

Vogel, Wendy. "Saya Woolfalk," *Artforum*, Fall 2012.

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS MONTCLAIR

Saya Woolfalk

Montclair Art Museum

Montclair Art Museum | 3 South Mountain Avenue

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By Wendy Vogel ☼



View of "The Empathics," 2012.

Saya Woolfalk's first solo museum exhibition—an ethnographic display of artifacts from a fictional all-female tribe of plant-human hybrids called the Empathics—demands a suspension of disbelief. Created by Woolfalk as an idealized metaphor for cultural hybridity, the Empathics blend racial, ethnic, and species characteristics, gaining supernatural powers of compassion through their mix of qualities. The immersive installation of colorful life-size mannequins, textiles, paintings, video, and photography, all credited as loans from the fictive Institute of Empathy headed by the Empathics themselves, traces the species' development, culture, and life cycle.

Like natural history installations, the show opens with a presentation of skeletons. Atop Empathic bones swathed in patterned fabrics and adorned with mandalas and beads, each creature sprouts a functional second head (an homage to W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness," a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others"). Environmental tableaux depict the Empathics' daily life, their costumes, their collective "Utopia Conjuring Therapies," and visionary paintings produced during these therapeutic sessions. Empathic "artifacts" reference a playful mix of influences, from the museum's neighboring Native American collection and traditional kimono fabrics (which Woolfalk weaves) to Afrofuturism, manga, and the pattern and decoration wing of 1970s feminism.

One can compare Woolfalk to artists like Nick Cave and Matthew Ronay, who likewise explore performative hybrid identities and ethnography in their work. Yet Woolfalk's constant questioning of anthropological ethics moves her work in a different critical direction. See, for example, the Empathics' molted hides, or "sheds." The exhibition's wall labels (also authored by the tribe) explain that these hides are sold to fund the Institute of Empathy's research and the species' collective livelihood. This collusion with the "other" and self-exoticization point to a more complicated history of colonialism, a link between our messy present and the Empathics' vision of a future perfect.