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Looking Back from the Future at Michelangelo Lovelace Sr.

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I never wanted to be a part of planet Earth, but I am compelled to be here, so anything I do for this planet is because the Master-Creator of the Universe is making me do it. I am of another dimension. I am on this planet because people need me.

-Sun Ra, quoted in an A&M Records press release (1998)

Afrofuturism is an ideology linked to music and art and a Black experience. Sun Ra often acts as its musical trope. Born in 1914 in Birmingham, AL, Sun Ra claimed to not be of this earth. His outer space sounds challenged the Black aural aesthetic in many ways, including being one of the first musicians to use electronic instruments. Like Sun Ra's music, the overarching phrase "Afrofuturism" responds to a search for the world of tomorrow, today. Afronaut artists like William Villalongo and Cristina de Middel, and writers like Octavia E. Butler and Samuel R. Delany keep an undeniably thick racial history as a subject but present new ideas about race and representation, breaking with normalized racism to create a space for change. Coined in 1994 by writer Mark Dery, the phrase Afrofuturism questioned the largely streamlined depictions of both utopian and apocalyptic futures, which were predominantly Anglo/European based. Afrofuturism is not about science fiction, though that may be the genre chosen to relay ideas of the future; more accurately, it is about imagining a Black reality not limited to racial identity. In this world, the human race exists in colors other than Black and White to include the Purple, Green, and Orange. Pop and politics are key in the Afrofuturists' aesthetic, and to their goal of empowering Otherness. Afrofuturists paint portraits of how they want to be seen, or perhaps how they see themselves. But this is not always how others see them. What, then, is the Black future?

Michelangelo Lovelace Sr. has been painting for most of his life. His treasure trove of canvases includes hundreds of paintings, which are snapshots from moments in his life. Some are celebratory, depicting community pride, block parties, and dancing.

Some are more personal and include portraits of people in his life or of the artist himself, painting. Others are social commentary: the historical election of the first Black president of the United States of America; the swift block-to-block changes that occur within the landscape of the urban American cityscape; dark temptations of our inescapable vices; the light of redemption; police crime scene tape marking the site of another dead young Black man.

Lovelace's scenes are not paintings of the future. Instead, the tableaux capture moments of the present. He paints what he sees — often visions of all races sharing similar experiences. In one of these paintings, *Katrina Aftermath* (2006), he paints the chaos of the flooded streets of New Orleans, post-hurricane. Here, colorful acrylics paint the faces of the displaced — people of all colors, all in desperate need of help. The masses are faceless, as are most of the faces in Lovelace's large and vast crowds. Black and White, young and old, the ailing and the able bodied, all vulnerable. As people on the ground try to stay dry atop of cars, or stand

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in the rising water, a few dead bodies float by. Some fill the rooftops and hold up signs, hoping to catch anyone's attention.

Lovelace takes this opportunity to use commentary and media coverage of Hurricane Katrina and inserts them onto the signs. A White man holds a sign that reads "Help Us!," and another holds one that reads "We All Are American." A small group stands in front of a sign that reads "Need Help Don't Call FEMA." A Black man waves the American flag while another holds a sign paraphrasing the musician Kanye West's off-script remarks: "Bush don't care about Black people." West's outbursts during a live NBC telethon for hurricane relief, less than a month after the storm, was in response to aid, or lack thereof, being delivered to the affected residents of New Orleans. Criticism came from both inside and outside the city walls. The predominant accusation being that help would've been swiftly and effectively delivered had the affected not been predominantly Black.

In the same painting, where locals rummage through stores in desperation and panic, store signs reflect the racist double standard of the media's interpretation and reporting on riots and looters: "White Folks Just Looking For Food," and "Black Folks Just Looters." This, in particular, feels very close to recent press coverage of the aftermath of various accounts of murder at the hands of the police. This past April in Baltimore, the story of a young man named Freddie Gray, and his suspicious death, seemingly at the hands of local police officers, sparked a wide range of emotional reactions from the local, predominantly Black, neighborhood. The sensationalized news coverage of both the video recording of Mr. Gray's scuffle with officers and mysterious uncaptured moments which left him in excruciating pain and paralyzed, mixed with the rioting, looting, and property damage caused by incensed locals, had media outlets calling the people of Baltimore "Thugs." Cable news consistently presented nearsighted views of the riots. Drawing attention to young Black men dressed all in black, reporters become visibly irritated at the sight of Baltimore residents destroying police property. Much less attention was paid to the rioters who were not Black, and even less still to the peaceful protests. The reality painted for those not on the ground differed from what the angry and exhausted communities were experiencing: a seemingly endless fight for justice.

Lovelace's *Katrina Aftermath*, as most of his paintings, comes from observing and absorbing the moments around him. In the style of Afrofuturism, race remains an overarching theme, but he plays with it by means of dissecting ideas of community and empathy. He is not, by conventional definition, an Afrofuturist. The work is neither intergalactic nor fantastical. And his paintings have been criticized for depicting racial stereotypes. I agree that they depict stereotypes, stereotypes that have sadly stood the test of time, reappearing both pre- and post- his *Katrina Aftermath*. But the stereotypes are not of people in his paintings; instead, they often reflect those looking in from the outside. An Afrofuturist attempts to create an alternate reality, where identity is not bound by race or racial stereotypes, but may present itself in many forms. From an electro-infused jazz song to a photograph of a Black astronaut in the Zambian desert. But what if the viewer, not the artist was an Afronaut?

Looking at the works now, through an Afrofuturist lens of an alternate racial reality, the work has both utopian and apocalyptic elements. Like an artist, an Afrofuturist viewer can retain race as a subject but move beyond it and customize it. Seeing Lovelace's paintings from this point of view, the work challenges stereotypical depictions of race by illustrating the artist's reality, one that is often not acknowledged or appreciated for the ongoing strides made toward equality. Afrofuturism uses fantasy to discuss bigger issues. Michaelangelo Lovelace does just that, but this demands more work from the viewer. In this Black future, a brick wall is not part of a ghetto, the death of a young Black man is tragic, all humans deserve to be treated as equals, and life can be a party.

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