

Transcript-QS-Episode 4-Art

Music in and under

Sofia Soto Sugar: Hello! And welcome to QueerSpace, a project from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, from the people who usually bring you AirSpace.

I'm Sofia from the National Air and Space Museum and my pronouns are she/her.

Erin Barker: And I'm Erin from the Story Collider and my pronouns are she/they.

QueerSpace features people and stories that have been historically and intentionally ignored at the intersection of aviation, space, and queer history and culture.

Music up and out

Sofia: Time and time again when we were researching episodes for QueerSpace we came across creators mixing themes of space and themes of queerness in their art.

And like science fiction, these works of art can trace a lot of their origins back to other speculative genres that depict the future.

Erin: Key to futurist thinking is using the experiences of the past and present to contextualize and reimagine what the future could be.

People who have been pushed to the margins of society often create futures that are free from the social conventions they're confined by, like racism and heteronormativity.

Sofia: Afrofuturism takes that reimagined future and reframes it through a global Black lens

Similarly, queer futurism reshapes the past to envision futures here on Earth or far beyond it that are more equitable and often radically different than what we have now. The philosophies of Afrofuturism and queer futurism often intersect in art, reflecting the identities of the artists who have created it.

Erin: In order to get an idea of where queer, space art started we reached out to the Leslie-Lohman Museum, an art museum dedicated to collecting queer art and art by queer artists.

Stamatina Gregory: My name is Stamatina Gregory, they and she. And I am the Chief Curator and Director of Exhibitions and Collections at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art in New York.

And of course I think when we start telling this story we start with Afrofuturism and so the first person that comes to mind, always, not necessarily a queer figure but someone who could be understood to be within certain realms of queerness is Sun Ra, the jazz musician who created this mystical persona for himself that merged science fiction with Egyptian mysticism and who did not claim to come from the Jim Crow South, where he was actually from but from Saturn and that he was here on a mission, that he was here to connect the Black diaspora to their ancestry and so to a new sense of possibility.

And also from around that time Samuel Delany the science fiction author, is one of these authors about which the term afrofuturism was originally coined by the author Mark Dery. So Delaney's sci-fi novels and short stories created this kind of expanded queer space in every sense. For example where our conventional logics of gender, of sexuality, of language were really upended and where like cis heteronormativity basically didn't exist and so since then a number of more contemporary artists have taken up those concepts.

Sofia: In addition to Stamatina we also spoke to two of the many, many artists doing work in this space. The first...

Lola Flash: Hello Everyone! My name is Lola Flash, my pronouns are generally she, her and they, and I'm a photographer.

Erin: Lola has done a lot of traditional portrait photography. More recently, she has created a series of self-portraits called *syzygy, the vision* that bring together themes of space, queerness and also themes of Blackness, incarceration, slavery and identity.

Lola: This project, *syzygy, the vision*, is a narrative that I'm creating. That's one of the beauties of being an artist, is that we can create our own worlds. And so in this world, you'll see some of the images where I look powerful. Other images, I'm grimacing. Some images I look like I'm beaten down. And others are quite whimsical, like I'm eating an ice cream cone. You know, so I'm kind of thinking about it as having waves of kind of climaxing and coming down, and climaxing. And at the very end we are free! Black people are free! And we're jumping from planet to planet in this sort of, like, ecstasy. And so in that way I feel like I'm queering the space. I'm putting queer people into a place where we normally aren't seen.

Sofia: In the portraits, Lola becomes syzygy, a gender neutral avatar who appears in an orange prison-esque jumpsuit, orange handcuffs, and space helmet. Lola really ties in her own identity - queerness in gender and sexuality, her Blackness, it's all tied together in the presentation of syzygy.

My favorite image, the one she just described with the ice cream cone, they look like they've been traveling quite a long way and like they might finally be getting a break with a perfect

soft-serve, vanilla and chocolate twist of course, at a place aptly named Milky Way. It's this moment of levity and joy, the helmet is open and it seems like for a second the gravity of anything else is irrelevant and all that matters is that first lick.

By the way, we'll be featuring some of these images, along with other queer art that inspired this episode, on our Instagram Guides and Twitter. Check it out @AirSpacePod.

Erin: The second artist we spoke to is also inspired by the intersections of space and queerness and their possibilities.

Nikki Giovanni: I'm Nikki Giovanni, I'm a poet. And mostly I think I'm a dreamer at this point, I daydream a lot. And I'm a space freak. And I'm looking for how Earth is going to respond to new life in the galaxy.

Sofia: Nikki's poem, *Quilting the Black-eyed Pea (We're Going to Mars)* talks of freedom and dignity for all in a space faring society that is going to Mars to escape the bounds we've created on Earth. Her poem goes...

Erin: "We're going to Mars because whatever is wrong with us will not get right with us, so we journey forth carrying the same baggage, but every now and then leaving one little bitty thing behind:

maybe drop torturing hunchbacks here,
maybe drop lynching Billy Budd there,
maybe not whipping Uncle Tom to death,
maybe resisting global war....

Fades into Nikki reading

"Maybe resisting global war

One day looking for prejudice to slip...

One day looking for hatred to tumble by the wayside...

One day maybe the whole community will no longer be vested in who sleeps with whom."

Sofia: Nikki has spent a lot of time thinking about space travel, after all, she's a self described space freak, and she's thought about how we would introduce ourselves to beings from other worlds. Beings who wouldn't use our Earthen categories to describe themselves or others.

Nikki: Well they can't say 'I am from Virginia.' Cause that doesn't make sense, what is Virginia, what's a Virginia? They'll have no concept. You can't say 'I'm an American' because they will have no concept of countries.

