

BERKELEY ART CENTER

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David Huffman: Afro Hippie

August 14 - October 16, 2021



David Huffman, *This Season's People*, 2021, acrylic, oil, African fabric, glitter, spray paint, color pencil and gouache on panel, 72 in. x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist.

July 20, 2021, Berkeley, Calif. — Berkeley Art Center presents *David Huffman: Afro Hippie*, a solo exhibition of new and existing work that examines the artist's experience growing up in Berkeley, California; his family connections to the countercultural movements of the 1960s and '70s; and his continued pursuit of a formal visual lexicon for African American identity. A deeply personal show, *Afro Hippie* includes large-scale paintings, family mementos, artwork from his mother, and a series of 'psychic portraits' that have never been exhibited. *Afro Hippie* also considers the formative complexities of Berkeley as a site for social change, experimental thought, and the psychological and aesthetic reverberations of that pivotal time in California and American history. *Afro Hippie* opens on August 14 and runs through October 16, 2021. Exhibition programming will be announced on the Berkeley Art Center website.

The first time David Huffman carried a protest sign, he was five years old. Born and raised in Berkeley in the late 1960s and '70s, Huffman was heavily influenced by his mother's social and political activism—especially her work for the Black Panthers, which included designing the iconic Free Huey flag. The show's title *Afro Hippie* references his interest in reuniting two important local historical movements that have been segregated over time: Black Power and free love. For Huffman, the adults of his childhood were all part of a single community—Black and white, Oakland and Berkeley—mingled together and united by radical ideals.

Working collaboratively with Berkeley Art Center and given artistic freedom to pursue an expansive representation of his work, Huffman chose to highlight the multidisciplinary nature of his art practice, which includes painting, sculpture and video. On his collaboration with BAC and what makes this show unique, Huffman states: "This show gives me the opportunity to bring all of my research into one place and present it at the same time; it's like the inside of a lab."



Anchoring *Afro Hippie* are Huffman's large-scale, mixed-media "Social Abstractions," cosmically chaotic paintings that appear, from afar, to be pure expressionist abstractions. However, as the viewer is pulled into their orbit, apparitions of African textiles and Black cultural icons appear. Filigrees of swirling basketball hoop nets and chains are outlined by glitter and bold parallel zigzag lines. Gestural drawing marks loaded with emotion are pulled to the surface of the paintings. Amidst the converging elements, signatures of narrative, story and meaning begin to emerge.

Alongside his Social Abstractions, Huffman's never-before-seen *Psychic Portraits* will also be on view. These figurative paintings are stark and elegant counterpoints to his

abstract work. Inspired by his mother's interest in psychic energy and the paranormal as well as defaced and decaying Egyptian wood figurines acquired during travel, Huffman was struck by the mystery in the figures' worn-down features and broken off extremities. In what he describes as an "intuitive, forensic" process, Huffman follows the lines of the face, but also draws on his own psychic sensibilities to reimagine the personalities of his subjects.

While these two bodies of work appear formally divergent on the surface, like all of Huffman's creations, a centralized concept of imagined identity emerges out of diversified aesthetics. Whether reinventing a historical personage from African history or layering his paintings with Black cultural iconography, Huffman describes the African American experience as an exercise in constructing identity, one that was obliterated during slavery, and that must be remade using what is available. Be it Ghanaian textiles or the reclamation of the pyramids of Giza as a lineage symbol, Huffman's practice is an exercise in invention.

Physically central in *Afro Hippie* will be a life-size tin foil pyramid with openings that will allow viewers to see a swirling floor of video projections inside. While Huffman's mother, Dolores Davis, was an artist and craftsperson for the Black Panther Party, her interest in the paranormal fueled her creative production as well. Huffman describes tin foil pyramids all over the surface of his childhood home, triangular totems meant to tap into and harness supernatural energy. Emblematic of the metaphysical spirituality of both counterculture Berkeley and African American culture, this flirtation with the transcendental suggests yet another strategy for coping with the trauma and erasure of African American history.

Afro Hippie orchestrates a confluence of the artist's immediate history growing up in Berkeley with his artistic and intellectual pursuit of a psychic reconstruction of identity. In weaving these personal and conceptual threads together in one place, *Afro Hippie* becomes a site of creative convergence, an amalgam of the real and imagined relics that make up the building blocks of the self.

About the Artist

David Huffman (b. in Berkeley, CA in 1963) studied at the New York Studio School, New York, NY, and the California College of the Arts and Crafts in Oakland, CA. He received his MFA at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco in 1999.

Selected solo exhibitions include his forthcoming display at the Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, CA, Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, CA; "Print Project," Paulson Fontaine Press, Berkeley, CA; "Worlds in Collision," Roberts and Tilton Gallery, Culver City, CA; "Everything Went Dark Until I Saw Angels," Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco, CA; "Out of Bounds," San Francisco Art Commission Galleries, San Francisco, CA; "Dig It!" Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco, CA; and "Land of the New Rising Sun," Lizabeth Oliveria Gallery, Los Angeles, CA. Selected group exhibitions include the forthcoming "Personal to Political," Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, Detroit, MI; "Ordinary Objects/Wild Things," de Young Museum, San Francisco, CA; "Counternarratives," Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles, CA; "There's Reality and Then There's California," NIAD Art Center, Richmond, CA; "Way Bay," Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California Berkeley, Berkeley, CA; "Where is Here," (curated by Jacqueline Francis and Kathy Zarur), Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, CA; and "Portraits and Other

Likenesses,” San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, CA.

His work is included in the permanent collections of Arizona State University Art Museum, Arizona State University, Tempe Campus, Tempe, AZ; Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, AR; Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA; Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL; Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA; de Saisset Museum, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA; Embassy of the United States of America, Dakar, Senegal; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Oakland Museum of Art, Oakland, CA; Palo Alto Arts Center, Palo Alto, CA; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA; and The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY. David Huffman lives and works in Oakland, CA.

About Berkeley Art Center

Berkeley Art Center (BAC) is a hub for artistic exploration and community building that champions work by Bay Area artists and curators. Nestled in Live Oak Park in North Berkeley, the gallery makes contemporary art approachable and accessible — for free — at an intimate scale. Since its founding in 1967, BAC has exhibited work by important local figures such as Robert Bechtle, Enrique Chagoya, Taraneh Hemami, Mildred Howard, Hung Liu, Jim Melchert, Chiura Obata, Sonya Rapoport, Betye Saar, Katherine Sherwood, Peter Voulkos, and Carrie Mae Weems, among many others. For more information and images, contact Kim Arteché at 510-644-6893 or info@berkeleyartcenter.org. Berkeley Art Center is located in Live Oak Park at 1275 Walnut Street, Berkeley, CA 94709. Gallery hours are Wednesday through Sunday, 11 am to 5 pm. Admission is free. Generous support for Berkeley Art Center is provided by the City of Berkeley, the Alameda County Arts Commission, the California Arts Council, the East Bay Community Foundation/East Bay Fund for Artists, Mechanics Bank, Wattis Foundation, Zellerbach Family Foundation, and BAC’s members and donors.