

Curating the End of the World, Red Spring, and 2nd-wave Afrofuturism

Reynaldo Anderson and Sheree Renée Thomas

Curating the End of the World is an online, multimedia, multi-genre, Black speculative pop-up exhibition. It began by looking at the concerns Black people address across the diaspora through Black speculative lenses in response to existential threats.

Organized by Reynaldo Anderson and Stacey Robinson, and originally curated by Tiffany E. Barber as a collaboration between the Black Speculative Arts Movement and New York Live Arts, the exhibit is displayed on the Google Arts platform in conjunction with the Live Ideas Festival *Altered Worlds: Black Utopia and the Age of Acceleration*. It was created with support from other Black cultural formations like Afroflux, Black Kirby, NubiaMancy, Xion network, Kaos Network, Blerd City Con, and others.

The two-part exhibition brings together an international cadre of artists whose work responds to the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Black violence, climate change, poor governance, trans-humanism, and an accelerating, technologically driven economic system on the verge of collapse. *Curating The End of the World* and its second installment, *Red Spring*, are a second wave Afrofuturist, or Afrofuturism 2.0, commentary on the end of our current age of “cyclical chaos” (as conceived by Sheree Renée Thomas), interrogating the racist pathology and corruption that influences policy around the world.

The second exhibition, *Red Spring*, curated by Sheree Renée Thomas, Danielle L. Littlefield, and Dacia Polk, focuses on Black artistic reactions to the pandemic and the political unrest that followed the murder of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and others. *Red Spring* explores the circular nature of systemic racism and the

public policies—public safety, health, and wealth—that adversely impact Black and Indigenous communities. This work is remembrance and resurrection, resistance and restored hope in a social, economic, and political landscape of uprisings and upheaval, strange fruit buried in scorched earth. The international visual artists, musicians, designers, and writers gathered here ask the essential questions that plague us all. What ancient and familiar new blossoms will spring up from the change the world demands now? What sacrifices and compromises will be made in the days ahead? *Red Spring* evokes the clarion call for dignity, equality, and justice of Claude McKay's classic Red Summer poem, "If We Must Die." It speaks to the temporal and systemic changes that must come to pass throughout the diaspora in order to birth futures where Black lives truly matter.

Black Speculative Art is a creative, aesthetic practice that seeks to interpret, engage, design, or alter reality for the re-imagination of the past, the contested present, and act as a catalyst for the future. Second wave Afrofuturism/Afrofuturism 2.0 and the Black Speculative Arts Movement are indebted to previous movements like the Black Arts Movement (BAM), Negritude, The Harlem Renaissance, AfriCOBRA and other continental and diasporic African speculative movements (Anderson R. 2016). Our understanding of the multi-dimensionality of the Black experience—the good and the bad, the respectable and the undesirable—are explored. We see our curatorial work as a reinvigoration of the Black/African political imagination. Current issues concerning human and technological obsolescence, time, futurity, and economic and ecological forecasting are what plague our collective consciousness during this time of crisis. Long treated as dark matter, Black bodies have been integral to the emergence of modern capitalism, science, medical practice, and cultural assemblages, but little or not enough attention to Black health, precarity, and other threats within the context of Black futures and existential risk is developed (Alexander M. 2011; Jones E.L. 2016). *Curating the End of the World* and *Red Spring* aimed to address this absence through a mix of new and existing works of site-specific, participatory drawing, painting, photography, collage, sculpture, and performance.

Utilizing BSAM's international network and partners, our specific focus is to showcase through art the relationship between science, anti-blackness, and Black bodies in science fiction, technology, and public health. As such, *Curating the End of the World* and *Red Spring* are both consistent with BSAM's mission in that they demonstrate how art can be a point of departure for engaging with and possibly transforming socio-political issues facing Africa and the African Diaspora.

Of particular interest are three artistic works from the *Curating the End of The World* exhibition produced by visual artists John Jennings, Stacey Robinson, and La'Nora Boror. John Jennings's piece *JES'GREW* was originally produced for the Afrofuturist exhibition *Unveiling Visions: The Alchemy of the Black Imagination*, hosted at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City in 2015. Jennings noted:



Figure 1: John Jennings, *JES' GREW* (2020).

The idea was to create a piece of discursive design that fused together the utilitarian nature of a CDC poster with the fantastic allegory that Ishamel Reed used to create the malady of “Jes Grew.” The poster served as a diegetic prototype that reified the concept that Reed was proposing (Jennings 2021).

JES' GREW piece was repurposed for *Curating the End of the World* as it seemed to capture the spirit of the time. It presciently and graphically illustrates the chaotic atmosphere surrounding the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and, similar to the tropes identified in the novel *Mumbo Jumbo* by Ishmael Reed, captures the reactionary response of the American public attitude to a disease that spread invisibly, disrupted social norms, and spread xenophobic behavior.

