

# David Huffman at Jessica Silverman Gallery



By Jianfei  
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David Huffman's solo exhibition *Odyssey* at Jessica Silverman Gallery is a must-see for anyone interested in contemporary art that speaks to complex issues of group belonging, race, and social justice. The exhibition includes paintings and works on paper created from 2004 to 2009, all populated by Traumanauts. This is a character created by Huffman - Black astronauts navigating the political cosmos against stark, abstract backgrounds. Huffman has a history with the California College of the Arts (CCA), where he serves as a faculty member.

The exhibition's focus on the Traumanauts series offers an intriguing look into Huffman's earlier work for those who may be more familiar with his recent creations. The characters, which Huffman has suggested are linked to the psychological rupture caused by slavery, are used to explore issues of memory, loss, and trauma. In works such as *Intro to Dark Matter* (2006), an acrylic painting on canvas, Huffman depicts two Traumanaut characters floating into a void, where they encounter a celestial scene filled with vibrant, exploding stars and swirling galaxies, representing a mysterious and awe-inspiring beauty.

The characters' transformation is reminiscent of Octavia Butler's concept of "tangible aliens." Butler, a renowned African American science fiction author, used the term to describe beings who are physically present but still feel disconnected from their surroundings. In Huffman's work, the Traumanauts evolve from this state of alienation and reconnect with themselves as children of the cosmos, symbolizing a journey of self-discovery and identity formation. This exploration of identity and the self is a recurring theme throughout the exhibition. Though Huffman does not directly reference Octavia Butler's "tangible aliens" in his work, the shared theme of alienation and reconnection provides a compelling lens through which to analyze and appreciate the Traumanauts series. As viewers engage with the exhibition, they can further appreciate the depth and complexity of Huffman's artistic vision and its relevance to broader discussions of identity, belonging, and the African American experience.

Huffman's choice of materials further enriches his work. His works on paper often feature glitter, introducing a unique texture and shimmer that captivates viewers. Traditionally associated with femininity and youth culture, glitter is a potent and intentional choice in Huffman's work. This seemingly whimsical addition could be interpreted as a subversion of expectations, challenging the common stereotypes associated with themes of struggle, resilience, and trauma present in his work. The use of glitter

contrasts with the Traumanauts' representation of resilience and perseverance, creating a tension that invites viewers to reconsider societal expectations around strength, vulnerability, and gender roles. This interplay adds nuance to Huffman's exploration of identity in his work.

Huffman's background as the son of activists, including his mother who was a member of the Black Panther Party, informs his work as a painter and educator. His interest in art began at an early age, and his association with Afrofuturism – a cultural movement that combines science fiction, history, and fantasy to explore the African diaspora and address the experiences of Black people in the future – and the Black radical tradition is apparent in his work. The Black radical tradition encompasses a wide range of political, social, and cultural movements and figures who have fought for the liberation and empowerment of Black people throughout history.

Huffman's interest in science fiction and anime is also evident in these works. For instance, his use of the "traumabot" warrior in *Traumaeve 2 Battles Traumatanks* (2009) is reminiscent of the powerful female characters often found in science fiction, both visually and conceptually. The dynamic poses, futuristic armor, and vivid colors used in the piece mirror the aesthetic of many anime series. Similarly, the celestial imagery in *Intro to Dark Matter* evokes the fantastical settings and otherworldly visuals commonly associated with anime. These references to popular culture serve as a vehicle through which Huffman explores important social issues. By incorporating elements of science fiction and anime into his art, he creates a unique fusion of styles that not only attracts viewers but also encourages them to reflect on the underlying themes of identity, belonging, and the African American experience.

*Odyssey* is an incredibly rich and multifaceted exhibition that rewards close examination. It is a testament to Huffman's skill as an artist that he is able to combine so many disparate elements - formal abstraction, social justice, science fiction, and more - into a cohesive and thought-provoking body of work.



**David Huffman, *Intro to Dark Matter*, 2006**  
**Acrylic and gesso on mixed ground on canvas**

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