Taking a Look Beyond Afrofuturism

The Hayward Gallery show steps into the expansive worlds of Black imagination.

By CHARLOTTE JANSEN

LONDON — In a sedate northwest suburb of London, in the 1970s, Ekow Eshun and his brother spent their free time in their bedroom, poring over Marvel Comics. Among their favorites were the X-Men, relaunched in 1975 as a racially diverse team of mutants.

Elsewhere in visual culture, not to mention on the streets of London, "our presence as Black people in Britain was treated with skepticism and hostility," Eshun, now 54 and a curator and writer, said in a recent phone interview.

In the fantastical universe of these superheroes, Eshun — whose parents are Ghanaian — found not escape, but a way to rationalize his experiences. "I never got over the strangeness of a racialized society that defines people of color as inferior — that is a science-fictional state," he said.

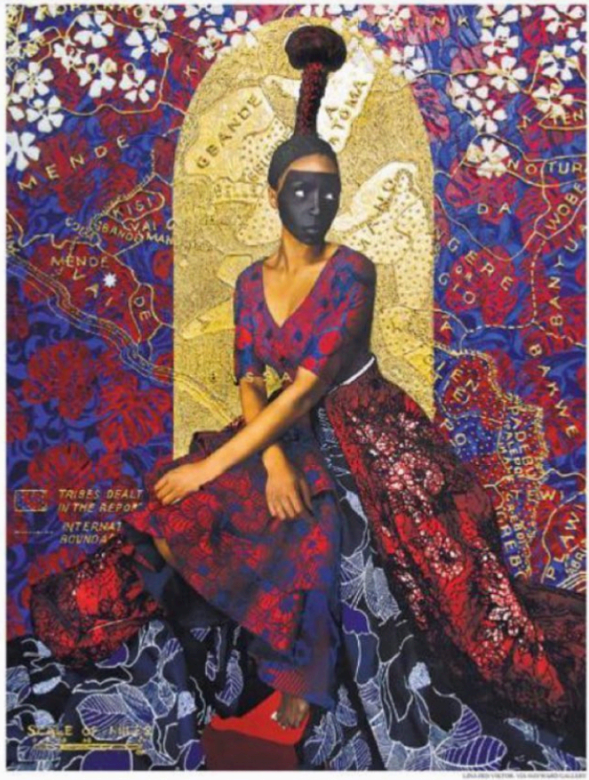
Exploring alternative worlds as a way of understanding one's own is at the heart of "In the Black Fantastic," an exhibition curated by Eshun that is on view at London's Hayward Gallery. The show brings together a taut selection of work from established artists from the African diaspora, all born between 1959 and 1989, presented as episodic solo presentations that unfold like a labyrinth of varied environments.

The first of these is a series of dazzling works by Nick Cave responding to acts of violence in the United States. It includes a collection of Cave's "Soundsuits," the full-body costumes he began making in 1992 after seeing televised footage of the police beating of Rodney King. The exhibit's "Soundsuit 9:29" is a new ensemble dedicated to George Floyd (the title is a reference to the length of time the former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck). Majestic in scale and exquisitely crafted, the Soundsuits contend with being both hypervisible and unseen — particularly as a Black person in any white-dominant society.

Cutting through Cave's space is a dramatic new commission titled "Chain Reaction." Extending from ceiling to floor, chains of black resin casts of Cave's forearm grasp on to one another, fragments connecting to create a feeling of wholeness, which reverberates throughout the rest of the exhibition.

From Cave's works, the exhibition extends over two more floors and across 10 more artists' imaginations. Ralph Rugoff, the Hayward's director, called "In the Black Fantastic" a "landmark" exhibition, one that brings together artists under this umbrella for the first time in Britain. Eshun shied away from calling the Black Fantastic a movement, defining it as "a way of seeing shared by artists conjuring up visions of Black possibility." But the exhibition still heralds a new chapter in the ways contemporary art approaches race and culture.

It is poignant that such a statement is being made in London, a city that was once the engine of Britain's slave trade and its colonial rule of African countries, and one that is still reckoning with that legacy. Hew Locke, another artist featured in the exhibition, said "you couldn't have done a show



Above, Lina Iris Viktor's "Eleventh" (2018). Left, Rashaad Newsome's "Build or Destroy" (2021). Below from left: Ekow Eshun; and a new commission from Nick Cave, "Chain Reaction," left, that shares space with "Soundsuits." Bottom from left: Hew Locke's "Serpent of the Nile (Sejant)" (2007), left, alongside the sculpture "Ambassador 2" (2021); and Cave's new commission.

formerly enslaved Africans from the United States. Her commanding mixed media works often focus on female figures pertaining to Liberian mythologies and histories, and question the dangerous allure of utopian representations of dominance and power. For Viktor, one of the younger artists in the exhibition at 35, responding to the idea of a "Black Fantastic" was "sensorial . . . it didn't need further explanation."

The exhibition's artists share a concern with reinventing, refashioning and remixing, favoring techniques such as assemblage and collage. This innovative spirit is evident in the 24-karat gold Viktor applies to her work, and in the CGI video collages Rashaad Newsome splices together from his photographs of Black queer bodies and consumer goods.

Newsome, an American artist, said that his collaboration with Eshun was wholly positive, but that the Black Fantastic wouldn't define his practice. "Curators create containers, and it's my job as an artist to destroy them — that's where we'll always be tussling," said Newsome, 43.

On the third and final floor, Cauleen Smith's installation, "Epistrophy," is a complex arrangement of objects that have personal importance to the artist, which are then reflected and projected by nearby screens and monitors; an apt metaphor for the politics of display.

Laying bare the process of making art to the viewer is important in all of the works in the show. According to Smith, who is American, this transparency conveys a sense of actively "dismantling the world around us." The artists in the show "are actually just using what is already all around us, to show what is possible," she added.

Grounding the work in the substance of reality seems more important in the Black Fantastic than conjecture about a future, especially when the future can be increasingly difficult to imagine. The art of the Black Fantastic is replete with references to historical events that still pierce the present.

A recent film work by Walker in the exhibition, "Prince McVeigh and the Turner Blasphemies," re-enacts in cut-paper puppets the murder of James Byrd Jr., a Black man who was chained to a pickup truck and dragged to his death along a country road in Texas by three white men in 1998. Many of the works invoke both memory and presence to account for the multiplicity of the Black experience, in which the peril of the past seeps into the everyday. Although Eshun is reluctant to codify the Black Fantastic as a movement, this quality emerges as one of the touchstones of the exhibition.

At its core, the Black Fantastic grapples with a paradox every marginalized community faces: how to acknowledge the "other" as a construct while also celebrating the unique power of difference, and the imagination that pours forth from it. As a result, many of the works exhibited at the Hayward land somewhere between joy and grief, with jubilance and the macabre meeting in a soaring, melancholy overture.

"I think of this as a feel-good show about death," Eshun said in an interview at the gallery. "It's about the fragility of life and the promise in death, and how physical presence, how aliveness, can be denied through acts of violence, and pervasively through the denial of our humanity."

He paused, and said, "These are things I