

Afronauts: A Conversation about Paintings from Spaces In-Between

Daniel Kojo Schrade in conversation with Henriette Gunkel (Goldsmiths University)

H.G.: Daniel, you have been thinking around, and working in the realm of, Afrofuturism for a while now. The figure of the Afronaut, for example, appears in a number of your works. It is also the title of a series of paintings you have produced. How did that series come about, what inspired you?

D.K.S.: That was around 1999, after I had done a series of works and paintings with titles like *DuBois, Made in Diaspora* or *Brother Beethoven*.¹ The *Afronaut* series arose under the influence of a number of things, such as the work of musicians like George Clinton, Sun Ra, and Lee Scratch Perry, whose performances in outfits with mirrors, antennas, and helmet-like objects on his head in a way bring together the trickster and shaman with the space voyager. An interview with Henry Louis Gates that I read in 1998, about his *Encyclopedia Africana*, also played a role. In the conversation, the journalist made fun of the project, questioning the point of an *Encyclopedia Africana* when there existed already an *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Gates expressed really beautifully why he was going to present Ludwig van Beethoven, the European cultural icon, as an Afrodiasporic time traveler in his *Encyclopedia*. It is an important subject.

My *Afronauts* are dislocated characters who create and control their image spaces themselves. They claim the power to renegotiate ascriptions of identity. The roots of my painting lie in gestural abstraction, and the presence of *Afronauts* in these otherwise homogenous paintings has an unsettling effect. It transforms my work into painting that comes from the “spaces in-between.” The *Afronauts* often function as elements that operate in the liminal space between foreground and background. At a certain point, the viewer is left alone with their own “reading ability.” The *Afronauts* are an important projection surface not just in my paintings, but in my performances, too.

H.G.: In your paintings, you don’t simply work with various materials. You also apply these in different layers – a practice that doesn’t just make reference to the in-between spaces that you describe, but also produce a complicated temporality. In addition to that, you work with archive material that, in a sense, you dig up, expose, and incorporate in the piece, but also cover over again. This means that various temporal levels come together in your paintings, and that the futuristic element is always permeated by the past. Can you tell us about this retro-futuristic approach?

D.K.S.: Yes, there is a really practical connection there, between painting and these temporal levels. I work in countless layers of paint. Every single layer has a memory, each layer continues to have an effect in, or an influence on, the next one. And the

¹ To view the works described here, go to <http://www.danielkojoschrade.com>

structure that grows out of this is infused with different layers of time which, superimposed on one another, can take on greater meaning. The idea of the palimpsest is very fitting here. Then there is the materiality of the paint, which through the continued layering builds up three-dimensionally, relief-like. It forms a landscape, so to speak, that can store much more information, more memories, than a two-dimensional surface.

As I mentioned, these memories are inspired by a broad spectrum of Afrodiasporic music: Lee Scratch Perry, George Clinton, Sun Ra – and of course Drexciya, DJ Spooky, and Butch Morris, who conducts an orchestra without a score by creating a piece out of the moment. That is not exactly true; you can't say out of the moment, because this moment – and this is the case with my painting, too – is so permeated by the past and by the future, by expectation, that you don't need things like notes or a fixed palette of shapes and colors. In literature, the works of Samuel Delaney and Octavia Butler, as well as, for example, the traditional Ghanaian stories of *Anansi the Spider*, convey dramatic, nonlinear concepts of time and space. The *Anansi* stories were basically already Afrofuturistic a thousand years ago.

H.G.: My last question is aimed at how you conceptualize technology, one of the central aspects of science fiction and Afrofuturism, it seems. We are talking about, for example, the synthesizer, the beatbox, the human-machine interface. Your Afromonauts seem to be able to do without this kind of technology. Instead, other objects appear, for example the umbrella, the iron, simple antennas?

D.K.S.: Exactly. To me, an umbrella or an iron can actually be a high-tech communication tool. When one of my Afromonauts holds an umbrella in their hand, that is a code for a kind of communication that utilizes this high-tech level, but also a more complex, spiritual communication level. They're tapping into survival strategies that were, and still are, existential in the depths of the (Black) Atlantic, in outer space, or in social spaces that aren't clearly defined – in spaces in-between. The Afromonaut expands the technology by cultural and spiritual means in order to navigate the countless terrestrial and extraterrestrial in-between spaces.