WAYNE HODGE

SKIN LIKE DISTANT STARS

JOHN MASSIER: The images used in *Skin Like Distant Stars* seem to extend from your *Android/Negroid* collages, where historically-sourced black faces are manipulated, transformed, or partially obscured by other elements, often mechanical-seeming. It's a visual cue that suggests a lot—about history, identity, cultural progress, and even the overt question of a mask and whether a mask is a mode of concealment or revealment. Where did you source the images for this project?

WAYNE HODGE: I go to many sources when I make my work. Some of the images are based on photographs of colonial soldiers from African nations in the era of WWI. Other images are from ethnographic studies of South African tribes. I am also using comic books, NASA photography, and examples of 18th and 19th century decorative arts. While the collages are realized digitally, they incorporate scans of books as well as online collections. Through this process, I can look at the archive (be it virtual or a physical) and make artwork as I am responding to the imagery. My point of reference is the image that becomes masked and layered by its history as well as revealing the structures of power that underpin my selection. In this way, a conversation begins to reveal itself between the historical source material; and how we culturally define it.

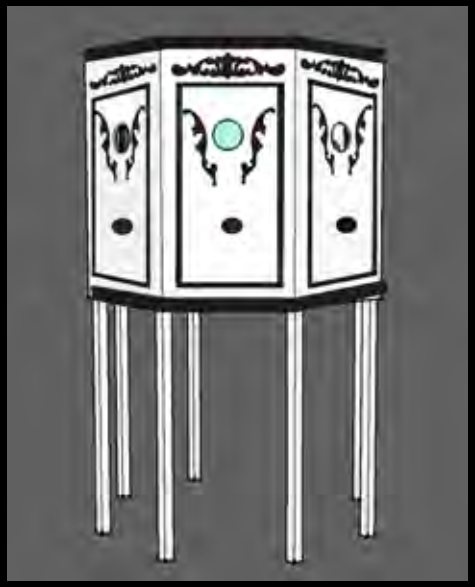
JM: In terms of your collage process, what determines the selection of your first image, the ground of the collage?

WH: There is usually something in the gaze of the subject or even a certain image quality if I am sourcing an illustration. There is however, a process in which I am looking at how disparate elements go together. It is finding a way for those two elements to work together that really mark the beginning of a collage.

JM: The broad variety of source material for the collages gives great emphasis to the notion of a hybrid or future-possible identity. I was staring at one of them for a long time, looking at the shoulders and collar of the space suit, wondering if it was sectioned from a Jack Kirby illustration. Of course, the "Inspirations" page of your website clued me into what I should have immediately recognized—the section is culled from the final panel of a famous EC Comics story from the mid 1950s called *Judgment Day* written by Al Feldstein, drawn by Joe Orlando, and colored by Marie Severin. An astronaut surveys a robot planet to discern its suitability to join the Galactic Republic, only to find it highly segregated between orange and blue robots and then, in the final iconic panel, taking off his helmet to reveal himself as a black man. What was your interest in that source material?

WH: That comic was originally published in EC *Comics Weird Fantasy #18* (April 1953), later reprinted in 1956. In 1954, there were a series of US Senate hearings on juvenile delinquency. William Gaines, publisher of EC Comics, was called to the hearings and the industry was targeted with a new series of regulations regarding content. What was reasonable to publish in 1953 became more difficult in 1956. The Comics Code Authority (CCA) was established and comics that did not meet the guidelines became almost impossible to get sold through newsstands. The fact that Tarlton (the astronaut) was black meant that the comic was unfit for the new standards. It was the last comic book EC Comics published. After multiple readings of the story, I get the sense that there was much more than the last panel that made the CCA uncomfortable.

If we suspend our disbelief for a moment and assume that the robots constitute a "race" or are at least a stand-in for race, then Tarlton throughout the story appears as a robot. This act of racial "passing" is reiterated by the motif of his helmet. It is orange and blue. When he is escorted by the representative of the orange robots; Tarlton chooses to take the bus instead of driving a car—what science fiction story character chooses the bus? This is compounded by his move to the back of the bus, a move that the robot representative immediately remedies by calling him to the front. In 1953, bus riding would have been on many minds, and this sleight-of-hand on revealing his face in the last panel is also a complicated series of masking and unmasking. He has worn two helmets, and in the final panel his skin is covered in a layer of perspiration that reflects the stars as he leaves the planet. So the title of the exhibition, *Skin Like Distant Stars,* is taken from the text in that final panel. It is also a major source of imagery in the show, as almost every image shown has an element of Tarlton's spacesuit and helmet as a collaged element.



