

JOHN JENNINGS • STACEY ROBINSON • BLACK KIRBY presents IN SEARCH OF THE MOTHERBOXX CONNECTION
NOVEMBER 9 TO DECEMBER 21, 2012 • HALLWALLS CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER • BUFFALO, NY



WE NOT JUST CONSCIOUS *BLACK KIRBY* WE DOUBLE CONSCIOUS.



Those who don't know Jacob Kurtzberg, aka Jack Kirby, should.

More than any single individual, Kirby is responsible for developing the visual style—the vocabulary and grammar—of what we today think of as prototypical comic book art. Working from the mid 1930s into the 1990s, his output is literally too prolific to detail here. He helped create Captain America in 1940, invented the genre of romance comics in the 1950s, and though he was already of an older generation, was the key artist driving the youth-centric Marvel Comics through the counter-culture 1960s, having a hand in creating the Hulk, Thor, the Fantastic Four, Galactus, the Silver Surfer, and the X-Men, among countless others. His Marvel writing partner Stan Lee gets all the cameos in the Marvel films by virtue of still being alive but any self-respecting comic fan will tell you that Jack is the Man.

In presenting the work of Black Kirby—the collective name used by artists John Jennings and Stacey Robinson—my interest was not the blossoming forth of my internal fanboy (well, maybe a little), but rather the act of hybridization taking place, the specific remixing of visual culture. Jennings and Robinson have noted that they are using Kirby “as a genre,” which is a curious and appropriate way of phrasing it. It's not simply a polite way of admitting you are copying someone's style (though there is a touch of that), it's more a fervent mingling of homage and appropriation. It's a formal declaration by the artists that Kirby is sufficiently significant, artistically, that one can approach him as a genre, as a mode of expression.

Even though he has been aped many, many times by many other artists, Kirby remains a recognizable artist and, by extension, a recognizable form—his particular style of rendering limbs and faces; his exaggerated, panel-busting compositions; his tendency to create immensely detailed compositions whose purpose was not always to further the narrative but sometimes just to pimp out the visual appeal of the tale; and even the abstract gestures and details used for backgrounds, explosions, energy bursts and other textures are readily recognizable.

Jennings and Robinson are acute admirers of all these elements and employ them with unrestrained glee. Formally, it might appear as though they are operating in a state of perpetual overload, but Kirby was like that too, often piling on intricate detailing in a manner that verged on compulsive. But taken as a whole, there is a rhythm within this aggregate style and its appropriate to the remixed genre in question. It's not necessarily a melodious rhythm, more like a bass-heavy bottom end with lots of stylized inserts. Jennings and Robinson introduce more contemporary illustrative practices into their Kirby-genre—like graffiti tagging—but their method remains one of operating through a cacophony of images, a beautiful visual

noise.

Like lots of hybrid culture, including hip hop, puns abound in the work of Black Kirby—beginning with that terrific name itself, but including references to Ralph Ellison, Gil Scott Heron, Public Enemy, Stevie Wonder, Malcolm X, Afrika Bambaataa and the reimagining of the planet-devouring Galactus into Mo'Blacktux, “the collective consciousness of a people who predate all mortal records of time.” This is the poetry of the remix, but also a cue to deeper reservoirs of thought in the work, addressing black culture in its current and historical guises, Afro-futurist sensibilities, and long-standing notions of the Other.

While cultural diversity in comics has only really come to bloom through the work of more current generations of artists and writers, even in Kirby's time, super heroes were often the unwanted outcasts from mainstream culture—often pining to be understood, often derided, often saving the world or mankind anyway. Because that's how even misunderstood heroes roll. Like film directors, writers, and musicians who would come to define American popular culture—its airiest dreams and aspirations—Jack Kirby was Jewish at a time when it was more advantageous for even a comic book artist to change his name. Even the whitest of white super heroes could usually be framed as an Other. Superman, for every advantage he had, was the lone immigrant from another world.

So the idea of a Black Kirby is wholly in line with the broader cultural underpinnings of comics and Jennings and Robinson draw upon these affirmative and proactive aspirations. Malcolm X is not depicted as X-Men nemesis Magneto because he was an evil genius, but because he was a leader of an oppressed class, determined to never be oppressed again. But it's not an antagonistic or aggressive posture, it's an allusion that draws upon the positive, using the emphatic gestures of comics (and comics' most emphatic artist) as a means to propel a positive vision for the present and future.

Either Jennings or Robinson might have approached this notion of a Black Kirby as a singularly-created art project, but their choice to operate as a kind of dynamic duo is a nod to both the classic paradigm of effective oppression-fighting teams, in comics and in the collective actions of the real world. Or, as they themselves note, they not just conscious. They double conscious.

John Massier
Visual Arts Curator

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LIST OF WORKS: (front) MAKE ME WANNA T'CHALLA / DIGITAL ARCHIVAL PRINT ON PAPER / 24" X 36" • (this page, beginning top left) MAGNETO X / DIGITAL ARCHIVAL PRINT ON PAPER / 24" X 36" • HIGHFATHER BOMBATTAA / DIGITAL ARCHIVAL PRINT ON PAPER / 24" X 36" • CROWN OF BADDASSERY / DIGITAL ARCHIVAL PRINT ON PAPER / 24" X 36"

JOHN JENNINGS is an Associate Professor of Visual Studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo. His research and teaching focus on the analysis, explication, and disruption of African American stereotypes in popular visual media. His research is concerned with the topics of representation and authenticity, visual culture, visual literacy, social justice, and design pedagogy. He is an accomplished designer, curator, illustrator, cartoonist, and award-winning graphic novelist. His work overlaps into various disciplines including American Studies, African American Studies, Design History, Media Studies, Sociology, Women and Gender Studies, and Literature. Jennings is co-author of the graphic novel The Hole: Consumer Culture, and co-curator of Out of Sequence: Underrepresented Voices in American Comics. His most recent book was curated with collaborator Damian Duffy and is entitled Black Comix: African American Independent Comics Art • Culture.

STACEY ROBINSON is an artist. His subject matter examines the African-American experience, more specifically the future. Making many African-American private conversations and concerns public. In a celebratory fashion, he accentuates the form. What many times is over-sexualized is honored in his work as the accentuation, elongation and distortion of his forms represent much more than the initial appearance. Inspired by Michelangelo, Ernie Barnes, Charles Bibbs and Robert Rauschenberg, Stacey ventured in a different direction, examining the future. His Afro-Futurist works consist of reoccurring motifs, which are symbols of technology and rebirth. Juxtaposing flesh with mechanical objects, the works comment on newness of life beyond the struggles of the past. Currently, Stacey is preparing for graduate school. Balancing family, community activities and art events is an everyday challenge. Having achieved most of his life goals, Stacey is looking forward to an unreached goal, art professor, lecturer, and world-renowned post-modern artist.

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HALLWALLS CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER
341 DELAWARE AVENUE, BUFFALO, NY 14202
716.854.1694 www.hallwalls.org