Correspondingly, visual artist Stacey Robinson, also an organizer for the beginning of *Curating at the End of the World*, helped to develop a piece for the exhibition, noting:

UNADJUSTEDNOWRAW speaks to Black now, the survivalist state of being. We are always surviving, always unadjusted, always unjusticed, and in all ways, unmoved. The pandemic only heightened this state of regularity. Whether policed by tear gas, or airborne pathogens our activity always lies within enemy



Figure 2: Kamau Grantham and Stacey Robinson as BLACKMAU, *UNADJUSTEDNOWRAW* (2019).

lines. Always finding our footing in what is a regular state affair as we battle police, pandemic, and pandemonium. Yet we hold onto our Africaness as transformative as it is advancing. We find the beauty in the midst of brutality, joy despite the injustice, and we rise above it all, transforming reform into revolution (Robinson 2021)

UNADJUSTEDNOWRAW captured the desperation of the African-descent community as it realized that the conditions of the pandemic exposed the precarious nature of their existence on the healthcare margins of American society. Furthermore, the art represented the stark nature of systemic racism in the United States, how fragile the social fabric of American life was, and how quickly it unraveled in the face of catastrophe.

Finally, La’Nora Boror’s piece *Life-Altering* captures the new reality of life in a mask for Black people, and intentionally looks at the intersectional position occupied by women. Art critic Florian Kijlstra asserts:

By placing a Black woman in a position that historically—and presently—is mainly reserved for White men, the work reclaims the practice of epistemological contemplation and defies the intersectional oppressive mechanisms that have prevented, and often still prevent, Black women from filling such positions.

Through this engagement, *Life-altering* subverts the exclusionist and racialized implications of Western Enlightenment from an intersectional perspective (Kijlstra 2020).

In summation, the *Curating the End of the World* exhibition series serves as an online visual archive of the African diaspora experience in America during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the acceleration of capital to online platforms as working class people of color did not have the luxury of working from home, often functioning as front line workers that still had to pick up garbage and prepare or deliver food. Finally, the exhibition also serves as a

turning point in the formation of platform capitalism as Black digital artists began to demonstrate an increasing sophistication with blockchain technology, developing NFTs or Non-Fungible Tokens as an alternative to the traditional route of using art dealers, other elite outlets, or hegemonic platforms like Google and more that control their artistic expression.

The first exhibition, *Curating the End of the World*, features creative works by Chloe Harrison, Jessi Jumanji, Kinnara : Desi La, Jordan P. Jackson, Ioven-loops, Zeal Harris, Kimberly Marie Ashby, Stacey Robinson, Patrick Earl Hammie, Jon-Carlos Evans and ReVerse Bullets, Shawanna Davis, Edreys Wajed, La'Nora Boror, Delia Martin, Sherese Francis, John Jennings, Damian Duffy, David Brame, Motherboxx Studios, Muniyra Douglas, Ingrid LaFleur, BLACKMAU, Zeal Harris, Nettrice Gaskins, William Falby, Charles E. Mason, Walidah Imarisha, Sheree Renée Thomas, Stefani Cox, Clinton R. Fluker, PhD, and ZiggZaggerz the Bastard with Tobias c. Van Veen.

Artists featured in *Red Spring* represent a variety of mediums and aesthetics and hail from around the world, including: Gerardo Castro, Jimmy James Greene, Algernon Miller, Bryce Detroit, Arthur Flowers, Shawn Theodore, Nicole Mitchell Black Earth Ensemble, S. Ross Browne, Jorge Elecer Bermudez, Ashundra Norris, Andea Rushing, Zeal Harris, Jackie B, Nicki Monteiro, Roldan Muradian, Jasteria, Eric Towles, Adeyemi Adegbesan (Yumg Yemi), Mahwyah Milton, Elle. L Littlefield, Ekpe Abioto and the African Jazz Ensemble, Linda D. Addison, Kristina Kay Rob-



Figure 3: La'Nora Boror aka Eco Artist Healer, *Life Altering* (2020).

26 Reynaldo Anderson and Sheree Renée Thomas

inson, Weenta Girmay, Winifred Hawkins, Patience LeKien, Julia Mallory, Tokie Rome-Taylor, Regis and Kahran Bethencourt (Creative Soul Photography), Darian Darrell Jerry, Yasin Allah aka Mmilk. Hippy Soul (Idi Aah Que and Teco Sensei), Quentin VerCetty, Meighan Morson, Muniyra Douglas, Dedren Snead, M. James. Cooper, Jacqueline Johnson, Adebukola Buki Bodunrin, Street Genius, InnerGy, Intergalactic Soul (Marcus Kiser, Jason Woodberry, Quentin Talley), Picket Fence (Jay Webb), Cudda Mack, Mike Colley, A Slate, Audra D, Ron Herd II, Morisha Daneé, Taylor Deed, Paul Thomas the Recycle King, Daniel Coates, and tobacco brown.

References

- Alexander, M. "The New Jim Crow." *Ohio St. Journal of Criminal Law*. Vol. 9, pp.27-51, 2011.
- Anderson, Reynaldo. "Afrofuturism 2.0 & the black speculative arts movement: Notes on a Manifesto." *Obsidian* 42.1/2 (2016): 228-236.
- Kiljstra F. *Curating the End of the World: Afrofuturism and Black Speculative Art in Times of COVID-19*. 8 July 2020. Retrieved 4 April 2021. <https://moed.online/curating-the-end-of-the-world-afrofuturism-black-speculative-art-times-covid19/>.
- Jones, E. L. *Medicine and Ethics in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Springer 2016.
- Jennings, J. Personal Communication. 18 April 2021.
- Robinson, S. Personal Communication. 18 April 2021.