

# SAYA WOOLFALK

AUGMENTED VISIONARY REALITY OUTPOST



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Nordhausen & Callaway Galleries

**THE COLUMBUS MUSEUM**

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Since 2006, Saya Woolfalk has been imagining and creating an alternative universe that combines science fiction, ceremonial ritual, technology, identity, and art. This other universe exists in the future and past simultaneously. Overall, Woolfalk's ongoing project considers identities and influences across cultures, especially in relation to our contemporary world. Each museum that hosts one of the artist's fantastical, immersive, multi-sensory installations helps continue and expand the story of this fictional world.

Woolfalk's alternative universe is inhabited by beings from the future called the No Placeans. Part human and part plant, they can change gender and color. In Woolfalk's narrative, a group of modern-day women in Upstate New York stumbled on a set of No Placean bones covered in fungi. (The bones had been transported back in time via a portal in Queens, New York). Over time, as the women were exposed to the bones, they experienced psychedelic visions. These illusory mental images then caused a genetic alteration that fused the women's human DNA with that of plants. With this change in their DNA, the women renamed themselves the Empathics and set out to make this hybrid metamorphosis possible for anyone. They founded the Institute of Empathy to excavate the original archaeological site and then formed a corporation called ChimaTEK to sell this transformational process to consumers.

The environment in the Nordhausen Gallery tells the story of the ChimaCloud, the Empathics' newest groundbreaking technology. This self-replicating digital

universe is populated by fragments, ideas, and forms uploaded to the ChimaCloud by people from around the world. The multi-media installation demonstrates the ChimaCloud's various functions, most importantly how it is accessed using custom headdresses built with 3D-printed objects, colorful ceramic disks, and metal mandalas.

Woolfalk has reimaged the Callaway Gallery as a ChimaTEK day spa. It features three stations that foster mindfulness, guided meditation, and self-actualization for visitors. With the help of directional prompts, ChimaTEK's Visionary Reality Outpost allows users to enact their desires for a positive possible future. This installation includes porcelain tiles that Woolfalk made during an Arts/Industry residency at the Kohler Company factory in Wisconsin in 2018.

By envisioning and then creating fully realized aspects of a fictional universe, Woolfalk intends to evoke not only wonder but also a feeling of disorientation. She hopes this combination of responses will lead to a sense of curiosity, openness, and possibility that visitors will then take with them into their everyday lives.

The original iteration of this project, *Visionary Reality Outpost: Saya Woolfalk*, was organized by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Elements of *Saya Woolfalk: Expedition to the ChimaCloud*, recently on view at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, are also featured here. The exhibition at The Columbus Museum has been made possible in part by the Columbus Convention and Visitors Bureau and the Columbus Cultural Arts Alliance.

**Above:** Installation view of *Visionary Reality Outpost: Saya Woolfalk* at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, 2019. (Photo: John Michael Kohler Arts Center) | **Front cover:** Installation view of *Visionary Reality Outpost: Saya Woolfalk* at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, 2019. (Photo: John Michael Kohler Arts Center) | **Interior images:** 1. Astrologer Alice Sparkly Kat and patron activating the 2018 Outsider Art Fair's Curated Space, which featured Saya Woolfalk's homage to the late artist Eddie Owens Martin, aka St. EOM. (Photo: Billy Farrell Agency) | 2. Installation view of *Visionary Reality Outpost: Saya Woolfalk* at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, 2019. (Photo: John Michael Kohler Arts Center) | 3. Installation view of *Saya Woolfalk: Expedition to the ChimaCloud* at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, 2019. (Photo: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art) | **Back cover:** *Saya Woolfalk, Cloud Catching Garment (After Apollo Splashdown)* (detail), 2016, digitally printed neoprene top and skirt on mannequin. Collection of the artist

# SAYA WOOLFALK

## AUGMENTED VISIONARY REALITY OUTPOST

**JONATHAN FREDERICK WALZ:** Your overall project to date involves creating a parallel universe, complete with inhabitants, their own economic system, and so forth. This seems like a lot of responsibility! Could you tell us how you got started on this path of exploration?

**SAYA WOOLFALK:** When I started thinking about making art professionally, I was studying with feminist artists at Brown University and became invested in the idea that “the personal is political.” I was inspired to explore ideas that impact me as an individual that might be of interest to others.

I began to expand my critical vocabulary and read post-colonial, feminist, and cultural theory as well as semiotics, interned for the African Film Festival and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, while I pursued a dual degree in Visual Art and Economics. I spent my time in school ingesting tools and exposing myself to things I could use to analyze real life. To consider race, gender and sexuality, economics, human consumption and its impact on the environment, the role of technology in shaping culture, as well as how museums work.

