

Frohawk Two Feathers: Afrofuturism and the Colonial Imaginary

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Through his drawings, monumental portraits, detailed maps, and sculptures, Los Angeles-based artist Frohawk Two Feathers is creating an ongoing saga of epic proportions. Rewriting history by mixing fact and fiction, Two Feathers has devoted much of his career to telling the tale of the imagined union of France in England through his ongoing exhibition installments of the "Frenlish" Empire.

Throughout his oeuvre, Two Feathers plays with our conception of time, history, and reality by repeatedly using historic events as a base, and tweaking them slightly by adding, subtracting, or substituting key players and figures. He uses photographs of his friends and colleagues as inspirations for his portraits of empire and gives them an

MORGAN LEHMAN

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antiquated feel by aging the surface of his paintings and sculptures with coffee, tea, and dirt. In this myriad of ways, he imbues the past with the present, as he plays with themes of Afrofuturism and the colonial imaginary. His work calls to mind visual time travel as he rebuilds and reimagines the past, creating an alternative rendition of history that is uniquely "midtopic" in the way that it is neither saccharinely and utopically perfect, nor dystopically doomed and foreboding in a Bradburian or Orwellian sense.



[Click to enlarge] Frohawk Two Feathers, "The Spanish Main 1794 (3BB): Blanca, the motherfucking Queen of Spain Jacinta; Queen of the Tairona (Deceased); Carlota, Queen of Santo Domingo (Deceased)," 2012. Acrylic, ink, tea, and coffee on paper. 44.75 x 60.5 in. | Image: Courtesy of the artist.

This blending of parallel histories in order to illuminate current climates occurs in other humanistic fields. Literature professor Rudyard J. Alcocer presents a theory about the popularity of time travel literature, which could be applied to Two Feathers' work. In his book "[Time Travel in the Latin American and Caribbean Imagination](#)," Alcocer analyzes time travel literature to determine whether there are similar socio-political climates and events that might have inspired this literature's popularity at distinct times in both Latin America and the Caribbean. He posits that, "...if [fiction and nonfiction] seek either a literal or symbolic return to the past, both... do so because they want to change something that seems immutable without such an imaginative return to the past. The

MORGAN LEHMAN

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fictional missions that began a few decades ago with the objective of altering history in the Americas have become among some groups the actual missions to alter the present."

Considering his work in this sense, Two Feathers' *Frenghish Empire* feels extremely pertinent and relevant to today's current events. Using Alcocer's framework, viewers might question what driving forces beginning in the 2000s through the present might have felt so "immutable" that they required Two Feathers' "imaginative return to the past."

When asked about whether he intends to change or correct the past with his art in my recent interview with him, Two Feathers noted:

"Initially, I began this series out of a desire to find the parts of my identity that I felt was [sic] missing. Later on, it became a crusade to tell the history of marginalized people throughout the globe. However, at its core the oeuvre lives and breathes in the present. It speaks to the now via the past and presents the collective 'we' with a vision of a future that will come true or not depending on how the record is processed. And at the core of it all, the work is an illustrated account of the human condition (whatever that truly is)."



[Click to enlarge] Frohawk Two Feathers, "The Unnecessary Death of Lucretia Theroux (Brought)," 2015. Acrylic, ink, graphite, tea, and coffee on paper. 30 x 44 in. | Image: Courtesy of Morgan Lehman and the artist.

In this sense, the artist used the *Frenghish Empire* as a mechanism through which to search for his own identity, while also sifting through his conception of time, change, and historical transformation. Two Feathers himself, a Chicago-born African American artist, is constantly playing with his own persona as well, as if rewriting and reimagining his own identity through different artistic mediums and performances. The name itself, Frohawk Two Feathers, is in fact his *nom de plume* reserved for his visual telling of the

MORGAN LEHMAN

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Frenghish Empire. Musically, he also moonlights as Kent Cyclone (a self-described "improvisational music and song generator with Peggy Sue-Nami"), as one half of Superdeluxe (a throwback '80s rap group with Micah James), and as Tha Grimm Teachaz (a "faux golden age of hip-hop group with Serengeti"). Only in 2014, did he have his first solo art exhibit under his birth name Umar Rashid.

(Embedded Video "Tha Grimm Teachaz - I Getz – Featuring Son Doobie (1993)")

This sense of identity-building, identity-searching, and even alienation with the world as-is hints at themes of Afrofuturism that Two Feathers expands through his work. In cybertheorist Alondra Nelson's interview about Afrofuturism for Soho Repertory Theatre, she explains the basic history of the Afrofuturist movement:

"It's a way of looking at the world, it's a sort of canopy for thinking about Black diasporic artistic production, it's even an epistemology that is really about thinking about the future, thinking about the subject position of Black people and about how that is both alienating and about alienation, right, so that the alien... comes to feature quite centrally in Afrofuturism -- the outsider figure. It's also about aspirations for modernity and about having a place in modernity. And it's about speculation and utopia... I think part of why it's Afrofuturism, in particular, I think part of the resilience of Black culture and of Black life is about imagining the impossible, imagining a better place, a different world."



Frohawk Two Feathers, "Scenes from the Veld 2: Hunter-gatherer of the veld and the spectre of his future, a servant," 2011. Acrylic, ink and tea on paper. 16 x 20 in. | Image: Courtesy of Morgan Lehman and the artist.

