

No wonder we need aliens.

No wonder we're so good at creating aliens.

No wonder we so often project alienness onto one another.

This last of course has been the worst of our problems—the human alien from another culture, country, gender, race, ethnicity. This is the tangible alien who can be hurt or killed. . . . And yet we are unable to get along with those aliens who are closest to us, those aliens who are of course ourselves.

—Octavia E. Butler, “The Monophobic Response”¹

The cultural theorist and novelist Albert Murray once remarked that the mandate of the black intellectual was to provide “technology” to the black community.² By technology, Murray didn't mean mechanics, new media, or the Internet. Rather, he defined it as those novel analytic approaches he believed necessary to understanding black life “on a higher level of abstraction.”³ For Murray, this process was one of distillation and complication. He advocated theories of African American existence that, like a blueprint, would be sufficiently robust to reveal the larger patterns of society and do justice to its intricacies and complexities. By Murray's definition, the artist Laylah Ali is a technologist of the highest order. In spite of their striking clarity, her gouache images reflect the contradictions of the human condition.

Ali's work explores the tragic lives of the Greenheads, her hypercephalic, thin-limbed, brown-skinned creations. Using a limited palette, she composes provocative visual fields noticeably lacking in scenery, save the humanoid figures that inhabit them. A master at sleight of hand, she uses bright comic-strip colors in a way that recalls the Sunday funnies; but these images have more in common with sardonic political cartoons, for the figures she depicts inflict all manner of insult and injury on one another. Although Ali provides no script for her images, their despair and anger is unmistakable. But there is no violent haste in her brush stroke; the images are controlled—eerily exact. As befits the work of a technician, these tortured lives are rendered with the sharpest precision.

More troubling still for the viewer is the family likeness of the individual Greenheads to one another. The symbols that distinguish one Greenhead from another are remarkably superficial: one wears a dotted shirt, another a solid-color top; one wears a uniform, another a tunic. Why would these characters, who are so seemingly similar and whose sole medium of differentiation is their attire, be at violent odds with one another?

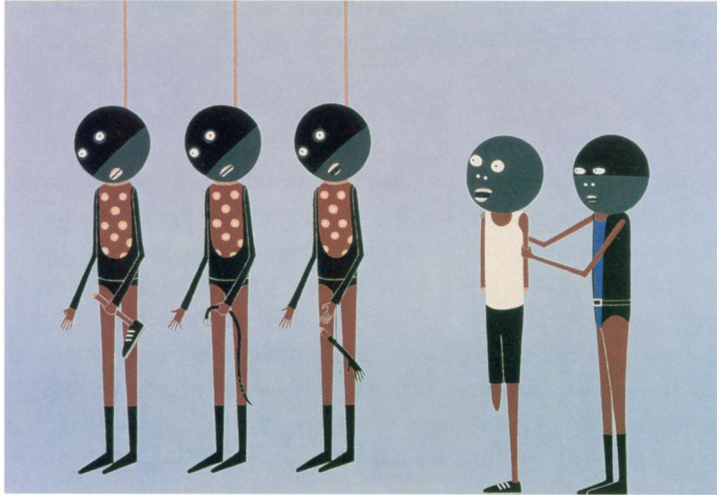
In Ali's paintings these differences, though only skin-deep, have grave consequences. Encounters in the land of the Greenheads typically end in violence: loss of limb, decapitation, subjugation, and abduction. Moreover, the power trips in this dystopic universe appear to be racialized. In *Untitled* (2000), a Greenhead pair attired in white hats and robes that resemble white supremacist get-ups meet two similarly dressed figures, one with hair ornamentation that harkens back to ancient Egyptian ceremonial attire. One pair offers a severed head to the other. Violence is pervasive and all encompassing where the Greenheads dwell; all are subject to it. Such exercises of power,

Alondra Nelson
**Aliens Who Are of
Course Ourselves**

1. Octavia E. Butler, “The Monophobic Response,” *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, ed. Sheree R. Thomas (New York: Warner Books, 2000), 415.

2. Albert Murray, quoted in “The Alain L. Locke Symposium,” *The Harvard Advocate*, December 1, 1973, 18.

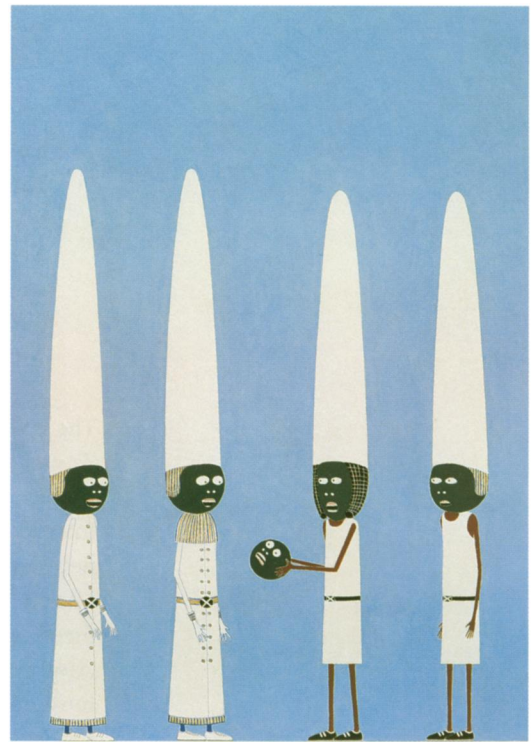
3. *Ibid.*, 17.



