



Robert Pruitt
Fireflies on the Water
Coffee, charcoal, and conté
2014

Myth Versus Reality:

Robert Pruitt's Visionary Afro-Futurism

Allison Young

The predicament of race in this country is so limiting. [...] I am interested in what happens when these things don't exist, and specifically, I'm wondering what do black people look like in the future without those limitations.

Robert Pruitt¹

I'm not real. I'm just like you. You don't exist in this society. [...] I come to you as the myth, because that's what black people are. I came from a dream that the black man dreamed long ago.

Sun Ra²

In Robert Pruitt's large-scale charcoal drawing, *Fireflies on the Water* (2014), a woman sits cross-legged on a metal stool. She appears relaxed and yet intensely focused, her hands cupped together in a gesture of meditation. Her garment is printed with circular vignettes—a simplified nod to West African commemorative cloth—that feature technical drawings of space-crafts, both real and imagined. One resembles the Apollo Command and Service Modules, for instance, which facilitated the return of NASA's earliest lunar explorers in the 1960s; others depict diagrams of shuttles or figures in elaborate spacesuits.

Like an astronaut's helmet, the sitter's domed afro covers the top half of her face, concealing her eyes, as it rises upwards towards the top of the image. In the absence of her gaze, another pair of eyes stares out: a white and red *gelede* cap mask is nestled in her hair, just as it would sit atop a Yoruba masquerader's own head.

Adorned with symbols of mythicized pasts and imagined futures, Pruitt's subject is rendered in a posture of *channeling*—poised to absorb and recode national and trans-Atlantic histories alike into an alternate vision of liberation, heritage and possibility.

Widely recognized for his drawings and photographs that blend references to African visual cultures alongside motifs drawn from science fiction, comic books and urban street style, Pruitt is at the forefront of a new generation of Afro-futurist creatives. Across his practice, he aligns seemingly disparate references in order to create positive, affirmative images that transcend a present outlook that is still too often colored by racism, disenfranchisement and the legacy of slavery. As the writer Greg Tate suggests, Pruitt's work encourages viewers to "imagineer [...] a separate and more marvelous reality" that both hones and rewrites histories of black diasporas.³



Mickalene Thomas

Portrait of a Wrestler

Video, rhinestones, acrylic and enamel on wood panel
2007

A graduate of Texas Southern University, the artist studied under an Afro-centric curriculum that was originally developed by the muralist John T. Biggers. An aspiring comic book artist, he ultimately connected his training in West African art history to the cultural references and ideas that surrounded him and his peers. As journalist Michael Agresta has written, Pruitt's art examines "a natural parallel with the way masks, ceremonial costumes, and religious objects function in traditional society and the way modern-day hip-hop culture transforms clothing and other self-ornament into statements of affinity, community values, and revolutionary ideals."⁴

One of the stand-out works in *Queen, Fireflies on the Water* encompasses a variety of themes that are central to many pieces in the exhibition by contemporary African American, Caribbean and West African artists. It exemplifies, as well, CCH Pounder's passion for collecting art that is empowering and visionary in nature, that blends traditional and contemporary visual tropes and places emphasis on black women's strength, dignity and beauty.

The Yoruba *gelede* masquerade, for instance, honors The Mothers, who are emblems of female power and spiritual life force. The Mothers represent a range of dualities: creativity and destruction, nurturing and ruthlessness, love and anger.⁵ In Pruitt's work, the mask appears all-knowing and attentive, as if expressing recognition of the many facets of women's strength across the gallery in *Queen*: as in Mickalene Thomas's portrait of a female wrestler, which celebrates her aggression and physical prowess; in Harmonia Rosales' graceful homage to Oshun in the guise of Venus, the Roman goddess of love; or in Pounder's own mixed media sculptures that honor black women's beauty, wherein electric-blue braids and tresses of textured and straightened hair hang

like fetishes from an antique chair, connecting that seat of power to qualities of self-love and aspiration.

Yet, Pruitt's work is unique in its deconstructive approach: the artist's engagement with African art moves beyond a desire to represent a diasporic heritage—he employs such references in order to parse the ways in which deep-seated mythologies continue to define our lives, remixing the narratives that both limit and affirm black communities. The *gelede* masquerade itself channels the benevolence of the Mothers, while also functioning to preserve Yoruba history and to maintain a sense of social order. The ritual employs mythology in order to make sense of, and assert control over, the daily struggles that befall individuals and communities.

As Roland Barthes proposed in *Mythologies* (his seminal book of essays first published in French in 1957), myths offer a kind of framework that we can use to make sense of our circumstances or roles in society, yet they are often imposed on us by higher institutions—be they bureaucratic, capitalist or political.⁶ Barthes deconstructed and appropriated the format and rhetoric of myths, shedding light on the ways in which widely accepted narratives about culture and society are constructed today, pulling back the curtain on the forces behind the status quo.

While sharing Barthes' interest in contemporary significations of culture, Pruitt's aesthetic style can be more directly aligned with that of the prolific poet and jazz musician Sun Ra (born Herman Blount in 1914), a contemporary of Barthes with a radically distinctive vision. Sun Ra appropriated the narratives and symbols that define blackness in America, pioneering the movement that would be dubbed Afro-futurism decades later. His musical ensemble went by many names, including The Myth-Science



Carol Christine Hilaria Pounder

Hair Chair

Video, hair, ivory, wood
2010

Arkestra, a moniker that refers to biblical narratives of survival as well as opposing epistemological modalities, offering new possibilities for imagining one's past and future. The Arkestra's immersive performances featured chanting and African

drumming, free jazz and electronica, and eccentric costumes that merged space-age metallic fabrics with Ancient Egyptian headdresses.

In the 1972 song, "Myth Versus Reality (The Myth-Science Approach) – Angelic Proclamation – Out in Space," vocalist June Tyson and saxophonist Danny Davis chant in repetition: "If you are not a reality, whose myth are you? If you are not a myth, whose reality are you?"⁷ These lyrics speak to the ways in which our histories will be written for us if we don't intervene with new alternatives.

With her own eyes covered, the central figure in *Fireflies on the Water* demonstrates that looking inwards—towards one's self, one's community and history—is an integral step in this process. The work's title describes a scene as vivid as it is deceptive: swarms of glowing insects can be easily transformed, by their reflections in water, into a cosmic abyss, a parallel world of possibility and spectacular vision. Invoking the illusory nature of the world around us, Pruitt compels us to recognize the role we play in seeking and forging our own realities.

¹Robert Pruitt, as quoted in "Robert Pruitt's New Works Juxtapose African Culture and Space Objects," *Artsy* Editorial, November 6, 2015. Accessed January, 2018: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-robert-pruitt-s-new-works-juxtapose-african-culture-and-space-objects>

²Sun Ra, in the film *Space is the Place*, released 1974, directed by John Coney, 85 min.

³As quoted in Michael Agresta, "Wards Matter: Robert Pruitt's art vividly portrays the lives and dreams of the people who have long called Houston's rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods home," *Texas Monthly*, December 16, 2016. Accessed January 2018: <https://www.texasmonthly.com/the-culture/artist-robert-pruitt-on-gentrification-in-the-houston-wards/>

⁴Michael Agresta, "Wards Matter."

⁵See Babatunde Lawal, "New Light on Gelede," *African Arts*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (January., 1978), pp. 65-70+94

⁶Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*; first edition published in French by Editions de Seuil, France, 1957. American edition published in English by Hill and Wang, 1972.

⁷This song appears on the 1972 album *It's After the End of the World* by Sun Ra and His Intergalactic Research Arkestra.



Steve Prince
Angela, Messenger of God
Conté
2014