JM: This half-face trope has recurred in your work before, in other collages and prints, and even in your *Negerkuss* sculpture. Is it the underlying question of what constructs one's identity that keeps you returning to this visual?

WH: In some ways, it is a formal device that I have been using for years. In another sense, it is a way to interject this notion of a hybrid subject. I can juxtapose multiple meanings onto something that had a fixed meaning before. For instance, one can consider the way machine or helmeted parts give way to the flowing flourishes that contain stars and galaxies in some of the images in the panoramas. On one hand, it is decorative and ornamental. I wanted that because in Art history there is a way that Black subjects are associated with the decorative and ornamental (in this case, I am thinking specifically of the blackamoor). By constructing a relationship where the subject and the object are flowing in and out of one another, and then layering it with something that is beyond the realm of both, we are forced to consider what we see in a context that takes a viewer out of a comfort zone. One is forced to look harder and to shift their thinking around ways in which we are used to seeing Black subjects.

JM: Does this fragmented imagery merely underscore a complex problem about history and identity or does it simultaneously offer the more affirmative notion of construction, of reassembly, of taking the fragments of one's history to build a newer, stronger whole?

WH: For me it is the question of using the visual detritus of representation and reforming it to a new whole. It is not all-inclusive or all encompassing, but I think it does provide an alternative that is greater than the sum of its parts. As to whether it is a stronger whole, I am confidant that it is, but that is a question that ultimately lies with the viewer.

JM: The past few years has seen a pronounced rise in Afro-Futurism's insinuation into mainstream culture and popular culture, in films, tv shows, and graphic novels. Not to reflexively label you an Afro-Futurist, but the fantastical elements of your work share some of those sensibilities.

WH: I am okay with being called an Afro-Futurist, but I was not always okay with Afro-Futurism. I know that seems like a contradiction, but I began doing this work as a way to interrogate the terminology as I began to wonder if there was a way that Afro-Futurism as a label actually excluded aspects of Blackness from "The Future" or even the concept of "Futurism." I love and respect Sun-Ra, I grew up on Funkadelic, but if we are only looking at a specific time frame and a pretty narrow range of Black experience, then it becomes another ghetto (albeit gilded).

I am interested, however, in the way that speculative fiction offers another layer of experience, but again, I am investigating the roots of that as well. In early pulp Science Fiction for instance, Black characters represent a threat to the order of scientific rationality. There are many stories that go so far as to hinge the survival of "civilization" on the extermination of the Black "other." I think in many ways my work can be characterized as a response to these inadequate representations.

I think that the issue of dissatisfaction with representation is certainly not mine alone. Many young people of color are interested in alternatives because the needle in the mainstream just hasn't moved far enough. They are taking matters into their own hands and making creative contributions and in some cases taking it over themselves. This is a good thing, and I see places where things are shifting in the market. This is a good first step, but this is a much longer conversation.

JM: Can we step back a second to what you just mentioned about your question of whether Afro-Futurism excluded Blackness from its vision of the future—what prompted that question and what did you determine? Did that question and answer inform the trajectory or content of your work?

WH: Let me start by going to the example of Marinetti and Italian Futurism. Much has been made about the misogyny in the Futurist Manifesto, and the exclusion of women, and rightly so. As they advocated for war, they invariably were in concert with Italy's colonialist aspirations, particularly in Africa. Art history values the formal and technological innovations in Italian Futurism, yet never outright dismisses it due to its relationship to fascism. In other countries, Futurism was somewhat more aligned with the left and even Dada, but those were tenuous relationships made more ambiguous by the Russian revolution. All of these movements are under the umbrella of the Avant-Garde and—good, bad, or ugly—are canonized as such. At this point I do have to defer to Marinetti that the Great War does push some cultural formations rather quickly. Jim Europe goes to France and with the 369th Infantry band start to

syncopate Sousa marches. This is the beginning of Jazz. One can argue that despite Marinetti's manifesto with all of its false bravado, the Harlem Hellfighters band is making Futurism without the label. It is born of the same environment that Futurism extolls (the war), yet it also has a foot firmly planted in The Great Migration and the shift from slavery to industrialization. These are formations that predate Sun Ra by decades, yet we choose to place them in an entirely different category. This is certainly not to take away from Sun Ra's contribution, but I wanted to broaden the terminology around Afro-Futurism to include contributions like Jim Europe. I think this is important because it gives a longer view to how we contextualize Blackness.