Laylah Ali. *Untitled 2000*.
Gouache on paper. 13 x 19 in.
(31.2 x 45.6 cm). Courtesy of
303 Gallery, New York

Laylah Ali. *Untitled 2000*.
Gouache on paper. 19 x 14 in.
(45.6 x 33.6 cm). Courtesy of
303 Gallery, New York.

Laylah Ali. *Untitled 2000*.
Gouache on paper. 7 x 6 in.
(16.8 x 14.4 cm) Courtesy of
303 Gallery, New York



however, are also the imposed heritage and present-day reality of people of African descent. The brown-skinned Greenheads do double duty as agents in humanity's universal power struggles and as actors in the performance of racialized violence.

The Greenheads are humanoid—human like—but their countenances and outlines are conspicuously similar to the Grays, the archetypal aliens who appear in abduction stories in popular culture. Elaine Showalter and Jodi Dean argue that aliens are *doppelgänger* of our human fears and

desires.⁴ Although Showalter and Dean provide different explanations for our strange attachments to aliens, both have argued that U.S. culture is obsessed with them.

In an essay in the anthology *Dark Matter*, the science-fiction writer Octavia E. Butler provides a related theory of the economy of the imagination that produces aliens. She suggests that we create the ethereal, otherworldly figures of sci-fi and speculative fiction in part as an escape from dealing with local others. Yet, as Butler reminds us, back in the real world we also have homespun “tangible aliens” who are marked as irrevocably different by virtue of their language or culture (rendered as attire in Ali’s vocabulary). We fashion aliens, and we “project alienness onto one another.” Ali could be said to be sending the same message since she uses alienness to reveal both human connection

4. Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998) and Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

and detachment. In this sense, we are all aliens, though blacks, are doubly so.

Ali's *mises-en-scène* are both otherworldly and familiar. This alien-ness is at once personal and collective, local and global, nodal and networked. Laylah Ali's images are a poignant reminder that the brother from another planet is still kin. The aliens are in fact ourselves.

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Remember when you used to watch science fiction? How it was acceptable that there were no black characters because it was an imaginary world? Well, that didn't sit well with David Huffman, an artist who inserts the black subject into science-fiction narratives. His fantastic sci-fi images go so far as to suggest that the black psyche can be liberated by ultra-advanced robotics and military technology. Huffman's choice to portray black characters turning toward technology to escape inner and outer defects is full of implications. While his work deals with notions of race enforced by images in the entertainment media, it is particularly concerned with the psychological and physiological ramifications of our shared history and anxiety about blackness.

When I first encountered Huffman's artwork, I was organizing an exhibition focused on professional artists' and folk artists' concepts of outer space, UFOs, and paranormal phenomena. The idea for the exhibition *Above and Beyond*¹ was sparked by the actions of the UFO cult Heaven's Gate. Led by Marshall Applewhite, thirty-nine members of Heaven's Gate committed suicide in late March 1997. They believed that Hale-Bopp, an unusually bright comet passing our planet at the time, was a signal to shed their earthly bodies—"containers"—and join a spacecraft that they imagined traveled behind the comet. They were attempting to achieve a higher plane of existence which had they religiously studied in the television programs *Star Trek* and *The X-Files*.² Science fact and fiction and pop culture were combined to disastrous ends for Heaven's Gate members, especially for Thomas Alva Nichols, an African American man found among the deceased. Strangely, he was the brother of Nichelle Nichols, the actress who portrayed Lieutenant Uhura, the communications officer on the original *Star Trek*.

Star Trek first aired in the 1960s, during the height of the Civil Rights movement, and has continued to do so for more than thirty years. In the original episodes, Nichelle Nichols portrayed a beautiful, accomplished, intellectual black woman of the twenty-third century, and an indispensable member of the starship *Enterprise*'s crew of brave space travelers. Her character was one of the first of many African American characters in sci-fi, fantasy, and spy-thriller action programs. These characters were always overdetermined, so that there was no question as to why they were there; they could never just be ordinary black people, and they were never written as leading roles.

Remember Barney Collier, the quiet, efficient electronics expert on *Mission Impossible*; Sergeant Baker, another electronics and mechanical genius on *Hogan's*

Arnold J. Kemp If Sambo Were a UFO

1. *Above and Beyond* presented at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, February 26 to April 30, 2000 was originally titled "Above Human." It examined fringe belief systems in a culture saturated with representations of the paranormal, the extraterrestrial, and the metaphysical. Participating artists and organizations were the Aetherius Society, Dennis Balk, Jessica Bronson, Davis & Davis, Douglas Curran, Cameron Jamie, David Jarvey (in association with Harrel Fletcher, Chris Johanson, Elizabeth Meyer, and Alexis Hurkman), Chris Johanson, Corey McCorkle, John McCracken, Sun Ra Research, Ionel Talpazan, Mungo Thompson, Rubén Ortiz Torres, and Charlie White.

2. The details of the Heaven's Gate tragedy were sensational. The police described an eerily placid death scene. Applewhite and several of the cult members had undergone voluntary castration in the months before the mass suicide. The revelation that Heaven's Gate was comprised professional web designers used the Internet to win converts and spread their message, compelled me to examine my own role as a producer of esoteric events and exhibitions. I was grappling with how to evaluate my responsibility as a cultural producer to a culture in which bizarre events take on a daily basis.