



Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room (2021), installation views. Photos: Anna-Marie Kellen, courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS

BEFORE YESTERDAY WE COULD FLY: AN AFROFUTURIST PERIOD ROOM

Curated by Hannah Beachler and Michelle D. Commander with Sarah E. Lawrence, The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, 5 November 2021–ongoing

Reviewed by Charlene K. Lau, Independent Critic

As the United States grapples with issues of anti-Black racism, the Met Fifth Avenue has made efforts towards inclusionary practices and decolonization with the offering of a new temporary Afrofuturist period room situated in the European Sculpture and Decorative Arts wing. This compact, re-imagining of a domestic space in Seneca Village – a largely Black community of residents and landowners in the nineteenth century – has been layered upon the Indigenous land and history of the Lenape peoples, its acreage later expropriated for present-day Central Park. For the museum, now charged and ensconced by colonial narratives, infrastructure and categorization, what can a period room for the future look like? How can such a display mode possibly succeed? A closer look at the curatorial team behind the room offers context: lead curator Hannah Beachler, a film production designer; consulting curator Michelle Commander; and the Met's own curator Sarah E. Lawrence. With guest curators collaborating with an internal voice to guide and set the institutional tone, the space feels measured, if not a bit strained. As a proposal for Seneca Village (had it not been destroyed), the installation envisions a future through its architecture and showcased objects, bound by what the exhibition text calls an 'illusion of authenticity', as period rooms are wont to create (The Met 2021).

As part interior design, display, installation and decorative art, the period room imagines and reimagines African diasporas as they collide through space and time. Constructed to resemble a tiny house, its constituent parts include an openwork portion that encapsulates a modern, white *de rigueur* living room, with a faux distressed clapboard section meant to emulate a kitchen.

Unlike previous period rooms at the Met, viewers can walk the perimeter of *Before Yesterday We Could Fly* (2021–ongoing) allowing closer looks at objects and artefacts than would normally be available from behind a velvet rope. It is a house inside a room, and the museum walls that surround the installation serve as a backdrop for Njideka Akunyili Crosby's verdant wallpaper *Thriving and Potential, Displaced (Again and Again and ...)* (2021). Derived from layers of photo-based transfers including a mid-nineteenth-century map of Seneca village, historical portraits of Black New Yorkers and the silhouetted foliage of an okra plant, the wallpaper's imagery echoes the many layers of migration and Afro-diasporic experience and interrupts an otherwise white space – literally and figuratively – of the cubed gallery ubiquitous in presentations of contemporary visual art and modernist homes.

Something else feels much different here, and part of that might be the room's metaphorical openness and time travel, jettisoning viewers into future worlds steeped in ancestral pasts. With its slatted roof, the sitting room's architectural frame reads as unfinished, yet to be built, like history itself. Simultaneously open and closed like a greenhouse – a structure known for cultivation, growth and nourishment – *Before Yesterday We Could Fly* presents the possibilities for African belonging, free to roam across temporalities and lands. While the product of history as a discipline is periodization, this installation moves against categorization, flitting in and out of time. Here, the idea of tomorrow co-exists with history and contemporaneity, blending continental Africa with its diasporas. These multiple Africas, that otherwise exist geographically apart, instead move physically closer together in this space while remaining true and distinct, fluid and flexible.

Furniture, fashion, painting, photography, ceramics and other everyday household goods come together under this guise of an ever-shifting entity. A glossy, white, cubed television set anchors the living room, transmitting artist Jenn Nkiru's five-channel digital video *OUT/SIDE OF TIME* (2021). In it, a man repeats 'Senegal ... Seneca ...', signalling kinships between the Black and Indigenous histories interwoven on Lenapehoking (homeland of the Lenape), and how collective overlaps and imprints on the land and waterways formed as the previously enslaved and Native Americans encountered the terror and trauma of white settler colonialism. At one corner sits designer Jomo Tariko's walnut, bentwood 'Mido' chair (2021) that reforms an iconic mid-century modern technique into the iconic Afro comb, an object from ancient Egypt now recognized as a politically trenchant symbol of Black Power and sovereignty. A ceremonial palm wine vessel from Grassfields, Cameroon (nineteenth to twentieth century) and William Henry Johnson's screen-print *Jitterbugs II* (1941) sit in vitrines – set into the room's walls – alongside contemporary items such as Willie Cole's shoe sculpture *Shine* (2007) and Lorna Simpson's work on paper *Earth & Sky* (2018).

The other half of the structure plays host to a warm, wooded sensibility in counterpoint to the cool, space-age white gloss of its opposite side. Fabiola Jean-Louis's dress sculpture *Justice of Ezili* (2021) sits in the kitchen on the chair sculpture *Mollo Oa Leifo – Ngoanana ('fire in the hearth – Girl')* (2021) by artist Atang Tshikare. As an embodied presence, the former – a reproduction of a Victorian dress made of coloured papers, with a bodice pieced together like stained glass and adorned with gold, Swarovski crystals, lapis lazuli and labradorite – is named after Ezili Dantor, the *lwa* or *loa* (spirit) of vengeance in Haitian Vodou. The figure lends the space a spectral spirit, presiding over and protecting the home as a living inhabitant might. For the latter, Tshikare

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recovers Afro-histories from a colonial French grasp: an upholstered chair from eighteenth-century France known as a *fauteuil* is composed of South African grasses and wood, with brass beads arranged in a pattern derived from Zulu pictograms and zodiac constellations. Reminiscent of Yinka Shonibare's post-colonial *tableaux vivant* re-enactments of historical European portraiture, the staging of these objects in the room puts forth complicated histories, wresting Tshikare's Tswana culture from so-called canonical narratives, forever haunting the present and future.

Cabin-like and anchored by a brick hearth, the room's kitchen counterpart plays host to more flourishing arts, further comingling works from contemporary artists and designers with historical, African diasporic objects from across time and place: ceramicist Roberto Lugo's dishware (2021) bears the visages of Black American artists and cultural figures including Zora Neale Hurston, Henrietta Lacks, Horace Pippin and Alma Thomas; a collection of sixteenth- to nineteenth-century Murano and German glassware, results of which were produced from North African and Middle Eastern raw materials and exploitation; and American stoneware crockery, including one jar (1796–1819) made by Thomas W. Commeraw, a free Black potter working in New York City's Lower East Side. Uncannily, contemporary shelves that line the interior walls look like stand-ins for commercial displays in a design store rather than supports for museological interpretation. However, what grounds the kitchen are its natural elements: dried bunches of thistles, pine and herbs hanging from the rafters, bottles of botanicals, oils and fragrances grouped together on shelves.

By definition, a period room holds things, be they everyday items or history; it attempts to freeze time and encapsulate a past. As an experiment in material and visual culture, *Before Yesterday We Could Fly* finds interconnections and relations across the African diaspora, reformulating temporal narratives in exhibition form. The heterogeneity of styles and forms on display announce that no monolithic Africa exists, not in the past, not now, not ever. Instead, *Before Yesterday We Could Fly* might be cast as an 'unperiod' room, for the many cultures, histories and futures of Africa and its diasporas can neither be contained nor reduced to a singular aesthetic or a specific moment in time. Any attempt to exhaustively define and synthesize a time and place would be incomplete, and a period room that meets the boundless potential of many futures is an oxymoron precisely for this reason. Unlike other period rooms, *Before Yesterday We Could Fly* offers a speculative window onto a future, in a celebration of culture, joy and hope.

Reference

The Met (2021), 'Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room', Metmuseum.org, <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2021/afrofuturist-period-room>. Accessed 18 June 2022.

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