After graduation, I interned at Christie’s for the summer, applied to a bunch of graduate schools in fine art, and took classes at Fashion Institute of Technology in New York while working at a coffee shop and a non-profit called Publicolor. I did this while living at my parents’ house.

As you can imagine, I was happy to escape to grad school that fall. There, I took as many classes as I could in multiple media to expand my material horizons: sculpture; painting; performance; video; art and tech. I also got back into my childhood obsession of reading lots of sci-fi and fantasy.

This motley collection of interests became the foundation for my current exploration.

The universe I am building is made up of my lifelong ac-

cumulation of the knowledge of others, and the generation of ideas through collaboration. I prepared to have the critical tools to build this world, but the world that I am building and collaborating with others to build channels itself through us, it has a life of its own.

**JFW:** I know your partner is a practicing anthropologist who does fieldwork. Did you know him when you began creating the world of Empaths? Have you taken anthropology courses yourself? Do you and your partner discuss each other’s work?

**SW:** I met my husband Sean T. Mitchell when I was in grad school at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He was preparing for his qualifying exams at the University of Chicago for a Ph.D. in Anthropology.

I was already working to figure out ways in which I could build worlds, but I was mostly inspired by science fiction. I was consuming book after book, and lots of bad movies trying to get a handle on how to use immersive environments, live action, and narrative to build habitable and believable yet fantastical worlds.

When I graduated with my MFA, I received Fulbright funding to study folkloric performance traditions in Northeastern Brazil. My husband was already doing his field research in Alcantara, Brazil. He studies a satellite launching base that was built there in 1982.

It was not until I moved to Alcantara that I realized how anthropology, and ethnographic film could be tools for crafting critical believable narratives. In Brazil, I reconnected with a colleague, documentary filmmaker and anthropologist (at the time) Rachel Lears who became interested in collaborating with me on a fictional ethnographic film. The film we made over the next two years is called *The Ethnography of No Place*, a fictional future world that tracks the birth, life, death, and culture of a fictional race of future humans called No Placeans.

I also spent a fair amount of time with Ursula Le Guin’s books and I learned that her dad was the famous anthropologist A. L. Kroeber. While I was in Brazil, I read *Changing Planes*, a book she published in 2002. In each of the short stories in the book, Le Guin conjures a different world with a separate foundational premise. *The Ethnography of No Place* is a five chapter film, much like a series of short stories. Each of the chapters was scripted based on the ideas of people who would visit my studio. Rachel and I would ask them about their ideas of utopia, and then turn their ideas into chapters of the ethnographic film.

In our ethnography, anthropology and sci-fi became a hybrid.



**JFW:** Curators, critics, and art historians sometimes discuss your output in the context of Afro-Futurism. This concept is probably new to many in the Museum's audience. Could you tell us what you think it means and how your work does or doesn't fit into that framework?

**SW:** Part of why I was interested in moving to Brazil was that it is a country that has a similar history of slavery, colonialism, and immigration to the United States. A similar mixture of African, European, Indigenous, and Asian descendants is understood in very different ways in Brazil and in the US. As someone interested in distinct realities that can emerge from similar foundational conditions, doing research in Brazil was of interest to me.

In Maranhao, Brazil I was particularly invested in folkloric performance traditions that emerged out of histories of slavery, colonialism and resistance. I spent time participating in things like Bumba Meu Boi, Tambor de Crioula, and Festa de Divino. All three are fantastical performance traditions that have their creative formation during slavery. These traditions and their methods are syncretic, but are also a part of what is understood to be African diasporic culture.

*The Ethnography of No Place* emerged out of learning the methods of these practitioners and was made while I was an artist in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. In some ways it is a continuation of the transportation, and transformation of traditions brought to the New World by African slaves to suit the needs of diasporic people in their new environment.

In 2013, I was invited back to the Studio Museum to participate in a show that explored Afro-Futurism called *The Shadows Took Shape*, curated by Naima Keith and Zoe Whitley. The piece I made for that show was a collaboration with DJ Spooky and Ron Eglash, called the *Hybridization Machine*. This work is a part of the ChimaTEK narrative in the Empathic Universe. This home uses futuristic technology, a virtual DJ remixes the body and mind of a user of the hybridization machine so that they can have their identity wiped clean and download a new virtual avatar.

As you can hear from my description of that work, I use sci-fi and speculative fiction to think about proximate future worlds as well as parallel temporalities. I am also interested in the ways in which human life and culture are transformed by technology. These are some things that Afro-Futurists are interested in as it pertains to the African Diaspora.

**JFW:** Do you listen to music or podcasts or other programming in the studio? What's on your playlist?

**SW:** I tend to listen to pop music while I am making work in the studio. Something with a good beat. I am often listening to Santigold or Janelle Monae. As for podcasts, right now I am listening to *Nice Try*, which in its first season explores different utopias including Herland, the Biosphere, and Oneida. These three utopias coincidentally have directly inspired *No Place*, *The Empathics*, and *ChimaTEK*. I am also listening to Sam Harris's *Waking Up* course. His meditation is a part of my daily ritual to prepare for the studio.

