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4Columns

Saya Woolfalk

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A riotous multitude coheres into a defined cosmos in a new exhibition at the Museum of Arts and Design.



Reviewing Saya Woolfalk's *Empathic Universe*—her first mid-career survey, presenting twenty years of a multi-hyphenate art practice—it's tempting to give up on sentences and rely instead on lists. A staccato index constellating the many items, ideas, influences, and citations sewn up in the artist's comprehensive, self-referential fiction is easier to craft than a fluid prose summary of its fabulous whole. Grandmothers, mothers, daughters—fathers, grandfathers, ancestors. Egg cartons, kimono silk, felt scraps, toys plucked from trash—digital projections, LCD screens, cell-phone audio guides. Octavia Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin, Philip K. Dick—Thomas More, Barthes, Baudrillard. Candida Alvarez, Nick Cave, Eleanor Antin, Rembrandt, Louise Bourgeois, Yayoi Kusama, Faith Wilding, Hieronymus Bosch, Surrealism, the Hudson River School, Topsy Turvey dolls, natural history museums, period rooms, ethnography, anthropology, psychoanalysis, feminism, theater, dance, masquerades . . .

But this is not to say that her project lacks clarity—such a riotous multitude somehow coheres into a defined cosmos that is, in the artist's words, "more real than reality." Woolfalk has said that her goal in presenting her hybrid, dreamworld elaborations of the story behind a strange evolution of humans called, per the show's title, "the Empathics" (the study of which dominates her oeuvre), is "to bring the audience into an experience that is a combination of bewilderment and awe." Two feelings that can seriously disturb the critical-writing process, which is mostly devoted to analysis, dissection, lucidity.

And so, it feels disappointingly didactic to proceed like this: the exhibition is split into two floors, each containing roughly ten years of work. It starts on the fourth with the beginning of Woolfalk's novelistic narrative thread, the thirty-minute video projected on a wall to the left of the gallery: *Ethnography of No Place* (2008), made with anthropologist Rachel Lears when Woolfalk was an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum of Harlem. (Woolfalk's practice is almost always collaborative—her early work was constructed with the help of fellow students, artists in residence, even her mother; her mentors, younger artists, and her daughter now participate in her museum projects.)

"No Place" is a utopia that is not only paradisiacal (a vibrantly hued dreamscape inhabited by the "No Placeans," women who have evolved into human-plant hybrids, recycle trash to create helpful technologies, and turn back into the landscape when they die), but also melancholy, weird, haunting. In its prologue, the video invites us to journey there by stepping through a portal: a wobbly, *Sesame Street*-esque construction of brightly painted and decorated boxes assembled in a grungy empty lot in Queens, set against the ugly Manhattan skyline—the No Placeans, who live in the future, have sent this portal back in time for us. Six more chapters (and an epilogue) alternate between hallucinatory animations and live-action sequences that illustrate how the No Placeans (portrayed by actors, in full-body stockings hiding their facial features, who wear the costumes and wield the totems that are shown like sculptures and props on the floor to the sides of the video) live, evolve, reproduce, and die.

We learn, going forward, from wall text and the indispensable audio guide (*Utopia Station*, an interactive play performed by the Atlantic Acting School's NYU students), that the No Placeans sent another gift into the present from their futuristic abode: they planted bundles of bones in the ground in upstate New York, bones infected with a fungus that, when ingested by a human, catalyzes the ritualistic process to becoming an Empathic—a double-headed being who can empathize and communicate with all other beings and objects. Walk around to the right side of the gallery, and you'll find a life-size diorama, *Utopia Conjuring Chamber, Reconstruction of the Institute of Empathy, Greene County, New York* (2012). Three Empathics (faceless mannequins clad in sky-blue, cloud-patterned pajama pants with dramatic, variegated tunics on top) standing around a table on which lies a human (another mannequin, in the same pajamas, torso covered in white fabric petals and a stuffed, peony-like blossom over her face) undergoing one of the rites that will lead to her evolution. Our hosts in the audio guide explain this is a lucid-dreaming ritual that generates the visions that will help her shed her humanly personality and transcend into a new one. On the walls behind the figures are heads and skins discarded by the Empathics when they evolve (which they cannily realized they could sumptuously decorate and then sell to fund their Institute). Along an adjacent wall is a series of works on paper—illustrations of the visions captured during the lucid-dreaming ritual.

If the fourth floor has a handmade and mystical vibe, the mood on the fifth is darker and sleeker. The walls are now painted a deep shade of eggplant purple that sets off the gleaming, seductive surfaces of the new, high-production-value technologies the Empathics have developed with their "for-profit" arm, ChimaTEK. The impatient can pay to use these "Life Products," prototypes of which hang along one wall (LCD screens playing short animations

supported by scaffoldings of bones) on a subscription basis (or for a per-visit fee) to accelerate their transformation into an Empathic and escape all the problematic “-isms” bound up with human identity markers. In the Utopia Station play, one of the characters, spooked, leaves the tour of the Institute for Empathy at this point—“I don’t want to give up everything that makes me me,” her voice quavers.

In an interview with Jasmine Wahi reproduced in the exhibition catalog, Woolfalk says, “To me empathy is the idea of attempting to understand somebody else by imagining being in their place and becoming another, at least temporarily.” This is the utopian, and sometimes malefic, arc of her invented universe—it’s both wonderful and horrible to shed your identity, both wonderful and horrible to become someone else; and, in her view, totally necessary. Maybe utopia can’t exist without casting its own dystopic shadow. Woolfalk, who was born in Japan to a Japanese mother and biracial American father, has pointed to her paternal grandmother’s background as a catalyst for her own interest in the concept. That grandmother was raised in Father Divine’s Peace Ministry in Harlem, an institution she remembers with trauma but that, with its idealistic aims, also did undeniable good for its community—we could insert so many institutions and political systems here that have done the same.

The world of the Empathics is no different—for all its cultish technocapitalism, on this floor we also have intimations of beautiful speculative universes made possible by Empathic evolution: swirling medicinal pools of projected light viewers can dip in and out of, room-size installations combining wall painting, projection, and sculpture that evoke Islamic patterned tiles, Japanese “floating world” paintings, Buddhist mandalas, stained glass from Catholic cathedrals—worlds of disparate cultures shimmering over each other, combining to generate undreamed-of possibilities.

In preparation for making *Ethnography of No Place*, Lears and Woolfalk invited their friends and neighbors to their studios in Washington Heights and Harlem to tell them what they thought about when they thought about utopia. The fictional tour guides of the audio-guide play invite viewers to do the same, and to speak those words aloud (sadly, no one actually did this when I was in the galleries). The only words I could think of were “freedom from fear”—nonspecific, general, the best I could come up with. The words I think of when I think of Empathic Universe, on the other hand, are granular, exciting, sometimes malignant: chimera, hybrids, sprouting heads. Plants, bones, skins, shedding, discarded, eaten. Fungus, algorithms, catalyzed evolution. Hope for sale. But also—wonder, bewilderment, awe.