Afro-futurism Arrives at the Hayward Gallery

Pauline de Souza

‘In the Black Fantastic’, Hayward Gallery, London, 29th June – 18th September 2022

Imagine an alternative universe, one which allows you to boldly go where no one has gone before, where mythological creatures roam and new conversations about civilisation occur, where your cultural identity is not a stigma but instead is a badge of pride challenging racism. ‘In the Black Fantastic’ creates this space for the eleven artists featured in the exhibition: Nick Cave, Sedrick Chisom, Ellen Gallagher, Hew Locke, Wangechi Mutu, Rashaad Newsome, Chris Ofili, Tabita Rezaire, Cauleen Smith, Lina Iris Viktor and Kara Walker. The exhibition is curated by Ekow Eshun.

‘In the Black Fantastic’ follows two important previous exhibitions at the Hayward Gallery that focused on the work of African, African American, Caribbean and Asian artists: ‘The Other Story’, curated by Rasheed Araeen in 1979, and ‘Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent’, curated by Simon Njami, Jean-Hubert Martin, David Elliot and Roger Malbert in 2005. These two exhibitions aimed to introduce new artists to audiences while breaking down white myths of black creativity and dealing with racial inequalities, as does ‘In the Black Fantastic’. But exhibition titles are just as important as the curatorial narratives. ‘The Other Story’ sought to demonstrate and legitimise the suppressed history of a modernist aesthetic among British visual artists of African, Caribbean and African Asian ancestry. It made an impact internationally but was highly criticised by critics in the UK who had problems comprehending the need to de-imperialise cultural institutions.¹ ‘Africa Remix’ was attacked for using the word ‘continent’ in its title because it generalised the creativity emerging in different countries, and the choice of artists appeared random. The use of the word ‘Remix’ was analysed to see if the exhibition offered progressive development in the visual arts; for some critics it did not. Despite these criticisms, ‘Africa Remix’ did show what art had been made in African countries to a national and international audience.

So, the question is: why has it taken the Hayward Gallery seventeen years to have a group exhibition that focuses on contemporary art from the African diaspora? Is it because

¹ See Jean Fisher, ‘The Other Story and the Past Imperfect’, Tate Papers No 12, 2009
www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/12/the-other-story-and-the-past-imperfect
the decline in public funding restricts exhibition programming? Arts Council England has continued to position cultural diversity as a core principle in their funding policies, but debates about cultural diversity and public funding continue. The definition of cultural diversity is in the hands of many stakeholders. Sometimes the stakeholders’ good intentions are misplaced, because even in-depth research on cultural diversity has its limitations, and managing the impact of the 2008 recession plus Covid-19 has meant that other priorities are more important. Sound financial management is key in exhibition programming in order to revitalise an institution in significant decline. ‘In the Black Fantastic’ could potentially be a sound investment for the Hayward Gallery exhibition programme, and enable the institution to boost its finances. Other previous Hayward exhibitions, such as ‘The Infinite Mix’ (a pop-up exhibition at The Store on The Strand in 2016) and ‘Mixing It Up: Painting Today’ in 2021, were seen as beneficial financial investments for the exhibition programme. These exhibitions consisted of artists from global ethnic minority groups, a new term used to describe a broad range of non-white people, and were titled without using any racial reference, allowing all the artists to represent their work in a racially neutral setting. This does raise the question of why ‘In the Black Fantastic’ uses ‘Black’ in its title. Targeting a particular demographic in order to aid finances is a distinct possibility; ongoing discussions about tapping into the black economy started some time ago. The most recent report is GiveBlack, which looks at black philanthropy.2 A blockbuster exhibition with a broad title is another way for public galleries to extend their audience and constitutes another form of financial investment. Many of the artists in this exhibition are represented by major commercial galleries,3 and it is noticeable that these galleries all supported the exhibition. Such galleries depend on public art institutions to show their artists in order to increase the prices of their artworks, and amongst the audiences are potential collectors, curators and art writers, who in their own way help with the promotion of artworks and this then feeds into the art market.

