EXHIBITION REVIEW

_Battling in a Cave_ (2016), plays on an unfortunate inscription with those words found under the topcoat of Malevich’s _Black Square_. Carved into each of Gallagher’s densely collaged canvases were a couple of amorphous figures, facing one another as people might in a fight. These amoeba-looking protagonists recalled were a couple of amorphous figures, facing one another as people. Carved into each of Gallagher’s densely collaged canvases _Black with those words found under the topcoat of Malevich’s Battling in a Cave_ (2016), plays on an unfortunate inscription gravitated toward Wangechi Mutu’s soily splatter and Ad Reinhardt, and Louise Nevelson, could not be taken for granted. Gallagher’s provocation in mind, the exhibition’s numerous black enigmas buried in individual examples of this painting genre. With Gallagher’s provocation in mind, the exhibition’s numerous black monochromes, even those by canonical artists such as Sol LeWitt, Ad Reinhardt, and Louise Nevelson, could not be taken for granted.

Some of the most evocative works made black banal materials strange by eliciting the color’s cosmic aspects. Gallery—goers gravitated toward Wangeci Mutu’s soily splatter _Throw_ (2016). This mural’s celestial design was the result of a private, live performance by Mutu. In it, she flung pungent fermented and dyed paper pulp at the wall. Knowledge of the artist’s assertive handling of this home-brewed goo redirected an appreciation of _Throw_ as earthly, extraterrestrial sight back to a reflection on the artist’s hand and human will. Lorraine O’Grady also simulated the natural environment, by deploying her body. The black-and-white video projection _Landscape (Western Hemisphere)_ (2010–11) provides close-ups of the artist’s locks wafting to ambient noises. Her ebony ringlets function as a synecdoche for the interracial mixing that underpins O’Grady’s biography, colonial history, and the Western hemisphere. With each new scene, the video presents the audience with a slightly different angle. The altering camera positions suggest an amalgam of abstract settings—from tall grass blowing in the wind, to the inside of a bird’s nest, to ocean waves. _Landscape (Western Hemisphere)_ provides an amalgam of abstract settings—from tall grass blowing in the wind, to the inside of a bird’s nest, to ocean waves. _Landscape (Western Hemisphere)_ exceeds preoccupations with black identity on the level of human portraiture, by evoking the mini-material organizations and vast ecosystems through which blackness emerges and interacts with our flesh. Such a compelling, if challenging, reorientation toward “black objects” is precisely what Edwards’s show fostered.

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NOTES
2. Ibid.
pany of the near future set up to advance human evolution through the gathering of genetic data from human and nonhuman sources, its purpose is partially glimpsed through the objects, text, and video that make up the installation in which its activities take place. But it is the role of this new technology in what is known as the “genetic gold rush” that underpins the film work (also titled Ophiux) on show in the open studio next door. Presented as a kind of business marketing tool for Ophiux’s R&D program, the film takes us deep down on a journey to the bottom of the sea—the deepest sea beds representing an unexplored “resource frontier,” infinitely rich in genetic material, untouched by human hands—and ripe for exploitation.

That it has echoes of Jules Verne’s early science fiction classic Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea (1870) is no coincidence. Abstracted from websites of already existing biotech firms, the film’s sparse captions create a narrative that is part pseudo-scientific jargon, part inspirational blue-sky thinking. With fragments of sampled internet video and Dr. Linse’s actual research footage, the film confuses fact and fiction, describing cutting-edge technologies through a mixture of digital and analog formats that confuse past, present, and future.

Ophiux’s mission statement remains deliberately unclear. Grainy shots of unknowable sea creatures loom out of the ink-black depths, like monsters of the deep. Arcane alchemical symbols sit side by side with the helices through which DNA and the codes of life are rendered visible, their forms echoed in the logo and typeface of the Ophiux brand. Complex digital processes that patch DNA to create new life forms are visualized via outmoded map-making software: images are cut and pasted, dragged and dropped by a computerized hand tool icon. And as the audience is shown the sites in which mined genetic information is stored in data banks above ground, screenshots of pulsating graphs overlay black-and-white scenes of twentieth-century pipework, gas tanks, and cooling towers—the materiality of heavy industry rendered increasingly obsolete by the digital era’s apparently pristine tech, immaterial networks, and humming servers.

By borrowing from science fiction, Ophiux similarly combines futuristic vision with contemporary realities in a way that acknowledgment of the inability to imagine the future in any other language than the vernacular of the present day. On the one hand, the all-too-believable explorations of Ophiux describe a future that we know has the potential to come true. On the other, by locating biotechnology’s attempts to remap and reconfigure life within the historical trajectory of the medico-scientific gaze, Holder’s practice interrogates the possibility of ever really uncovering the unknown. Despite radical progress, and the development of technologies through which human life is reduced to a visual language of binary code, its secrets remain obscure to true understanding: it is beyond comprehension.

Taking the language, processes, and visual culture of scientific research as objects of critical investigation, Holder’s engagement with her collaborative partners’ methodologies is central to the work’s realization—through what she describes as an interdisciplinary “pollination.” Her film’s screening as part of Cambridge University’s Festival of Ideas certainly attracted a wide audience, and presentations from the scientists involved in its conceptual development shed light upon its foundation in scientific “fact.” But, as with many art-science conversations, one is left wondering to what extent science, in turn, puts into practice new insight gleaned from the dialogue.

What Holder’s artistic perspective offers is a cultural interpretation of complex speculative propositions—propositions impossible for the layperson to grasp. In so doing, Ophiux captures the very impossibility of a contemporary medical imaginary, rooted as it is in a language so complex and with possibilities too difficult—perhaps sublime—to truly imagine. Perhaps only ever visualized in reductive terms—through the codes and symbols and diagrams that take the place of a reality too esoteric to be seen or known—Holder’s mapping of today’s technological gaze exposes it as both all-seeing and blind at the same time, probing and endlessly seeking as it plunges through life’s rich yet always murky depths.

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