

ART REVIEW

Going Beyond Blackness, Into the Starry Skies

By **Holland Cotter**

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One day in the late 1930s, Herman Blount, an African-American music student in Alabama, had an unusual experience.

Beings from Saturn picked him up and carried him off to their planet.

“They had one little antenna on each ear,” he later recalled. “A little antenna over each eye. They talked to me.”

What did they say? They told him to forget school and start making music on his own, that the world was falling apart and that people needed to hear what he played. He took their advice. To compress a long story, he started composing and playing a highly unorthodox way-beyond-freestyle jazz. He formed a symphonic-size band. He made himself robes and crowns and called himself Sun Ra, said he had always been Sun Ra, and that outer space had always been his home, always would be.

Did he make this all up? Did he believe it? Who cares. Sun Ra revolutionized contemporary music. He gave African-American identity a new, loose, utopian way to go. And he inspired an interdisciplinary cultural movement called

Afrofuturism, which is the subject of a fabulous exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

The show's title, "The Shadows Took Shape," is a phrase from a Sun Ra poem. And the musician himself, who died in 1993 at 79, is represented by archival souvenirs: a ballpoint pen drawing for the cover of the 1960s album "Other Planes of There"; his annotated copy of a 1950s religious tract called "Let God Be True"; and a photograph of him by Charles Shabacon, in which he seems to have a high-beam headlight for a face.

The show isn't really a historical survey. The name Afrofuturism came into use only in the early 1990s. And some of the figures closely identified with it early on, like the musician George Clinton and his Parliament-Funkadelic bands, and the science fiction novelist Samuel R. Delany, are here only secondhand. Both appear in a fast-moving, eye-zapping 1995 film called "The Last Angel of History," along with the writers Octavia E. Butler and Ishmael Reed; the musician Paul D. Miller, a.k.a. DJ Spooky; and the African-American actress Nichelle Nichols, who played Lt. Nyota Uhura on the original "Star Trek."

The director of the film, John Akomfrah, was born in Ghana and now lives in London. And it is through his presence, and that of a handful of other artists from Africa, Asia and Europe, that Afrofuturism, often pegged as purely an African-American movement, is revealed to be a global phenomenon, with a stellar band of young artist-devotees.

What's appealing about it now is what was appealing about it to Sun Ra, who saw himself as a black alien in Jim Crow America. In outer space, there are no fixed races, no segregationist fears amid the music of the spheres.

Intergalactically, everyone's just a star among stars. If you want to stand out, that's fine, too. Otherness can be power, like rocket fuel.

This floating, negotiable concept of identity is a boon to artists who otherwise

feel painted into a corner by market-narrowed versions of American racial politics, or weighed down by the West's relentlessly dystopian view of Africa itself.

Afrofuturism lets artists retain race and its undismissible history as a subject, but encourages them to mess with it, go wild: dissect it, customize it, flaunt it, move beyond it, and do any and all of that in high visual style.

In some work here, style is a lot of the story. The Ghanaian-born photographer Harold Offeh beams himself down for the camera as a chubby version of the extraterrestrially long-limbed and lithe disconaut Grace Jones. The American artist Saya Woolfalk conjures up a species of half-human, half-botanical beings called Empathics, who, in sculptures and videos, dress in white leaf-suits spangled with rainbow mandalas.

The Kenyan artist Cyrus Kabiru introduces his "C-Stunner" line of funkadelicate eyewear, each exquisite example handmade from scrap metal harvested in the streets of Nairobi. Robert Pruitt, from Houston, photographs members of his family outfitted in space-gangsta couture accessorized with guns. And in a series of collages, the New York artist Wayne Hodge gives photographic heads of black men a second, bionic skin formed from cut-and-pasted images of arcane mechanical devices found in sci-fi magazines.

As the black body is redefined and transformed, so is black history. In a series of photographs, the Spanish-born Cristina de Middel reimagines the all-but-forgotten story of a space program proposed in 1964 by a schoolteacher in Zambia, with the goal of sending an African on an interstellar journey. With comparable blending of fiction and fact, the Angolan artist Kiluanji Kia Henda creates a space-age vision of his homeland by photographing buildings there. The future is now, if you want it.

For better and worse, past, present and future are intertwined. An apocalyptic-minded mural by Edgar Arceneaux combines newspaper reports of 1967 racial violence in Detroit, painted images of engulfing ocean waves, and references to a suboceanic civilization descended from slaves thrown overboard during the Middle Passage.

In a wonderful, time-traveling 2008 painting by David Huffman, we see the prophet Moses miraculously opening a path in a paradisaical landscape so that a procession of black astronauts — he calls them “traumanauts” — carrying the coffin of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. can pass through.

And then there are just sky’s-the-limit fantasies. In a video animation, the Egyptian artist Khaled Hafez has the Pharaonic god of the afterlife, Anubis, return to the politically fraught consumerist world of present-day Cairo. The Jerusalem-born Larissa Sansour imagines Palestine as a machine-tooled skyscraper, part corporate headquarters, part welfare housing, where ethnic identity is perpetually being processed.

In a more utopian vein, a marker drawing by the New York graffiti artist and hip-hop frontiersman Rammellzee (1960-2010) envisions the world to come as a kind of celestial train yard waiting to be tagged. And William Cordova, who was born in Peru in 1969 and seems to touch everywhere these days, provides a miniature sculptural spacecraft equipped for flight. Built with a crew of fellow artists, Nyeema Morgan among them, it’s based on the original U.S.S. Enterprise, but with postmodern amenities. There is, for example, a cultural studies library with thumbnail-size books on black history. One is Eldridge Cleaver’s black liberationist shout-out, “Soul on Ice,” which, in a collision of contradictions that was the 1960s, appeared at the same time the escapist “Star Trek” was having its first TV run.

Pop and politics are central to the Afrofuturist aesthetic, monumentally so in Derrick Adams's reconstruction of the giant head of the Great Oz from the all-black 1978 film version of "The Wiz," a tale that welded robotic technoculture to song-and-dance sentimentality. Afrofuturism could easily be played for laughs, though the show's organizers — Naima J. Keith, assistant curator at the Studio Museum, and Zoe Whitley, an independent curator based in London — make sure that it's not. There's plenty of wit circulating in the galleries, but there's more than that. As Sun Ra himself said: "I'm playing dark history. It's beyond black. I'm dealing with the dark things of the cosmos."

Beyond black is an important part of Afrofuturism, and of this show. At least a few of the artists — Ms. de Middel, Lili Reynaud-Dewar from France — don't identify themselves as black but deal with African or African-American subjects. A video fable by the Kenyan artist Wanuri Kahiu, about ecological cataclysm and survival, is set in a fictional Africa but could take place anywhere. A porcelain sculpture of a music score by Cauleen Smith carries the single phrase "You Are From Outer Space," with the identity of the "you" left wide-open.

The Studio Museum, which coined the much-debated term "post-black" more than a decade ago, has been stretching at its own ethnically specific boundaries ever since. With this show, it subtly but decisively breaches them, a big step for an institution, and, with its implications for what we may experience here in the future, a spacious leap for us all.