So, what does the title of the exhibition really signify, and precisely what constitutes the curatorial narrative? Eshun declares ‘the turn to the fantastical has nothing to do with escapism. On the contrary, it suggests a refusal to live within the constraints of a society that defines Black people as inferior and alien’ in the era of Rodney King, George Floyd and Black Lives Matter.4 It is a challenging perspective, which allows funders to comment on the effects of inequality in contemporary society. The US Embassy in London and The London Community Foundation were the main funders of this exhibition. One of The London Community Foundation’s responsibilities is to connect philanthropists to the public

---

2 GiveBlack is in collaboration with UCL Culture and the brainchild of four UK-based Black women in senior leadership roles in the arts, education and business. Althea Efunshile CBE, Yvette Griffith, Patricia Hamzahee FRSA and Sue Woodford-Hollick OBE aim to galvanise Black philanthropy as an intentional source of support for organisations serving Black communities and advocating for racial justice and social change; see https://www.giveblackuk.org/
3 Nick Cave is represented by the Jack Shainman Gallery, Chris Ofili and Wangechi Mutu by the Victoria Miro Gallery, Hew Locke by Hales Gallery, while Spruth Magers represents Kara Walker and Gagosian represents Ellen Gallagher
4 Ekow Eshun, ‘In the Black Fantastic’, exhibition guide, 2022, p 1
sector by the donor-advisor system. The Cockayne Foundation also supported ‘In the Black Fantastic’ when it awarded funding from its Grants for the Arts programme to The London Community Foundation in 2020. Seven out of eleven of the artists are from the United States. The Cockayne Foundation is a private family foundation based in San Francisco, deriving out of the Columbia Foundation that funded art projects involving artists from diverse backgrounds, dealing with social injustice and disenfranchised communities showing in London. On their website The London Community Foundation states that the Cockayne Grants for the Arts programme does not support projects whose primary focus is social or political concerns. The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Exchange Programs at the US Embassy in London has the Arts Envoy funding scheme with its on cross-cultural understanding and shared values. Due to the decline in public funding, the arts sector has had to seek financial support from other sources. Having two institutions with American connections as main funders also raises another question: why have they funded ‘In the Black Fantastic’? With the deep divisions of racial inequality in the United States, and the lack of progress in addressing this divide, it is a question that is impossible to ignore. The racial divide is complicated; as President Biden’s progressive wing of the Democratic Party spotlights systematic racism, white philanthropists seek to address the injustice to ease their conscience. The selection of American artists for ‘In the Black Fantastic’ probably attracted funding because the artists matched the criteria for a focus on offering opportunities for Black artists and people of colour. The Cockayne Grants for the Arts programme also seeks to support the commissioning of new work; however, there is very little new work in this exhibition. It is clear that it has been social and political issues that helped to secure the funding. In relation to shared values, the UK has its own problems with systematic racism and access to the arts for Black people and people of colour. Funding from these two institutions continues the habit of supporting artists who are defined either by their ethnicity and/or socio-political concerns, without any consideration of the material and aesthetic value present in the work, whereas ‘The Other Story’ and ‘Africa Remix’ did not fail to take this on board. Both these earlier exhibitions received Arts Council Funding to promote cultural diversity in the arts sector, but instead of just spotlighting the identity of the artists, their art practice and how the work was made were discussed in detail.

Eshun’s curatorial narrative describes many spaces that ‘embrace fantasy as a zone of creative and cultural liberation’, which are contrary to racial injustice, while simultaneously understanding race ‘as a socially constructed fiction rather than a scientific truth’. This suggests that it is possible for the exhibition to break from a restricted modernity – as the cultural critic Mark Dery proposed in his 1994 essay, ‘Black to the Future’ – to ponder other

---


6 Ekow Eshun, ‘In the Black Fantastic’, exhibition guide, p 1

7 Ibid
possible futures. It does not mean that the exhibition turns away from racial constructions. The narrative acknowledges that societies can easily treat racist oppression as an anomaly.

As an exhibition title, ‘In the Black Fantastic’ draws people in. It evokes creative images, allowing them to become solid forms that are memorable and autonomous. It is not the first time this title has been used. Richard Iton used the term ‘Black Fantastic’ in his book In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era published in 2008. Iton’s book uses the term to destabilise Western modernity and deploy tactics to encompass African American cultural production. This approach has been used by Eshun, with added emphasis placed on the need to move ‘beyond the boundaries of realism’.

