

Installation view of Wangechi Mutu, Sentinel V, 2021



GLORIOUS ALCHEMY

The wildly imaginative *In the Black Fantastic* exhibition, running through to September at the Hayward Gallery in London, features the work of 11 artists from the African diaspora.

BY ALASTAIR HAGGER

ASPECTACULAR sequined bodysuit supports a giant, furry, multi-colored

eye, like the cyclops emperor

of a 1970s funk planet. The gender-amorphous head of a clay-rendered sentinel is crowned with either bird of prey or paradise, and stands alert on black toes that are delicately, unmistakably feminine. A young African woman, resplendent in scarlet and indigo, reclines like a callow deity before a backdrop of the names of tribes taken in the slave trade, written in gold.

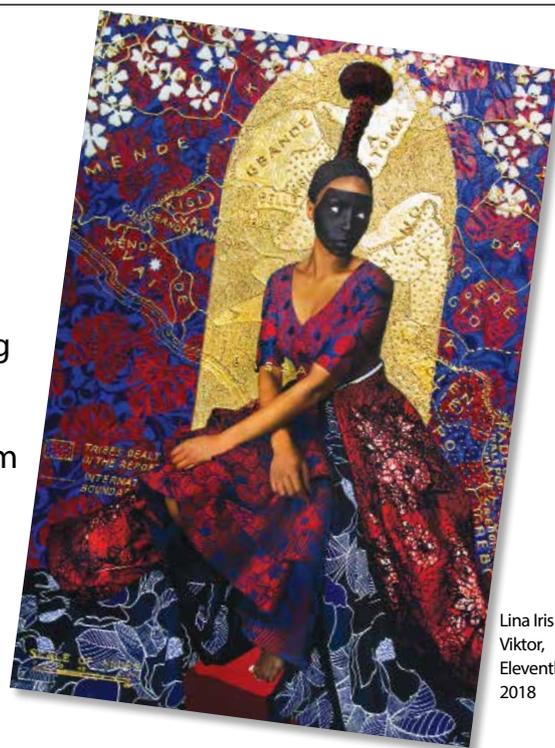
To walk through the *In the Black Fantastic* exhibition, running through to September at the Hayward Gallery in London, is to be taken on a journey through the black imagination unlike anything ever encountered: a startling, challenging, deeply inspiring immersion into the grotesque, the beautiful and the otherworldly.

"There's a really interesting cultural shift that's taking place, where you see black artists embracing myth and speculative fiction, fable and African cultural and spiritual practices, and using those as the inspiration point for works that look quite closely at the nature of the racialized everyday," says Ekow Eshun, the show's curator, and writer of the book that inspired it.

"It's an unnerving undertext, the context within which these works are created. They begin from an understanding of the absolute strangeness of a society that divides itself according to race, and then even further into hierarchies of race. I've been very conscious of how the language of fantasy and science fiction has been used by different black creative figures as a tool to interrogate their identity, as a means to new, glorious ways of seeing."

The show features the work of 11 artists from the African diaspora, each given their own room where their work can fully articulate each unique vision.

"As a visitor, you are within this proposition of the black fantastic not as a movement or a genre, but as a way of seeing," says Eshun. "The artists conjure their own world, that offers blackness as a site of dreams and possibilities. And the exhibition tries to bring alive



Lina Iris Viktor, Eleventh, 2018

their way of seeing."

There is a visceral political agency embodied in many of the works on display, which harness the creative idiosyncrasies in the artists to tell stories that resonate with the emotional power of each individual imagination. "The fantasy becomes a kind of armor or riposte, but it's also an assertion of being and possibility," Eshun says. "None of the works in the show are an escape from racial injustice. They're partly a response to that, but also an assertion, of self and possibility, that chooses to go beyond the ways the black figure is typically seen within Western society. All of the artists are balancing these different propositions between fantasy and reality, and conjuring something extraordinary out of that alchemy of elements."

The exhibition feels like a fierce confrontation with that reality via an empathy unlocked by the fabulous and the instinctive. "These works understand this connection between imaginative reach and the lived everyday, as a way to think more profoundly and more poetically about the complexity of our lives," says Eshun. "The show allows people space to contemplate beauty, without erasing the difficulty and the complexity that lies within that beauty. I think these artists are exceptionally good at creating this balance, and spaces that feel like they're alive, that have possibility woven within them."

After the horrors visited upon the black experience in recent memory – the painful echo of a trauma centuries old – is Eshun optimistic about the future of human creativity, its resilient ability to transcend?

"We can walk through the world with some sense of an ability to make this world on our own terms, through our imagination," he says. "What else is there for us to do apart from believe in our ideas – even the things we might describe as the fantastic dreams that we hold?" **P**