

ARTS

'In the Black Fantastic' Is the Must-See Exhibition of the Summer

BY FUNMI FETTO

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On June 29, the Hayward Gallery in London hosted the opening of the highly anticipated new exhibition “In the Black Fantastic.” Curated by Ekow Eshun, the writer, broadcaster, and chair of the Fourth Plinth Commissioning Group, it is the U.K.’s first exhibition dedicated to the work of Black artists who use the realm of the fantastical—including mythology, folklore, spiritual traditions, science fiction, and Afrofuturism—to explore racial injustices and identity. In Eshun’s own words, it’s “a way of acknowledging, a way of looking at the racialized everyday beyond the constraints that the Western imaginary has put around Black beings, Black personhood, and Black experiences.” He continues: “In a world where we are constantly, as Black people, subject to the fantasies and myths of others, one of the ways through for us is to embrace the fantastic. Not as an escape from reality, but as a way to explore further the possibilities and the imaginative reaches of our own experience of being. Essentially, ‘In the Black Fantastic’ is about saying there is no finite criteria or barrier to what being Black looks like.”

Below, the five things you need to know about what’s already being hailed as a landmark show.

TV and film provided the initial inspiration

Kara Walker, *Prince McVeigh and the Turner Blasphemies*, 2021. © Kara Walker, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; Sprüth Magers, Berlin

Eshun specifically cites *Black Panther*, *Lovecraft Country*, and *Get Out* as key references for the exhibition. “These were works that explored the language of fantasy from the Black perspective,” he explains. “They were asking profound questions about race, identity, belonging, being othered, being alienated. I was interested in how artists explore this central question of race as a socially constructed fiction and as our lived reality by using myth or African culture survivals or spiritual practices. All these artists are conjuring new worlds, new visions through their work.”

A relatively small number of artists are involved

Chris Ofili, *Annunciation*, 2006. © Chris Ofili. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

In its examination of alternative myths around what it means to be Black in the world—in the past, present or future—the show features the work of just 11 artists. “We wanted to give each artist the space to articulate their own position and for us to honor their work,” Eshun adds. The exhibition includes heavyweights such as Kara Walker (her work explores the ideology of whiteness) and Chris Ofili, who reimagines scenes from Homer’s *Odyssey* and the Bible. Eshun describes these two artists as embodying those who strike “this fantastic balance between violences of racism and offering a perspective, a way of looking that both sharply interrogates [racism] *and* looks beyond it, offering propositions of imaginative liberation for Black people”.

The opening piece is suitably dramatic

Nick Cave, *Soundsuit*, 2014. © Nick Cave. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Mandrake Hotel Collection.

The show opens with a powerful, specially commissioned work by Nick Cave, the extraordinary Missouri-born sculptor and performance artist whose work has rarely been shown in the U.K. The installation features hundreds of casts of Black arms linked together like chains. Cave's exquisite, iconic *Soundsuits* are also on display. These oversized, sculptural pieces of wearable art are intricately decorated with a variety of everyday materials and objects such as feathers, sisal, buttons, sequins, hair, and beads. He began making this series over 30 years ago as a response to the brutal beating Rodney King received at the hands of the Los Angeles Police Department during the city's 1992 riots. The spectacular suits were created to conceal race and identity, forcing the viewer to look without prejudice. A new *Soundsuit* made to commemorate George Floyd can also be seen at the exhibition.

Environmentalism, utopia, and gender identity are among the other issues addressed

Wangechi Mutu, *The End of Eating Everything*, 2014. Courtesy of the Artist, Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels, and Victoria Miro, London. Commissioned by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, NC.

Highlights include Wangechi Mutu, the Kenyan artist known for her fantastical, mythical, and layered collages which she describes as a way of “destroying a certain set of hierarchies.” These are shown alongside her short film, *The End of Eating Everything*, which features the singer Santigold as a gluttonous, Medusa-haired figure who serves as a metaphor for the world’s overconsumption. Lina Iris Viktor’s *A Haven. A Hell. A Dream Deferred* blends Liberian history and Greek mythology, and her gold sculptures explore the Egyptian funerary traditions where gold served as a conduit between heaven and earth. Sedrick Chisom’s paintings also look at the afterlife, focusing on a post-apocalyptic future with no people of color. Tabita Rezaire, on the other hand, looks back to look forward. Her immersive film installation—projected onto a large pyramid, a shape believed in many ancient cultures to be sacred—features the voices of seven narrators critiquing the Western conventions around gender, and instead reveals the binary fluidity that was common in pre colonial cultures.

In some ways, the exhibition is only the beginning

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. © Sedrick Chisom. Courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias, London. Photo: Mark Blower.

The show has an accompanying book with a more expansive breadth of fantastical works from numerous Black artists across all genres, published by Thames & Hudson. Over the summer, a series of related talks and events will incorporate a film season Eshun has curated for the British Film Institute. A highlight will be the showing of Daughters of the Dust, Julie Dash’s seminal film featuring cinematography by Arthur Jafa and set design by Kerry James Marshall.

“In the Black Fantastic” runs until September 18 at the Hayward Gallery.

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