‘In the Black Fantastic’ emerges from an interest in Afro-Futurism. Mark Dery coined the term Afro-Futurism in ‘Black to the Future’, where he declared that Black people have ‘other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come’. The exhibition has given the artists enough space to explore all these areas. Each artist has their own section and is seen in isolation. This might appear fragmented, but it is a productive way to curate a show such as this, where connections become evident as the viewer moves around the gallery. In the exhibition there are references to outer space as the final frontier, the possibility of new life and civilisations, as exampled by Nick Cave’s Soundsuit (2014) and Soundsuit (2020). The first combines two spacesuit designs, the light spacesuit worn inside a pressurised spacecraft and the headgear for the extravehicular activity worn outside the spacecraft.

Nick Cave, Soundsuit, 2014, mixed media including fabric, buttons, antique sifter and wire, 211 x 60.5 x 67.5 cm, courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and the Mandrake Hotel Collection

---

10 Ekow Eshun, ‘In the Black Fantastic’, exhibition catalogue, 2022, p 10
11 Mark Dery, ‘Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose’, op cit, p 182
Soundsuit materials are different from normal spacesuits. Instead of neoprene-coated nylon, aluminised mylar, fabric incorporating kevlar, nomex and teflon, Cave uses pearly buttons, bugle-beaded textured motifs, wire and upholstery fabric for the helmet. For Soundsuit 8:46, the materials are vintage textiles, sequinned appliqués and flowers. The Soundsuits are placed on mannequins. There is no direct reference to space in Soundsuit 8:46, but metamorphosis plays a part in both Soundsuits as the costumes entirely obscure the body.

Different forms of metamorphosis are explored in sci-fi television programmes such as Star Trek and Space 1999. In the former, metamorphosis happens in relation to inanimate objects such as clouds as well as animate objects like aliens. Maya, one of the main characters in Space 1999, transforms herself into both animate and inanimate objects, into animals, clothing, sticks, trees and pots, and she also has the ability to change things such as sticks into other inanimate objects. In Nick Cave’s Soundsuits, the body metamorphosises into different beings: Soundsuit (2014), with its large upholstered round eye, appears to be a Cyclops, and Soundsuit 8:46 appears to be a combination of Dogon and Burkinabe costumed dancers. The reference to space might seem obscure, but let us remember that during the space race between the United States and the USSR, the school teacher Edward Mukuka Nkoloso founded the Zambia National Academy of Science, Space Research and Philosophy (1964). The film Afraonauts (2014) imagines Nkoloso’s ambitions for space exploration, while Martin Luther King Jr was a friend of Nichelle Nichols, whose Star Trek character, Lieutenant Uhura, made an impact because it was the first time an African American woman had been given a high-profile role. Cave’s Soundsuits also present the black body on its own terms and can be worn by anyone. The elaborate patterns and decorative motifs stress the beauty of these figures whose identity is concealed, counteracting the racial stereotypes, and including the police brutality targeted at the black body, because the body is hidden.

From outer space to the sea, where the black body continues to be transformed. Ellen Gallagher’s Ecstatic Draught of Fishes (2020) depicts Drexciya, the mythic Black Atlantis. In Gallagher’s painting, female sea creatures swim on the sea floor amongst the shells and the coral. Modelled on ritual Fang figurines from Central Africa they are the descendants of the pregnant African slaves thrown overboard from ships during the Middle Passage. In this dangerous area between the West African coastlines and the New World, slave trading captains had no qualms about eliminating slaves in order to reduce the burden of care for these bodies. As the women were discarded, their foetuses breathed in the embryonic fluid, enabling them to adapt to living under the sea. These female sea creatures are mermaids. Another reference to mermaids is found in Wangechi Mutu’s The screamer island dreamer (2014), which derives its references from East African Nguva folklore. The strange female mammal dugong, with its human-like limbs, that swims in the ocean off East Africa, is the foundation for the myth of the mermaid. Mutu’s use of collage, paint and ink creates a frightening, fish-like female figure luring people into the sea. Gallagher’s creative vision
matures in her *Ecstatic Draught of Fishes*, where the layering of materials, by adding palladium combining oil and pigment on the canvas, vividly evokes the multifarious life of the ocean’s depth.

Chris Ofili’s 2019 series of paintings depicting the goddess Calypso and Odysseus, based on Homer’s *Odyssey*, brings us up from the ocean depth to the surface. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus is imprisoned by Calypso on the island of Ogygia in the Aegean Sea. In her consensual seduction, she promises him immortality while preventing him from returning home to his wife. Ofili’s paintings replace Ogygia with his homeland of Trinidad and Tobago, islands surrounded by the Caribbean sea and the North Atlantic ocean. Isolated by water, and also at home, Odysseus’s resistance to Calypso’s love is no longer necessary. In *Kiss* (2019) Calypso is depicted as a mermaid, and Odysseus, with his dark skin, hints at the meeting of different cultures, and potential problems when there is a power struggle between cultures. The history of the Caribbean islands is deeply rooted in the slave trade and colonialism.