JM: In your installation, the dually-collaged faces are housed within very specific structural forms based on the Victorian era Kaiserpanoramas. There's a complex gesture in that these futuristic and forward-looking black faces are contained within structural bodies that are—in two of the three sculptures—white on their exterior. It brings up notions of containment, the complex and beautiful corralled within an ornate and beautiful container than is, nonetheless, a cage of sorts.

WH: The Kaiserpanorama was developed by German inventor and businessman August Fuhrmann around 1890. They were franchised machines in which people could look at collections of photographs in groups. Much of the subject matter captured the popular imagination of the public of the day. New technologies, cities as well as faraway places and ethnographic images were all part of the shows. The way that all of these interesting subjects were presented invokes the medieval curiosity cabinet as well as early forms of museum display. The Kaiserpanorama was eventually usurped by cinema. My interest in using it is related to my source imagery. I am combining these histories as a collection of images, but these images point to a much different reality than the original sources. In choosing the color scheme for the various structures, I was thinking of the gilded frame as a device for contextualizing these images. I am playing with the idea of a white and black framing device also references the writer M.P. Shiel's notion of "Black and White Power."

JM: The mechanism of viewing these works—through a lensed portal—affords a dreamy and romantic visage of a distant place, a more positive space. And yet, the mechanized rotation of these images within the panorama structure opens and allusion to display, to the consideration of foreign artifacts, emblems of the Other than must be contained and controlled.

WH: And, let's not forget that the portal and the lens become another mask for the images. It is all being filtered through a type of display, but through that process all of the elements are changed. We are no longer looking at photographs of soldiers or comic book illustrations, but a hybrid that articulates a re-imagined history. I am not interested of removing the original context, but in literally shifting that context so that the conversation is changed. For example, I have sourced images of soldiers, both African-American and French colonial (some from Senegal) because in wartime propaganda, they were used as a threat to the opposing nation (In many cases that was Germany, but they were by no means alone in this tactic). H.G. Welles writes in his novel *The Sleeper Awakes* (1910) about a future Britain whose police force consists of men from the former African colonies. They are even referred to as "The Black Police" in the novel. The protagonist rallies the working classes in a revolt against them and the ruling oligarchs. There is a way that a Black subject, armed and in power, is still a taboo subject even today, over 100 years later.

JM: Just as faces that are masked both conceal and reveal, it is an open question whether the lenses through which we are viewing these images clarify or distort their subjects. They do a little of both, further alluding to some active process of alteration.

WH: Much like the display case and the frame, the device through which they are seen is a sort of stage—a place where I can render a world out of the various source material that I choose. When I was in Germany researching the Kaiserpanorama, I began to take photos of the images through the lenses. I got some beautiful images, flat and slightly distorted, and they were slightly different from what was seen looking directly at them as a stereo-optic device. In my version, the distortion in the lens, even though it is not stereo-optic, lends a certain depth to the image. I like the idea of the peripheral distortion threatening to take over the central image. It forces you to shift your gaze around the parameters of the image.

JM: I love that you frequently use the term "hybrid." The notion of the hybrid has always seemed exciting to me, something that holds perpetual promise. Whether that is a hybrid identity, fashion, or formal artistic gesture, it always points outward from convention or a perceived norm, often toward something than cannot be fully anticipated until it's been realized.

WH: My practice has always relied on taking things from disparate sources, a kind of picking through the bones of history and culture (both high and low). I thrive on fusing these things together, and making

connections that I think are interesting. I think that by virtue of searching for alternative forms of representation and presenting them in a context of Art is a bit of a dilemma in that they sometimes go against a notion or idea of what we think Art should be. I am combining 19th century stereo-optic viewers with comics from the 1950's and pictures of soldiers from 1914. None of these things go together in any other context, but I do choose an Art context because I think it is the most fluid of my available options.

JM: Is there a narrative within the exhibition? Or implied narrative? You have sequenced these images in a particular order and, even when we begin viewing at a random portal at a random moment, the images do proceed as you selected. Is there a narrative arc within this or is meaning intended to be more allusive and poetic?

WH: If there is a narrative relationship, it is between the three Kaiserpanorama. The largest is the main circle of astronaut-like characters. They are defined by technology and are singular, iconic portraits. As we move to the smaller one in the same space, things turn more toward bodies, as the decorative elements become almost biomorphic abstractions. These abstractions flow in and out throughout along with references to both Tarlton and the Blue Robots. The last one is separated from the others in the space and serves as a kind of archive for image and inspiration for the project.

