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Artist brings "Branding the Afrofuture" to Union College

Latest exhibit by Arbor Hill-raised Stacey Robinson

Tim Kane
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"Afrotopia" by by Stacey Robinson. Provided by Union College

Raised in Arbor Hill, Stacey Robinson took off for New York City to make his mark in the art world in the late '90s on the day legendary rapper Tupac died. Since then, his blending of hip-hop culture and Afrofuturism has developed a wildly graphic style that confronts yet disarms.

His drawings, collages and installations, both digital and analog, speak of black power in ardent terms. It's bold and visionary, suggesting utopias, but grounded in the realities of our time. These days, it couldn't be more relevant.

His ongoing explorations and commentaries dubbed "Branding the Afrofuture," which had its first installment at Buffalo's El Museo Museum in December, is opening on March 31 at the Schaffer Library at Union College with a public discussion.

What exactly will fill the library isn't quite clear yet, but one thing is pretty certain: It will electrify the staid environment with vibrant colors and eye-catching designs that challenge.

"Branding the Afrofuture" is a mix of recent work, including "posters, branding, comics and other graphic matter." The main section will be a large site-specific drawing that he will render from Monday through Thursday, which the public is invited to attend. He views "Branding the Afrofuture" as an overarching concept for different exhibitions that acts as a point of reference.

Now an assistant professor at the University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign, his MFA studies from 2013 until 2015 brought him to Albany more frequently to experience the changes in the city and neighborhood. With this exhibition, his first in the region in 20 years, he has come full circle. The following interview is based on phone conversations and emails:

Q: "Branding" has many connotations including ownership, or a logo that speaks to an organization's core beliefs at a visual level. In terms of the installation, what is the meaning you're trying to convey?

A: As a graphic designer and critical thinker, my conversation with branding includes thinking about how the black body is branded to connote ideas of villainy, sports, entertainment and sexual fantasy. I also use ideas of branding meaning "to mark indelibly" to express an urgency of thinking of a liberated black future away from colonialism.

Q: How do you define Afrofuturism?

A: I don't consider myself an Afrofuturist. Mark Dery coined the term in the early '90s. I love the term, but I think the definition is limiting for what I'm considering, which explores the politics behind the aesthetics most people romanticize in Afrofuturism. My work converses with the concept heavily, though. For context, I redefine Afrofuturism for my audience, explaining how I think of it: Black people exploring the past, present and speculative future; taking action to define black tomorrows by using science, technology, engineering, (through the arts) and math in an effort to reimagine and change our existence, resulting in freedom from colonial interference.

Q: So what would black liberation be?

A: I'm thinking of this answer as police violence and murder against black adults and, very importantly, children (have) no justice. That, in part, is what my work is beginning to question. What does "black liberation" look like? What would that be? My effort to "Brand the Afrofuture" is in part a visual jump-starting of the black imagination. I think the closest in American history we've seen to black liberation would be communities like "Black Wall Street," the Greenwood district neighborhood of Tulsa, Okla. , Rosewood, Fla,, and the MOVE commune of West Philadelphia. What black liberation is is not as a big a question (as) why is it always sabotaged?

Q: You mentioned that hip-hop culture is a big influence on your work. What about Sun Ra, George Clinton and Ras G from the Afrofuturist camp?

A: (I'm) very much pulling from the same aesthetics as Ras G: collage, sampling, remixing, repetition. I have no idea where my work would be without George Clinton's work and the P-Funk mythology. Musically, of course, Sun Ra is a major influence, I reference "Saturn" in my works very often, because I do have an understanding of time travel. As Ra said, "equation-wise, the first thing to do is consider time as officially ended. We'll work on the other side of time." I also am very much inspired by J-Dilla, and Madlib. I can tell you who I was listening to when I made a lot of my work.

Q.: You brought up John Jennings earlier, what exactly is Black Kirby?

A: Black Kirby is John Jennings and myself as a collaborative team exploring pop culture via artist Jack Kirby's aesthetic. Jack Kirby is considered the father of modern comics; he co-created the Avengers, X-Men, and Fantastic Four, among many other characters. We began this collaboration a few years ago when the Avengers movie had come out and Jack Kirby wasn't receiving credit along with Stan Lee for his creations. John and I debated the moral, ethical and legal obligations, while looking at what was happening to Kirby's legacy. It was a type of erasure. We were like "dang, Marvel and Disney are treating him like he's black. " Ah, Black Kirby! We wanted to critique the issues surrounding diversity (or the lack thereof) in comics and pop culture by way of celebrating, analyzing, and critiquing the comic template created largely in part by Jack Kirby.

Q: It wasn't too long ago we were talking about a post-race culture. Given the current political climate, what is, in your estimation, the state of race relations in this country?

A: There is no such thing as post-race. Furthermore, black people didn't create race as a construct. Yet all people influenced by the racial concepts have to respond to the fallout of constructions around fear of genetic dominance via higher melanin counts, creation of the world's earliest major religions, sciences, and universal understandings. The Trump administration and many of his supporters have tactically illustrated those fears as America is becoming like the rest of the world has always been, more black and brown. The construction and institution of white supremacy and racism are very real though and very dangerous. Race is, just as post-race is, a fallacy.

Q: I understand you have a graphic novel in the works. Can you elaborate a bit?

A:Sure, since my editor just announced it this week through The New York Times. It's called "I Am Alfonso Jones." It's about a teenager named Alfonso who is killed by an off-duty police officer. We watch the aftermath as it affects those around him. It's written by poet Tony Medina, penciled by me, inked by John Jennings (I believe there will be others contributing to the inking) and colored in part by my son Solomon, edited by Stacy Whitman, and lettered by my colleague Damian Duffy, who along with John just adapted Octavia Butler's "Kindred" in a graphic novel. "I Am Alfonso Jones" will be published by Tu Books, an imprint of Lee & Low Books this fall. I'm really excited about it, it's my first graphic novel.

Tim Kane is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.