

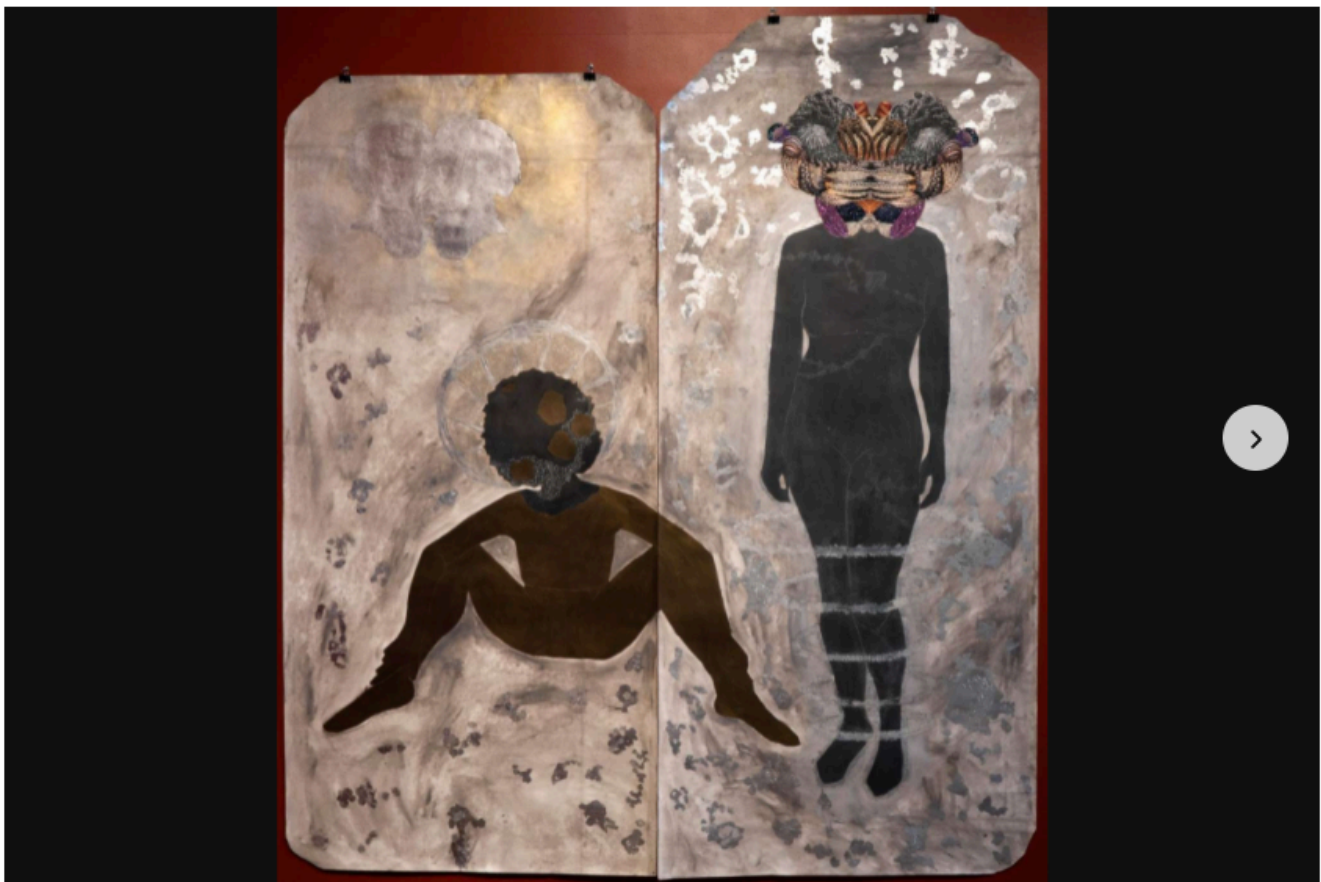
PREVIEW // ART + EXHIBITS

Afrofuturism in one-person exhibit at Mandeville



William Jaeger

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Alisa Sikelianos-Carter's "Afronauts and Ancestors," 2017. Acrylic, gouache, ink, micaceous oxide, silver foil glitter, white coarse mica, abalone shell, and collage on paper. (Photo William Jaeger)

William Jaeger

Thank goodness for one-person shows. Even a fairly small affair like "In the Eye of Belonging" at Union College's Mandeville Gallery has enough depth to get to what matters in the several different directions Alisa Sikelianos-Carter takes us. This is an artist whose mixed-media paintings have both

visual panache and far-reaching content, creating what she calls a “mythology that is centered on Black resistance.”

Her work is also a component of the loosely defined movement called Afrofuturism. Elements of the cosmos and cosmic mystery, infiltrate in subtle ways. Her almost completely black paintings eventually distinguish themselves with glistening black mica mixed with black acrylic paint, as if scraped from some nearby asteroid. Her more earthbound figural works are about the body and human presence, but also about flourishes based on Black hair design. The series of oversized mask-like shapes celebrate mystery and beauty with ethnographic roots.

All of this unfurls around the second floor balcony of the outrageous Nott Memorial in an embrace of serenity. In particular, the very dark, very black paintings, reproducing as nearly impenetrable but coming alive with the right light, catch light as if from the air itself. Yes, the blackness does have its own necessary energy. And yes, they are at heart also decorative, but they come off as sincere, with fortifying restraint. The inability to easily read the coiling, layered, and irregular shapes of black on black is what makes them emphatic as much as elusive. They are luxuriously self-defining.

Some of the titles are otherworldly (“On This Black Planet”) while others insist on very personal significance (“Look at Me”). Both point to roots in Afrofuturism, which unifies the divergences. Best of all, the viewer, whatever their feelings about the cosmos, can go where they want quite easily within them.

These ideas circle around the core of Sikelianos-Carter’s work: a Black artist’s fantastic expressions of cultural self. Her web page is peppered with inventive cross-currents, creating lofty expectations of a “sacred and divine technology” or “the body as a sight of alchemy and divinity.” I take her word for it. The paintings are easy to like. And certainly there is a visual vocabulary of textures and glistening surfaces that becomes the artist’s own, especially seen all together.

It might be that these black works have the most resolved intentions, and the large figural work the easiest hook. But the mask-like objects, made mostly of photographic prints that are cut and then appended with glitter, are the easiest to get at a glance. My Art Criticism students thought they had a Rorschach, ink-blot kind of quality, being bilaterally symmetrical and open to endless reading, giving them greater potential. The artist calls them crowns, which is something very different.

But for me, they resemble the face covering of one of the two figures in her own largest painting, "Afronauts and Ancestors." And as masks they suggest a long history in indigenous African art, and of seizing and making (and unmaking) one's own identity. The titles again lead us into different directions, with fitting, fertile ambiguity: "Black Amethyst Dragon," "Galaxy Flyer," and "Carry You with Me."

Who knew that photograph prints decorated with glitter could, at first glance, be this convincing? At least in this context. The ambience of the Nott, and the back and forth between the different kinds of pieces here, especially the more substantial figural and black-on-black paintings, lifts the show and all of the works in it.

If you go

"Alisa Sikelianos-Carter: In the Eye of Belonging"

When: through Jan. 9, 2022

Where: Mandeville Gallery, Nott Memorial, Union College, 807 Union St., Schenectady, NY

Hours: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. daily

Admission: free

Info: union.edu/gallery or 518-38-6004

COLLAPSE ^



Written By
William Jaeger

Jaeger has been teaching in the Art Department at the University at Albany for over twenty years. He identifies as a photographer and also writes about photography and art. He avoids social media as much as possible. You can reach him at wmjaeger@gmail.com.