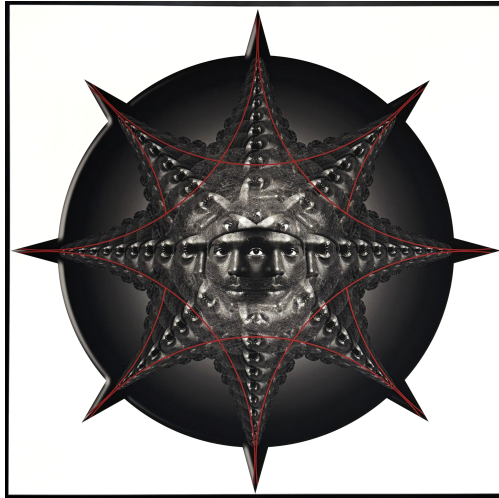


ETHAN COHEN

Afrofuturism and Beyond

Renee Cox, Ernest Frazier, Algernon Miller, Tyrone Mitchell, Gerardo Castro
Ethan Cohen Gallery at 1-54 Art Fair



Ethan Cohen Gallery at the KuBe Art Center is pleased to present **AFROFUTURISM**, an exhibition featuring seminal visual artists working in and around Afrofuturism including: **Renee Cox, Ernest Frazier, Algernon Miller, Tyrone Mitchell, and Gerardo Castro**. This exhibition is an extension to the *Afrofuturism* exhibition currently on view at Ethan Cohen Gallery at the KuBe Art Center in Beacon, NY, which followed *Afrofuturism* at Ethan Cohen Gallery, 225 West 17th Street (2025).

The presentation includes artworks which narrate the underlying concepts of Afrofuturism by imagining parallel or distant realities which are as empowering as they are liminal. While Afrofuturism as a subject matter has impacted a wide and dynamic number of artists' work, those included in the exhibition represent members of the community who have demonstrated an extended if not lifelong commitment to the concept demonstrated by works included in the exhibition dated from as early as 1970. For those who are new to the subject or those who want the opportunity to dive deeper into works by these seminal figures, we welcome you to explore *Afrofuturism* at both Ethan Cohen Gallery at the KuBe Art Center, and the gallery's booth at 1-54 Art Fair 2026.

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***Afrofuturism:
Somewhere on the South Side of Saturn***

By Isaac Aden

Somewhere on the south side of Saturn auroras dance in the warm polar vortexes, it is at this location the genesis of contemporary Afrofuturism was wrought. Between 1936 and 1937 Sun Ra had a deeply spiritual experience in which he was blanketed by a shimmering light. Ra would later recount the experience by saying:

“My whole body changed into something else. I could see through myself. And I went up... I wasn't in human form... I landed on a planet that I identified as Saturn... they teleported me and I was down on [a] stage with them. They wanted to talk with me. They had one little antenna on each ear. A little antenna over each eye. They talked to me. They told me to stop [attending college] because there was going to be great trouble in schools... the world was going into complete chaos... I would speak [through music], and the world would listen. That's what they told me.^[1]”

According to his biographer John Szwed, by Ra's account his extra-terrestrial experience “allegedly occurred a full decade before flying saucers entered public consciousness^[2]”.

Whether personal mythology or actual abduction account, what is certain is that the incident deeply impacted Sun Ra's arts and would shape what would come to be known as Afrofuturism.

Afrofuturism encompasses an aesthetic artistic movement, a musical genre, an area of speculative fiction, as well as a broader cultural phenomenon. Defined by Ytasha L. Womack as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future and liberation"^[3], the term Afrofuturism was first coined in 1993 by writer Mark Dery who posited in his definitive text *Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose*.

“African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind). Moreover, the sub legitimate status of science fiction as a pulp genre in Western literature mirrors the subaltern position to which blacks have been relegated throughout American history... Speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African

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American concerns in the context of twentieth-century techno culture—and, more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future might, for want of a better term, be called "Afro-futurism." The notion of Afrofuturism gives rise to a troubling antinomy: Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? Furthermore, isn't the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers—white to a man—who have engineered our collective fantasies?"^[4]

The artists included in the exhibition *Afrofuturism* at Ethan Cohen Gallery (2025) were selected by Algernon Miller and include Nanette Carter, Renee Cox, Ernest Frazier, Algernon Miller, and Tyrone Mitchell. Miller, who has turned Eighty during the duration of the exhibition, has gathered these elders to highlight the early predecessors of the movement's visual language. While many of the artists have worked in a variety of styles, it is compelling to consider how their work evolved into a dialogue with the movement. For many this development was not necessarily the result of a series of formal artistic decisions but rather the aesthetic conclusion was reached in response to the inescapable weight of the content of the black experience in America.