**JFW:** Was there a particular book and/or exhibition when you were in grad school that really changed your thinking?



**SW:** So many books, but Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* series was a major influence, Coco Fusco's *Skin Deep*, Juliet Mitchell's edited volume *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*...the list could go on. So many mind-blowing ideas that shifted what I thought could be accomplished by narrative and visual culture.

**JFW:** Part of the inspiration for this project is the figure of St. EOM and the utopian world of Pasaquan he created not far from Columbus. Tell us what interested you about St. EOM and how Pasaquoyan ideas or practices inform *Augmented Visionary Reality Outpost*.

**SW:** When I first went to Pasaquan it was the extravagance and intricacy of the site that blew me away. I was in awe of this Technicolor painted cement accumulation made by St. EOM and a few assistants as an addition to an ordinary house. I was also taken by the levitating figures, and multiple cultural influences in the work. It was only after a bit of research that I found the meat of my inspiration.

In 1957, interracial marriage was illegal in 24 states in the United States including Georgia. This was the year St. EOM began to build Pasaquan. He built a temple to a culturally hybridized world in a place and time when many Americans were violently unreceptive to this perspective. My resulting installation is an attempt to create a space in the Museum that can use some of the interactive strategies St. EOM used to communicate his vision of Pasaquan and a culturally hybridized world with the people who came to his complex.

As a part of the previous iteration of this project at the Kohler Art Center, we developed three activations of the space with Chicago-based performance artist and ritual holder Sojourner Zenobia. Each session engaged the audience in a different form of participation with the space. For example, Session I was called *Art Divination*, Session II allowed participants to connect with plant medicine, and the final Session III, *Farewell Heart Emergence Ritual*, used empathy practices and self-love meditations, to explore themes of collective consciousness.

**JFW:** You think about each installation project as a new chapter in the story of the universe you have created. Do you have a sense of what's next? How do you decide what fork in the

road to take? It seems like the possibilities could be overwhelming.

**SW:** When I first started the narrative, I came up with a three-part structure: No Place, The Empathics and ChimaTEK. This triad was supposed to function as a single narrative universe of the Empathics. No Place was outlined as a utopia collectively imagined and projected into the future, The Empathics took the form of a group of present-day humans trying to make that utopia a reality, and ChimaTEK was a corporation that takes the ideas and technology generated by the Empathics and their Institute of Empathy and turns them into usable everyday products.

This triad turned into something more than I could imagine. The content generated from the narrative turned into a project called the ChimaCloud and now has expanded into the Visionary Reality Outpost. So the three-part project has become five. It is the narrative that begets the next segment of the project, that and collaboration.

Usually, at the end of a project there is a nagging problem, something that does not make sense, a feeling of incompleteness. This incompleteness creates a question that needs to be answered. Collaboration is often the way to find the answer to the question, and that becomes a major stimulus for the projects.

**JFW:** Columbusites are very proud that visual artist Alma W. Thomas was from Columbus! In 2016, The Studio Museum in Harlem commissioned you to create a response to the work of Thomas, specifically from her Space series. What was that like? Were you aware of Thomas' work before that project?

**SW:** I was aware of her work before they commissioned me to

make the response. Curator Lauren Haynes, invited me to respond to Thomas work and the piece I was particularly interested in is called *Apollo 12 "Splash Down."* I loved her colorful abstracted image of a capsule falling from space splashing into the ocean, a return to earth after a journey into the unknown.

The work I made in response is a fictional building called the *Virtual Reality Outpost* and uses her abstraction as a wall drawing in this building. This wall drawing was then transformed into a textile design for an augmented reality garment.

**JFW:** What advice would you give to students in Columbus and elsewhere who are considering pursuing a career in the visual arts?

**SW:** I teach students at both the BFA and MFA levels and am the product of both a liberal arts and fine art education. What is fantastic about studying art is that it prepares you to be creative, to problem solve, and to self-motivate, all of which are tools that can be used in many fields.

Being an artist can take many forms, but to become an artist who makes a living from their art is a real challenge. It can require multiple jobs, and being tireless in your pursuit. I personally spent many years without a permanent address, couch surfing, and going from residency to residency. Even now I am constantly on the road for my projects. This may be appealing at first but it also can become quite exhausting.

The point is, really think about it. Are you committed to this? Do you really want to become an artist? If the answer is "yes," then go for it! If you have lingering doubts, they will probably amplify (and also sometimes subside), but you have to be able to live with the challenge of being an artist and still want to wake up in the morning and go to the studio to make art.





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