MORGAN LEHMAN

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Two Feathers' work both fits this genre on the one hand and breaks its boundaries on the other. While he reimagines a different world and explores complex themes of personal and historical alienation, technological innovation, and cosmology theories, he does not necessarily do so to imagine a better world. The Frenghish Empire is just as war-laden, dramatic, tumultuous, and greed-driven as the first time around. The artist explores the limits of colonial times in a series of vignettes entitled "Scenes from the Veld" which were part of his 2011 exhibition "The Edge of the Earth Isn't Far From Here" at the Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town, South Africa. In the painting "Hunter-gatherer of the veld and the spectre of his future, a servant," for example, he casts himself as both a hunter and servant, in a before-and-after sequence showcasing the roles his character might be offered or confined to. In this sense, his revisions do not perfect a flawed world, nor do they offer him vengeance, glory, or reckoning.

But, while he might not intentionally set out to change the present in this retro Afrofuturist revisionist model, his revisionist state in both his art and his own identity forces the viewer to reconsider history, narrative, and identity-making in a similar way -- and perhaps in thus doing, he simultaneously alters the viewer's present understanding of self, narrative, and history as well.



The "Guyana Girls" in progress: Frohawk Two Feathers in studio, sketching from an image of sitters, 2011. | Photo: Ellen C. Caldwell, courtesy of the artist.

MORGAN LEHMAN

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In a recent interview, he told me about his work's connection to Afrofuturism:

"I'm really building on a past to create this different future. In terms of Afrofuturism, there's the sampling element and the inclusion of technology, astronomy, and ancient technologies that become augmented as the story goes on. There's sampling from Black Power movement, cosmology, Voodoo, hairstyles, clothing, and languages -- these are all different modes of thinking with roots in the past but futurist in creating a new worldview based on the ancient and colonial world... It is really a cosmology of the empire in using the modern."

Through Two Feathers' portraits and exhibition settings, he uniquely and distinctly makes time malleable. Eighteenth and 19th century European portraiture was used as a messaging system in order to convey certain messages to the viewer -- portraits commissioned by the European upper class demonstrated visually that the sitter had wealth and resources in order to both flaunt and further reinforce the sitter's status and rank. Conversely though, ethnographic portraiture, rendered those depicted as victims of racist pseudosciences. In his portraits, Two Feathers destabilizes this hierarchical system.



Frohawk Two Feathers, "The Guyana Girls (I Tell All of You Like I Tell All of Them). Beertje and Geertje, fraternal twin sisters and assassins of Marechal Paul Dubois. Curacao 1790 sentenced to death in absentia in Frenland. Rescued by Admiral Deucalion," 2011. Acrylic and tea on paper. 44 x 30 in. | Image: Courtesy of Michele Pietra and Joel Cohen, MCA Denver, and the artist.

MORGAN LEHMAN

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He invites friends and colleagues to sit for him, he takes their photos as inspirations for his paintings, and he updates the past with present characters, thus offering the sitters freedom and power to control how they are depicted, something not seen in ethnographic portraiture of the past. He also ages his paintings, dyeing them with coffee and tea in combination with studio abuse like wearing the surface down with sandpaper or walking on the works as an agitator.

Additionally, he plays with time using the changing shape of the portrait's frame as a device for reframing history. The shape he most commonly uses is from an actual mirror, traced onto his paper, surrounding his depicted sitters with a dark black brush line. In this way, he is quite literally and metaphorically playing with the idea of viewers and sitters looking at themselves, seeing a reflection of themselves in the past.

At his shows, viewers often intermingle with those the artist has painted, whose portraits hang on those walls, so that those rulers and rebels who Two Feathers has reimagined appear to be alive in the present moment. The effect is jarring, as the past dances hauntingly with the present between the gallery and museum walls. In one moment, viewers see them in their 18th century military garb on the wall, and in another they are in their jeans and T-shirts interacting in the gallery space.



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[Click to enlarge] Frohawk Two Feathers, "Map of Hispaniola 1794," 2012. Ink, acrylic, coffee and tea on paper. 26 x 39.8 in. | Image: Courtesy of Morgan Lehman and the artist.

In this way, his portraits create a complex continuum: all at once, they bring the past to life, send the present to the past, and also serve as *memento mori*, reminding the viewers and sitters of our short and distinctly limited time on this earth. With Two Feathers, time is fluid, contradictory, and biting -- and at any moment, we could all be pawns and pundits of empire.

In bringing the uncertainty of the past, present, and future together within one portrait, he simultaneously questions and asserts agency over the validity of the historical narrative. For the individual viewer, this might personally challenge viewers to question how their stories will be told and recalled. More largely and philosophically, his work might encourage us to do as Alcocer suggests in altering the history and ideology of both the present and future.



Installation image of exhibition "Heartbreaking and shit, but that's the globe. The Battle of Manhattan" at Morgan Lehman Gallery, 2014. | Photo: Courtesy of Morgan Lehman and the artist.

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Frohawk Two Feathers, "Your Crew Is Not A Shield," 2014. Acrylic, ink on elk hide. 33 1/2 x 33 1/2 x 3 in. | Image: Courtesy of Morgan Lehman and the artist.