Renee Cox (b. 1960) is an American photographer, much of her early work dealt with the body, portraiture, identity, motherhood, and shared experience of African Americans. However, as Cox recounted in her May 2025 interview with Isaac Aden, she experienced a shift in consciousness which subsequently led to a shift in her photographic practice. After reading Eckhardt Tolle in Bali. Cox recounted asking herself the question Tolle had posed in his writing "*Why are you waiting for someone to validate you?*"^[5] Cox then underwent a process of rational observation in which she purposefully rejected any and all negative thoughts in her head, after which she arrived at a place of "no thought", a space of enlightened consciousness in which Cox was able to manifest a new direction for her work.

"When I did the work, it was not so much about identity, it was more inclusive of others. I was creating my own world where people of color were welcome and free to express themselves, however they saw fit."^[6]

Cox began to incorporate kaleidoscopic mirroring and repetition into her photography and portraiture. Her work began to take on a new dynamism as seen in her body of work *Soul Culture*, in which her portraits transcend the empiricism of the camera and seek to illuminate the more profound presence of the sitter's soul. While as is in other aspects of her Practice Cox has made use of historical allusion, the *Soul Culture* series similarly evokes the rich tradition of South Asian mythical depictions. However, her works clearly propel beyond mere historical allusion into

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a yet uncharted Aristotelian projection of an Afrofuturist subjectivity, one in which she knows and understand the past and the present, she is not looking backwards, her gaze is forward and set on a future yet unwritten.

In our current moment Nannette Carter (b. 1954) is having her moment with a solo exhibition at the Montclair Art Museum, a presentation of her work in the Venice Architectural Biennial, and a forthcoming solo museum exhibition in the fall of 2025 at the Wexner Center for the Arts. Carter's work has always addressed the underlying principles of abstraction with an emphasis on color, shape, line, and texture. Carter's *Afrosentinel* series incorporates an impressive formal means of production. The works are painted on sheets of mylar which are cut into various shapes and collaged together into individual *Sentinels*. The complexity works are further compounded by Carter's groupings of multiple *Sentinels* into larger works. Each individual work is then mounted to the wall resulting in a process which at first glance resembles a wall drawing or site-specific installation but is in fact a completely nomadic work just as any other discrete object or canvas. Carter has quantified her *Sentinels* as Afrofuturist works, describing them as protective totems to combat social injustice. According to Hrag Vartanian Carter's *Sentinels*:

"...comprise a row of 'warriors,' as they're described in the catalog for the show, that are guardian figures for people of color everywhere. Carter sees them as akin to the terra-cotta soldiers protecting the tomb of China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang (250–210 BCE). 'No matter the scale, girth, or color, each sentinel has the strength and acumen to halt all negative forces. These soldiers are fictional constructs that speak to the need for parity and humanity in the world'^[7]".

By contrast the work of Ernest Frazier (1942-2004), who was initially lauded curatorially so far as to even being selected for inclusion in the first Whitney Biennial), has remained in relative obscurity since his passing in 2004. Worse yet, Frazier was name checked by Evan Beard in his 2017 analytical financial analysis of the trajectory of the art market for ARTSY. Beard's analysis compared the art market values of artists from the first Whitney biennial in 1973 with the performance of the S&P 500. By dividing the participating artists into two groups, the first with strong market support from galleries such as the relationship between Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Leo Castelli, and a second group lacking a track record yet identified at the time as significant by the museum's curators. According to Beard's analysis:

"If we took the riskier path and bought Group 2 artists without an exhibition history, our returns would not only trail the S&P 500 but would likely be negative. Most Group 2 Biennial artists barely have an active market to speak of today. We might have gotten lucky by purchasing an early Barbara Kruger or Jim Nutt, but many of 1973's future stars, such as

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Alice Adams, Terry Allen, Paula Barr, Joel Bass, Jake Berthot, Howard Buchwald, Arthur Cohen, Joyce Cote, William Geis, or Ernest Frazier, returned close to a total loss despite their early curatorial esteem.^[8]”

Suffice to say we have crossed a threshold in which the old guard may be changing, and we are currently in a period in which many artists who have not received the attention or recognition due are beginning to see the light of day. It is clearly evident that the rubric of good art is not always in accord with market performance, and it too may be subject to correction.