From the sea to the earth, where the body summarily refutes racist rhetoric by revealing the warped narcissism implicit in white supremacist discourse. Lina Iris Viktor’s *Eleventh* (from her *A Haven, A Hell, A Dream Deferred* series, 2018) contains a history of Liberia presented as a paradise lost. Freeborn African Americans and former slaves who had their freedom bought, were resettled in Liberia by the white American Colonization Society from 1822. The African Americans encountered African slaves who were rescued and freed from slavery by the American Navy. The Society was attracted to the idea of Christian universalism along with the possibility of salvation for all, but this did not prevent it from using the existing codes that controlled the lives of African Americans in the US to deny equal rights to those living in Liberia. Posing as the Libyan Sibyl Phemonoe, Lina Iris Viktor foretells the future of the country. The positioning of the figure, invented regional names based on nineteenth-century maps, the red, white and blue referencing the American flag, and the use of 24 karat gold, all enhance the power of this work. Sedrick Chisom’s paintings are less dynamic, yet the subject matter is equally important. *Medusa Wandered the Wetlands of the Capital Citadel Undisturbed by Two Confederate Drifters Preoccupied by Poisonous Vapors that Stirred in the Night Air* (2021) is part of a series of paintings driven by the fantasy notion that people of colour have left the earth, leaving behind only white people with a pigment altering disease which gradually transforms them into monstrous creatures. The white soldiers in the painting are dressed in the Confederate uniform of the American Civil War. In the fantasy behind the paintings, battles between those whites not yet transformed and the monstrous creatures constantly take place. The white population is at war with itself. Wangechi Mutu’s video *The End of eating Everything* (2013) also looks at the potential catastrophe inflicting the planet. The overconsumption driven by neoliberal capitalism has the African American singer Santigold’s bulbous body covered with human limbs and machine parts that implodes as she eats the birds.
Sedrick Chisom, *Medusa Wandered the Wetlands of the Capital Citadel Undisturbed by Two Confederate Drifters Preoccupied by Poisonous Vapors that Stirred in the Night Air*, 2021, oil, acrylic, spray paint and watercolour pencil on tiled sheets of paper glued to canvas, 152 x 208 cm, courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias, London; photo by Mark Blower.

Hew Locke’s equestrian *Ambassadors* (2021) allude to rebellion and defence against Western powers. He describes them as ‘Survivors on horseback in a dystopian, burnt-out landscape, heading for the future’. These mannequin figures covered with various plastic beads and fabrics are imposing. They look straight ahead, ignoring your gaze as you look up at them. There is hope and determination in their eyes. Locke’s interest in Black history is the main focus of this work, and references to colonial medals, slave pennies and portraits of Toussaint Louverture can be seen on the heavy baggage and clothing of the *Ambassadors*. They are transporting Black History into the future to ensure it is not forgotten. Locke’s photographic work in the series *How Do You Want Me?* (2007) portrays the artist dressed in fabric, plastic beads, lizards, flowers and a coat of arms, posed against a backdrop of traditional colonial Guyanese houses influenced by the indigenous Warrau Indian huts. In this series Locke questions the construction of Guyanese identity by colonial powers. This work is connected to his *Coat of Arms* series commissioned by The Drawing Room in 2004, which also focuses on emblems as sources of power. The *Ambassadors* shows how his art practice has become more sophisticated over time.

---

Hew Locke, *Ambassador 1*, 2021, mixed media: wood, resin, fabric, metal, plastic, 155 x 50 x 137 cm, courtesy of the artist, photo by Anna Arca

---

12 Hew Locke, ‘In the Black Fantastic’, exhibition guide, 2022, p 8
Kara Walker’s *Prince McVeigh and the Turner Blasphemies* (2021) is another work in which the artist uses her distinctive artistic style, cut-paper silhouettes, to portray crimes by white supremacists committed against African Americans. Her film explores the myth-making of American identity as it becomes part of the national consciousness influenced by the 1978 novel *The Turner Diaries* by William Luther Pierce (originally published under the pseudonym Andrew MacDonald). While Walker’s concern is the destruction of democracy and African Americans, *The Turner Film Diaries* (2012) directed by James T Hong and Yin-Ju Chen looks at the possibility of ethnic cleansing worldwide. The book and the film were both banned in the US when they caused political unrest. Perhaps Walker’s work could have been more diverse, demonstrating the problem of worldwide ethnic cleansing and not just the history of genocide against African Americans.

