



What's It Like to Inhabit Saya Woolfalk's World of Plant-Human Hybrids?

Step into the artist's fantastical "Empathic Universe" at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, where everything seems moving and alive.

Detail of "Star Compulsion," 2012, in the exhibition "Saya Woolfalk: Empathic Universe" at the Museum of Arts and Design. Ramona Jingru Wang for The New York Times

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By **Hilarie M. Sheets**

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In a science-fiction cosmology imagined by the multidisciplinary artist [Saya Woolfalk](#), a group of people discover bones from a future race sent back in time. A fungus on the bones allows the finders to transform genetically — becoming part human and part plant — and to perceive the world through one another's eyes. Called the Empathics, these hybrid beings take part in rituals like joining their heads and communing in a floral starburst.

The details may sound a bit absurd. "Do we actually want to become plant people?" Woolfalk said with amusement at her studio in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, on the eve of the biggest show of her career. Titled "Empathic Universe," at the [Museum of Arts and Design \(or MAD\) in New York](#), this retrospective — her first — unfolds a narrative that Woolfalk has built in chapters over the last two decades.

Visitors can step into Woolfalk's fantastical and playful landscape, which features sculptures, videos, paintings, works on paper and performances, and is on view through Sept. 7.

"Empathic Universe" introduces the elaborate and rather goofy back story of her cast of characters in vibrant sculptural tableaux and narrative video performances on the fourth floor, then treats the fifth floor as a hallucinatory environment with an ethereal soundscape — what it might look and feel like to inhabit such a world. Projected animations in deep blues, purples, reds and greens — washing over a suspended explosion of glass elements and wallpaper with dizzying patterns that is hung with collages and figurative sculptures adorned in brilliant textiles — make everything feel moving and alive.



Details of “No Place (pre) Constructed: Self and Landscape,” 2007, an imagined utopian world of the future on view at the Museum of Arts and Design. Ramona Jingru Wang for The New York Times

Woolfalk said she hoped the installation would be seductive enough to draw people in while making them question what exactly was going on. “I’m always trying to facilitate disorientation,” she said, “and part of that does have to do with being multiracial.”

Woolfalk, 45, was born in Gifu City, Japan, and raised in the New York suburb of Scarsdale from the age of 2 by her Japanese mother and her father, who is of African American and Czech descent. Her experience growing up bilingual and spending summers in Japan with her grandmother — who taught her traditional crafts including sewing, origami, beadwork and dollmaking — meant she continually had to reorient herself to shifting cultures and codes.

That destabilizing is “actually really important for understanding other human beings and being empathetic,” she said. “My story world is one vehicle for that.”

Woolfalk’s garment-based sculptures, which double as costumes in her performances, sit at the intersection of art, design, fashion and craft, and made her a natural fit for MAD, said Alexandra Schwartz, the museum’s curator of modern and contemporary art, who organized the exhibition.

“Saya thinks like a novelist in terms of this extended story line,” Schwartz said, comparing Woolfalk’s episodic narrative to sci-fi writers like [Margaret Atwood](#) and [Octavia Butler](#), and her immersive world-building to the Pop artist [Takashi Murakami](#). “The whole story of the Empathics is a metaphor for how people from all different perspectives and backgrounds and set of assumptions either do or don’t live together,” she said, adding that in the current political and cultural climate this “could not be more topical.”



Saya Woolfalk with her work “Plucked from a Jangling Infinity (for Daphna Mitchell, my mother-in-law),” 2023, in the show “Empathic Universe.” Ramona Jingru Wang for The New York Times



Detail of “Holding Space (with Candida Alvarez, my friend),” 2023, at the Museum of Arts and Design. Ramona Jingru Wang for The New York Times

The curator gave Woolfalk her first solo museum show in 2012 when Schwartz worked at the Montclair Art Museum in New Jersey. There, Woolfalk presented her story world in a series of dioramas and videos, and used Colonial Williamsburg-esque live performers, dressed as Empathics in West-African-inspired textiles, to lead visitors through the museum and illustrate their transformation. At MAD, student actors from New York University perform an audio play, available through the [Bloomberg Connects](#) app, guiding a group of prospective Empathics, as if on a college tour, through the fifth floor.

“There are questions built into it like, ‘Is this a cult?’” Schwartz said. “Some people are less into it. Part of Saya’s work is satirical and we want to bring that out.”

Woolfalk studied economics and visual art at Brown University, where she was influenced by feminist thought and began making outlandish costumes inspired by the sexualized soft sculptures of [Louise Bourgeois](#) and [Yayoi Kusama](#). After graduating in 2001, she cold-called Bourgeois, who invited Woolfalk to attend her weekly salon. “She made me get under my sculpture and sing,” Woolfalk said. “She was very formative.”

In 2004, Woolfalk finished her M.F.A. at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she met her husband, Sean Mitchell, an anthropologist, and moved with him to Brazil for two years. On a Fulbright scholarship, she studied folklore performance traditions around Carnival, fusing Catholic, Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous influences — a “gateway,” she said, for mixing identity and multiculturalism in her work.