Tyrone Mitchell (b. 1944) is a sculptor originally from Savannah Georgia. Mitchell’s work has been deeply influenced by his travels and with the aid of his personal photography Mitchell is able to integrate ideas about how various cultures construct and create objects into his own practice. Mitchell’s work frequently makes use of ready-made and in contrast to many artists who share the same approach Mitchell appropriates preexisting figural depictions as well. The use of ready-made objects and sculptural material has generally been adopted as a means to present rather than represent in a memetic fashion. The addition of figural representations or other objects which have anthropomorphic implications such as a tricycle or a chair (objects which specifically derive their proportions from the relationship with the human body) allows Mitchell to create semblances of portraiture or rather leave traces of a person’s presence in an otherwise abstract accumulation.

Algernon Miller (b. 1945) is a visionary painter who has made seminal contributions in the field of Afrofuturism. For Miller, a reimagining or projecting an Aristotelian vision for the future has been a lifelong pursuit. Miller attended the School of Visual Arts (1965-67) and The New School (1967-68) during America’s cultural revolution, during which time he was deeply influenced by African studies and Afrocentric writings. Miller’s mature works developed in the late sixties, works from this period were characterized by hard edge geometric forms, and frequently realized on shaped canvases or sculptures with complex rounded forms. Miller’s use of bold color reflected an awareness and an adoption of palette which acknowledged and embraced colors schemes derived from African cultures.

The range of Miller’s virtuosity and his commitment to progress regardless of form would see him go on to explore areas of new media including light-based works and video. Additionally, Miller is an architect, he has developed concepts for structures which reflect the *Black* experience as well as realizing major public plazas such as the Frederick Douglas Circle at the northwest corner of Central Park. Seen in plan the granite and bronze plaza integrates the geometric patterns of 19th century quilts, which were used as codes. Similarly, to the sculpture, often semiotics or codes compound the complexity of Miller’s canvases. Miller has made use of fractal generating software and had Kante text translated into code, both of which have become languages he uses in his

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painting practice. As with the future so has the past permeated into Miller's work, the artist's most recent works feature not only a mathematically shifting dimensionality as seen through stenciled ovoids but through the fusion of hieroglyphic pictographs as well as the adoption of numerological signifiers, all of which serve to simultaneously acknowledge the history of the African American experience as well as image a future beyond.

- [1] Szwed, John F. (1997). *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*. New York: Pantheon. pp. 28–29.
- [2] IBID, pp. 28–29.
- [3] Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. 1st edition, Independent Publishers Group, 2013, p. 9.
- [4] Dery, Mark (1993). "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose". *The South Atlantic Quarterly*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, Pp. 180
- [5] Cox, Renee, In conversation with Isaac Aden, June 25th, 2025
- [6] Ibid.
- [7] Vartanian, Hrag, *Nanette Carter's Abstract Balancing Act*, Hyperallergic May 5, 2025,
- [8] Evan Beard, *How the 1973 Whitney Biennial Helped Blow Open the Market for Contemporary Art*, ARTSY, December 4, 2017

Addendum: For ***Afrofuturism and Beyond*** at the 1-54 Art Fair, Ethan Cohen Gallery is honored to include the late Gerardo Castro. Gerardo Castro (1967–2024) was a Puerto Rican, Afro-Boricua artist whose work expands the language of Afrofuturism through the lens of Afro-Caribbean spirituality, queer embodiment, ritual, and transformation. Born in Ponce, Puerto Rico, Castro developed a vivid practice in painting and mixed media that drew on Santería, Afro-Cuban religious symbolism, colonial history, gender, and the sacred power of the human figure. Castro's work proposes an Afro-Caribbean futurity rooted in ancestral knowledge, spiritual force, and the reimagining of identity beyond imposed categories. His figures, often radiant, androgynous, and icon-like, become vessels of resistance and renewal, asserting Black, Latino, and queer presence as both historical inheritance and future possibility.