with spray paint. *I Can't Breathe* (2015) is a large abstraction with the stenciled titular phrase: the last words of Eric Garner as he was being choked to death by a New York Police officer, Daniel Pantaleo. The words became a mantra of sorts and fueled activist resistance concerned with extrajudicial violence against the black community. Huffman's utilization of this phrase is both disturbingly powerful and cathartic in its anger and sense of urgency. Huffman's *Brother from Another Planet* (2019), continues the artist's fascination with abstraction, with its highly gestural applications of paint, combined with more minimalist color fields in shades of yellow, green, and blue. In this work, Huffman mines similar themes and iconographic references, while returning to his earlier astronaut-themed works. In this instance, the artist inserts a repeated screen-printed image of himself in an astronaut suit.

In these recent works, Huffman returns to more didactic forms of representational symbolism, playing with the unsubtle and the overt, while staying nestled within the formal and the material excesses of abstraction. His rather whimsical semiotic engagement with Colin Kaepernick's visage, collaged African batik fabrics, the colors of the black nationalist flag, and stenciled basketballs may—at least on the surface—appear to be a sign of an artist whose political commitments and machinations are overwhelming their creative spontaneity.

On the contrary, the artist has crafted a new formal language, and has reinvigorated nonobjective painting—engendering a new set of potentialities for formalist abstraction. What Huffman's "social abstraction" teaches us is that abstraction has always been a political act; it is as entangled with the messiness of identity, as it is

concerned with materiality and form. If it is true that the black artist must always “show that the system has made you suffer,” as Melvin Van Peebles suggests, then Huffman’s reconciliation of the impasse between content and form is a powerful rebuke to those social forces intent on segregating artistic production—restricting the creative potentialities of artists to prescribed genres and themes.

Huffman makes art about blackness, but he is also an abstract formalist, which in art historical terms is the ultimate contradiction. That said, Huffman’s social abstractions make a powerful argument that formalism is not just about escapist pleasures and fraudulent claims of the universal, that within all those tempestuous gestures and drips has always resided an irrepressible social urgency. One need only look a little closer. ■

1. Melvin Van Peebles. Quote from the documentary: *How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company (And Enjoy It)*, Directed by Joe Angelo, 2005, 86 min.

2. Ibid.

3. Derek Conrad Murray, “David Huffman, Black Universe” in *The International Review of African American Art*, <http://iraaa.museum.hamptonu.edu/page/David-Huffman%2C-Black-Universe>.

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