At a time when there were not a lot of artists of color in the mainstream art world, Woolfalk discovered community in a new way during her [2007-08 residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem](#). “For me, as an artist, it was like finding a home,” she said, describing an “intergenerational space where we were learning from and trying to support each other” — unlike her experience of intense competition in graduate school.

This environment prompted her to crowdsource ideas about utopia among artists and staff members at the Studio Museum. From these conversations, she produced “[No Place](#)” — exhibited at the Studio Museum in 2008 and included at MAD — a garden-like tableau inhabited by humanoid plant creatures of the future called No Placeans. Living in erotic harmony, they can change color and gender, as explained by a mock anthropologist in an accompanying video.

The No Placeans are the ones who send the bones with the magic fungus back in time in subsequent chapters of Woolfalk’s story world. “The Empathics are people in the present who believe that No Place is a future worth attempting to inhabit,” said Woolfalk, who clearly relishes the far-flung details of her heady narrative.

The artist [Wendy Red Star](#), part of a women's virtual critique group that Woolfalk initiated during the pandemic, finds Woolfalk's work to be freeing. "Saya gets to make the rules and figures out the different outcomes, and then those narratives can riff off each other," Red Star said. "She has been able to create these monumental pieces but not have a giant factory that produces them. She's like a magician."

Thelma Golden, the director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, has followed Woolfalk's career since her residency there. Golden feels that viewers who take the time to delve into the minutiae of her universe will be rewarded, but that it's not necessary to appreciate her art.

"Her work lives like so much work across the history of art that is involved with mythologies and world creations," Golden said. "We can recognize it and understand it without knowing its entire back story."



Detail of "Floating World of the Cloud Quilt," 2022. Over the last two decades, Woolfalk has undertaken a world-building project about a fictional race known as Empathics. Ramona Jingru Wang for The New York Times

[Woolfalk's "Floating World of the Cloud Quilt,"](#) first shown in 2022 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, is on view through Sept. 8 at the Crow Museum of Asian Art at the University of Texas at Dallas. Floral- and mandala-patterned projections sweep over a Japanese Buddha drawn for the Crow's collection, as well as over beautifully adorned mannequins and heads jutting from the walls and printed-vinyl flooring. "You don't know where the video stops and ends with her work," said the Crow's curator, Natalia Di Pietrantonio, who has observed the popularity of the artist's installations with school tours as well as collectors. "It invites you into this different world but at the same time is very relatable."

For Woolfalk, incorporating familiar materials is important to making her work accessible. "I use craft-based approaches so my grandma, who didn't go to college, can understand," she said.

Critique and parody are built into Woolfalk's narrative. Works shown at MAD explore how the Empathics formed a corporation, ChimaTEK, to promote their lifestyle. ChimaTEK videos advertise how anyone can experience interspecies hybridization without actually becoming an Empathic, but by just buying a product. "Corporatization is the corruption of that utopian vision," Woolfalk said, pointing out the ethics and problems that arise in utopian movements.

“Life Products by ChimaTEK” (2014) is now in the collection of the Whitney Museum. Other site-specific installations the artist made for the [Seattle Art Museum](#) in 2015 and the [Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts](#) in 2023 were also acquired by those institutions. Woolfalk is currently working on her second permanent commission for [New York’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#), and she’s making a giant upside-down ship, with a hanging garden, out of glass for the lobby of the [Bronx Museum’s new building](#), projected to open next year.



“ChimaTEK: Hybridization Machine,” 2013, an avatar download station. Ramona Jingru Wang for The New York Times



“Untitled #4,” from the ChimaTEK series, 2014, an example of an avatar playing with interspecies hybridization. Ramona Jingru Wang for The New York Times

Before offering pieces to collectors, Woolfalk’s dealer, [Leslie Tonkonow](#), has to confirm that they haven’t morphed into something else. “I always have to ask, ‘Does that piece still exist or have you taken it apart?’” Tonkonow said. “Everything is part of this universe and gets mixed up and reused.”

Woolfalk was already world-building when she learned that her father’s mother, a child of Czech immigrants who lived in Harlem, had actually grown up in [Father Divine’s Peace Mission](#) — a Black religious sect espousing communal child-rearing and racial equality.

“My grandma always talked like she was an orphan but she wasn’t — she was part of a multiracial utopian project,” Woolfalk said. “I don’t think she thought of it as positive. But I am the product of that Father Divine experiment, for better or for worse.”

Woolfalk, now raising her 13-year-old daughter, emphasizes the importance of choice in her empathic universe. Her characters voluntarily transform so they can perceive the world with empathy. “It’s not a dictatorship,” she said. “That utopia may not be utopia for other people.”

Saya Woolfalk: Empathic Universe

Through Sept. 7, Museum of Arts and Design, 2 Columbus Circle, Manhattan, (212) 299-7777; [madmuseum.org](#).