JM: At the beginning of the whole array of collages, we see multiple portraits, head shots of imagined astronauts, hybrid adventurers. They are at turns regal and brave, but also questioning and lonely. In fact, the first of these images appears especially forlorn. There is an underlying sense of the courage and daring of exploration, of both external and internal space. Eventually, the images turn more ornate, include one or more full figures, with even a couple whose appendages extend as though in full bloom of some new hybrid identity.

WH: Perhaps you are picking up on something I have not considered before. When I began this investigation to interrogate this notion of Afro-Futurism, it was almost as a side project to my other artwork. Over the years, it has taken over and become the centerpiece of my practice. You could say that at the beginning I was a lonely traveler in an empty space. I think over the years the dialogue has blossomed into a rich tapestry of voices and views. I am certainly changed by the process of creating and presenting this project, and can no longer claim to be so lonely and forlorn. Perhaps that narrative is ultimately one of connection to my own history and to a larger conversation about issues that I have wrestled with for many years.

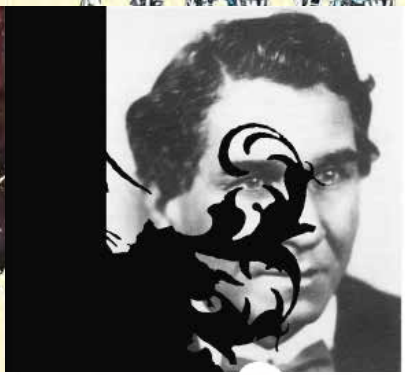
JM: There are five image portraits near the "end" of the array that are more directly b&w portraits partially obscured by an encroaching ornamental blackness. They stand out starkly from the other collaged images. Are these specific historical figures chosen for particular reasons?

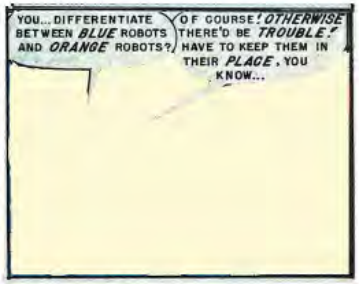
WH I wanted this grouping to serve as an interrogation of some early Sci-Fi and speculative fiction writers. I am not trying to deify them by any means. In fact they were chosen due to their problematic nature. They are (in no particular order) M.P. Shiel author of *The Purple Cloud* (1901), Edgar Rice Burroughs who wrote *Tarzan* and The John Carter/Barsoom books, H.P. Lovecraft of *Cthulu* and *Re-Animator* fame, and George Schuyler author of *Black no More* (1931) and *Black Empire* (1938). I have wrestled with each of them for various reasons ranging from outright racism to bad politics, or differing views on the nature of art. In *The Purple Cloud,* Shiel writes about "The Black and White Power." It is a driving force behind the protagonist's actions and a thinly-veiled reference to anxiety about race and colonial power. It may also be his own anxiety about being a biracial man who supported the British Empire. The flowing biomorphs that contain stars in the other spaces are only black and white here. I am placing Shiel's warring powers in the laps of the writers who embody these extremes.

JM: I'd like to ask a final question about the future of this imagery. You continue to maintain a collage/works on paper practice, but does realizing these pieces within the context of a specific viewing device lead you to now plan on future installations configured within other viewing devices?

WH: Thinking about that question is very evocative of earlier work that I made. I have always been interested in appropriation, and in the past I have made video works that have reassembled old films. I have long had an interest in early cinema, but now I am looking to pre-cinematic forms. I think this is rich territory so yes, I am very excited about where this process can take my practice.


SKIN
LIKE
DISTANT STARS...
THE END




YOU... DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN BLUE ROBOTS AND ORANGE ROBOTS?
OF COURSE! OTHERWISE THERE'D BE TROUBLE! HAVE TO KEEP THEM IN THEIR PLACE, YOU KNOW...

WAYNE HODGE • SKIN LIKE DISTANT STARS • NOVEMBER 11 TO DECEMBER 23, 2016

Wayne Hodge is an artist whose work combines elements of collage, performance and photography. His practice explores the relationship between history, media and fantasies of race and desire. He received an M.F.A. from Rutgers University and attended the Whitney Independent Study Program and the Skowhegan School. His work has been shown at The Bronx Museum, MoMA P.S.1, and The Studio Museum in Harlem. Hodge has shown internationally in Germany, Brazil and China. He was a recipient of grants from The Creative Capital Foundation, Art Matters, and Franklin Furnace Archive. Recently featured exhibitions include *The Radical Presence* at the Walker Center for the Arts and *The Shadows Took Shape* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, as well as solo shows at Columbia University in New York and Practice gallery in Philadelphia. www.waynehodge.com

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