NY CULTURE

'Afrofuturism' on Display in Harlem Museum

Art Show Features Works Exploring 'What Ifs' of Race Relations, Other Worlds

By ANDY BATTAGLIA
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A century from now, what will it mean to be black? Will the earthly concerns of history and identity retain their weight in outer space?

Those are the sorts of questions posed by the Studio Museum in Harlem's exhibition "The Shadows Took Shape," opening Thursday, and the theme of "Afrofuturism" that it focuses on.

"Afrofuturism is thinking about other worlds and what they could mean," said Naima J. Keith, co-curator of the show. "What if we were to go to another planet? Would we all coexist? Would there be racism?"

After emerging in the 1990s to describe a strain of African-American science fiction, Afrofuturism as an idea has grown to encompass an array of music, movies and art. Precursors include the sci-fi author Samuel R. Delany, the funk band Parliament-Funkadelic and especially the late Sun Ra, an avant-garde jazzman who changed his name from Herman Poole Blount and claimed the planet Saturn as his birthplace.

"A lot of people were influenced by Sun Ra as this larger-than-life character, born in Alabama, where everything in his life was saying he was lesser-than, who decides to create his own identity," said Zoe Whitley, the show's other co-curator, based in London. "He's Sun Ra. He's from Saturn, and he really embraced that."

The idea of inventing a fantastical world and living in it has persisted in black music—see contemporary pop stars such as OutKast and Janelle Monae—but it appears in the work of other kinds of artists as well, many of them active outside the U.S.

The Studio Museum show features work by 36 artists representing 15 countries. Derrick Adams's large silver sculpture was made for the exhibition and is inspired by "The Wiz," the 1978 "Wizard of Oz" remake that starred Michael Jackson, Diana Ross and Richard Pryor.

"It's from an epic scene in the movie when they realize [the wizard] wasn't magic—it was just a mask," Mr. Adams said. "I like that scene because, for me, futurism relates to things not working out sometimes."

Saya Woolfalk, who, like Mr. Adams, is based in Brooklyn, created an installation featuring a TV-like console that can remix a household interior, with music by DJ Spooky. "Even though it's futuristic," she said, "it's actually about the dreams and desires of people in the..."
Other artists signal the exhibition's global reach, including the British-Ghanaian filmmaker John Akomfrah, creator of the impressionistic documentary "The Last Angel of History," and the Egyptian Khaled Hafez, whose video work features images of jackal-headed god Anubis walking the streets of contemporary Cairo.

In an installation titled "Icarus 13," Kiluanji Kia Henda addresses colonialism in his native Angola by way of photographs of futuristic buildings and fictitious details from a solar space mission that never happened.

“All the buildings actually exist—he photographed monumental state architecture but reframed it as if it were part of a fabled launch,” Ms. Whitley said. “We wanted to open up a lot of conversations and make this an expansive subject, rather than a kitschy [history of] Labelle and their silver lamé jumpsuits. That playful element is there—it needs to be there—but there are other aspects.”


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