Cauleen Smith, a multimedia artist and filmmaker, is not so well known to a British audience. In her *Epistrophy* (2018), a collection of personal objects – African sculpture, plastic figurines, monitors, plants, a magic 8-ball, shells – are laid out on a table, and films are projected on the walls showing a ‘National Geographic’ landscape with African sculptures, a strange sunset taken from NASA’s photographic archive, and an unknown urban environment. The installation evokes a personal history of her African American identity and her interest in science fiction. The title comes from a literary and music term describing a phrase that is repeated to create a dramatic effect. It has been installed to essentially function as an immersive whole. Even though the work is engaging, it takes time to make the connection between African diasporic cultures and the technological innovations that feature in science fiction. In Smith’s painting series, *BLK FMNNST Loaner Library* (2019), where she has painted book covers, *Return to Exile* is another connection to music, where Joseph Jarmen puts forward a *Black Manifesto for Music*, while *Riot* by Gwendolyn Brooks is a book of poems influenced by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Tabita Rezaire’s *Ultra Wet – Recapitulation* (2017–2018), a video projected onto a pyramid, uses her decolonial healing practice and theory to move away from the hierarchies found in colonial and postcolonial structures. Images of foliage collected by her Sangoma, a traditional South African healer, images of Egypt and a snake, show how these cultures have different knowledge systems of healing and protection against Western racism. Talking heads and narrators inform us further about traditional healing methods that involve understanding the stars. Healing is also found in Cauleen Smith’s painting of the book *The Salt Eaters*, Toni Cade Bambara's first novel, published in 1980. The book is all about healing, in which a *haint*, a spiritual guide, is called upon to help the healing of a woman who has attempted suicide. Healing has now been incorporated into discussions about care, especially after the impact of Black Lives Matter, and cultural institutions are trying to find ways to incorporate notions of care in their dealings with artists and employees.
The Southbank Centre, which the Hayward Gallery is part of, had to deal with issues of making non-white employees redundant during the first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020. The ‘Statement on anti-racism’ on their website declares ‘We stand proudly in solidarity with our staff, our artists, and all our communities who are voicing their anguish and anger at this time. We will continue to use our platforms to amplify Black voices and call for urgent and immediate action to stamp out racism and inequality’.13

But there is another aspect to Rezaire’s work. Conversations with her Sangoma made her rethink our understanding of gender identity, and the duality between male and female. Using basic computer-generated imagery and chroma composition, images of two brown-skinned men walking across the same foliage, breasts floating in space and voiceovers discussing sexuality focuses on the alignment of masculine-feminine energy in one body. The history of colonialism enforces the dichotomy between the male and female body. Patriarchy as an evil force is the theme in Rashaad Newsome’s video *Build or Destroy* (2021). The intertwining of African sculpture and cultural references from the Black queer community makes it possible to break the shackles of heterosexual identity as the fictional

13 See the Southbank Centre’s ‘Statement on anti-racism’, by Elaine Bedell (Chief Executive) and the Executive Team www.southbankcentre.co.uk/about/mission-values/diversity-inclusion/statement-on-anti-racism
cityscape burns in the background. In Newsome’s work it is Black Trans Femme identity that becomes the power to build or destroy. This determination to survive can be connected to the Black Trans Femme Artists Collective based in New York City, formed to provide space for cultural production.

‘In the Black Fantastic’ is not just an exhibition about racial hierarchies and decolonialism, it is an exhibition where the creative imagination incorporates sci-fi, film, fiction and cultural critique. It is an exhibition allowing artists with these lived experiences to speak to each other, it allows the audience with these same lived experiences to engage and speculate about the future, pondering where they want to be and enabling others to join the conversation.

**Pauline de Souza** is Senior Lecturer in the Fine Art Department at the University of East London in the UK, and responsible for the Cultural Manoeuvres Programme for the Visual Arts Cluster. She is Director of Diversity Art Forum and sits on the TATE BAN Steering Group. She has written many essays and articles for different publications.