You can't say I'm Black, or white, because they will have no concept of race. Race is a construct. And so whatever life form we're running into, they will have no concept of that. Then you say, well what can you say?

Well I can't really say that I am a man, or a woman. Because I may find myself in space, in a galaxy where gender is insignificant, it doesn't make sense. Because we already know, the biologists are studying it now, how many animals can be both. So I was thinking if that's the case then looking at human beings as transgender.

We can only say one thing that will make sense to another life form is that we are Earthlings. We are from the planet Earth. And they will understand that because everyone, 'oh, third planet from the yellow sun' and we'll say 'yes, that's who we are.' Because that's the only thing we can say to a life form that will make sense.

Erin: While a lot of the artworks that bring together queer and space themes – including Lola Flash's syzygy and Nikki Giovanni's poetry – are forward-looking works, Stamatina from the Leslie-Lohman Museum says often these artists are just as impacted by the society that has rejected them and just as inspired by the things that bring others to study science and astronomy.

Stamatina: Yeah, I think there are really important intersections with these themes and I think with any kind of marginalized people or any people who face, kind of, violent exclusion from white and straight dominated society have always taken up the theme and imaginary of space exploration as a kind of political imaginary. Really as soon as space exploration entered the public consciousness like in 1957 by the launch Sputnik, followed by the U.S. Moon landing.

Lola: For me space really, you know I actually grew up in the hometown where Buzz Aldrin is from, Montclair, New Jersey. And so I actually remember going with my Grandmother to the ticker tape parade they had when he went to the moon. And he was on the back of a convertible like they used to do back in the day, waving. So that was pretty special to actually, I guess it felt kind of closer.

And I think for me when I think about my series ending in space it's because I grew up in the 60s and so Star Trek was a new TV show, right? And Captain Kirk always started with 'To boldly go where no, I'm going to put woman in, has gone before' If you just look through a lot of the quotes like 'logic is the beginning of wisdom, not the end' I love Doctor Spock, I love those ears, and also thinking about Nichelle Nichols, I mean, the first Black woman on there, and Nichelle if you're listening I would love to photograph you. You know that was pretty major that they had her on the show and so just thinking about my childhood experiences and how those things, I think you don't always know that they're influencing you. They're sort of stuck somewhere in your brain and they come out, you know?

'Without freedom of choice there is no creativity' another Captain Kirk. So we don't really know if they were talking about us but I feel like I can put myself in that narrative and really embrace whatever's out there.

Erin: There have been official, space agency sponsored artists and art programs since nearly the beginning of space exploration. And some of the artists in these programs have identified as queer, though not necessarily openly and while they were doing this work.

Stamatina: NASA has actually had an art program in one form or other since 1962 which queer artists, without necessarily forefronting their queerness, like Andy Warhol or Robert Rauschenberg, participated in. The Cosmonaut Training Center in Star City, Russia has also had an artists program and folks that participated there include like Tavares Strachan and the Otolith Group and since then this kind of space of imagination has been really fertile ground for queer artists.

Sofia: In addition to officially sanctioned ground-based art programs, Astronaut-scientist-artists on the International Space Station have taken photos and written poetry, they've played musical instruments, painted and even quilted in space.

Erin: Even early astronauts and cosmonauts made art; drawings, photos, writings and music in space. But so far no one has been sent to space specifically as an artist to do art.

Nikki: Because the artists are the ones who see that which was not seen. We've been sending the engineers and the scientists, and I like the scientists, I don't have a problem with that. We've been sending the scientists into space. But now we need to send the dreamers because there are things that the scientists are simply not going to look at because they have not learned to look for them. I mean, wouldn't you just love to have a saxophone player?

We had one of the astronauts, I forget which one, hit a ball, he was doing golf. He hit a ball, remember when he got to the moon? He took a good swing and he hit a golf ball.

And I was thinking, boy, wouldn't it be wouldn't it be great to have a saxophone player just stand on the moon and just play a few really lovely notes. And see who listens to those notes, because I really like saxophones. And then see who answers.

Sofia: In *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea (We're Going to Mars)*, Nikki describes going to space as a "life-seeking thing." She also says, and this is my favorite part, "we're going to Mars... for the reason we fall in love. It's the only adventure."

Imagine if that adventure included people like her? Or like Lola?

Music up then under

Erin: A big thank you to Stamatina, Nikki and Lola for talking to us about art! There were many other artists whose work we checked out while creating this episode. Keep an eye on our

Instagram, @AirSpacePod, in the next couple weeks, we're going to introduce you to some of them.

And if you'd like to learn more about Afrofuturism, check out the wealth of resources and recorded programs from the Smithsonian's Claiming Space Symposium online.

Sofia: QueerSpace is brought to you by the people behind AirSpace at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum.

It is produced by Katie Moyer, Jennifer Weingart, Nick Partridge, Amy Stamm and me, Sofia Soto Sugar.

Mix by Tarek Fouda. Our theme music is by the team at Story Mechanics.

And QueerSpace is presented by Olay and distributed by PRX.

Do you like personal stories about science? Then you may like Erin's podcast, The Story Collider!

Erin: On The Story Collider podcast, we share true, personal stories about science, from scientists, journalists, comedians, and more. Some hilarious, some heartbreaking, and everything in between. Find it wherever you listen to QueerSpace.

Sofia: Did you know there's also a monthly AirSpace newsletter?! You can sign up through the link in the show notes. And follow us on Instagram and Twitter @airspacepod.

Thank you so much for listening to QueerSpace! The first episode of AirSpace season six drops April 28th, but keep an ear on this space, we may have at least one more QueerSpace surprise for you soon.