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ARTS

Robinson's Afro Futurism at Union College

Installation by Albany native

Karen Bjornland | [March 29, 2017](#)



Afrotopia 1 by artist Stacey Robinson.

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For the next 12 months, the Schaffer Library at Union College is leaping beyond time and space with "Branding the Afro Future," an installation by artist Stacey Robinson.

Robinson, who grew up in Albany's Arbor Hill and now teaches graphic art at the University of Illinois, is into Afrofuturism, a idealistic science fiction and fantasy world inhabited by people of African descent.

Grammy-award-winning singer Janelle Monae, who starred in the movies "Moonlight" and "Hidden Figures" is an Afrofuturist. She injects sci-fi into her music to explore ideas of prejudice and class.

Octavia Butler, the highly acclaimed African-American sci-fi writer is a figure in the movement. And don't forget Lt. Uhura, the pioneering African-American space woman in the popular "Star Trek" TV series.

For four days this week, in the library's Learning Common, an open study area on the first floor, Robinson arranged his digitally-created graphic designs on the walls and then, using a Sharpie, drew images directly on six wall columns.

Students, faculty and the public could watch the artist at work and ask him questions.

On Wednesday night, Robinson did an art workshop with children at the Hamilton Hill Arts Center.

At 12:55 p.m. Friday, Robinson will talk about his work at a reception in the library.

Robinson's works, which he calls "visual utopias," blend images about past African-American experience and re-interprets them for the future.

"He's cutting and pasting culture"... "it's the combining of horrific and positive visions," says Julie Lohnes, Union's curator of art collections and exhibitions. "Afrofuturism looks to technology and sci-fi. It imagines a great future for African-Americans."

In one corner of the room, 12 posters depicting influential African-Americans, including Maya Angelou, Angela Davis and Steve Biko, are lined up over study desks.

On each poster, in the style of a comic book, the person's words appear in a yellow text bubble.

"You can kill a revolutionary but you can never kill the revolution," says Black Panther Fred Hampton. "You know you've got to find a way to bring some lovin' here today," Marvin Gaye tells us.

"By utilizing cultural symbols, machinery and non-human life forms as survivalist metaphors for the Black experience, I revere Black culture while confronting the traumatic results of colonialism," Robinson wrote in the catalog for his 2015 M.F.A. exhibit at the University at Buffalo.

Just past the Learning Room, in the Lally Reading Room, there are more Robinson works and a glass case where you can read about Black Kirby, Robinson's collaboration with artist John Jennings that deconstructs

and re-imagines the work of famous comic book artist Jack Kirby, who co-created characters like the Hulk and the X-Men with Stan Lee.

Robinson is the fifth featured artist in Union College's Art Installation Series in which contemporary artists "are making work in real time" and "activating spaces," says Lohnes.

The series was launched in 2004 when Lohnes noticed that many students were not going into the Nott Memorial to see the regularly scheduled Mandeville Gallery exhibits.

"This get works out of the Nott Memorial, gets the work out to students," she says.

"We're demystifying the art process. Students are having an experience with an artist."