



museum of arts and design

MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN TO PRESENT FIRST RETROSPECTIVE OF MULTIMEDIA ARTIST SAYA WOOLFALK

Saya Woolfalk: Empathic Universe Opens April 12, 2025



Installation view, *Saya Woolfalk: Expedition to the ChimaCloud*, Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, March 1–September 1, 2019. Courtesy Nelson-Atkins Digital Production & Preservation. Photo: Dana Anderson.

NEW YORK, NY (November 19, 2024) – In Spring 2025, the Museum of Arts and Design will present *Saya Woolfalk: Empathic Universe*, a parable of how cultures mix, clash, and ultimately transform through shared understanding. On view from April 12 through September 7, 2025, the multimedia artist’s first retrospective and first major museum exhibition in New York City brings together two decades of her site-specific installations comprised of garment-based sculptures, video, paintings, works on paper, and performance.

Woolfalk’s work represents one of the earliest and most influential examples of “world-building” in contemporary art; her ambitious fictional narrative of an imagined race of women known as “Empathics” runs throughout her entire oeuvre. The Empathics’ story is told through their own distinctive imagery, symbolism, and folklore, which reflect the artist’s investigations of African, African American, Japanese, European, and Brazilian art, craft, and storytelling.

“With its sumptuous handmade aesthetic, interdisciplinary approach, and searching examination of how craft shapes and reflects global cultures, *Saya Woolfalk: Empathic Universe* offers both

an environment for meditation on the complex times in which we live, and a hope for a better, more compassionate way toward navigating the turbulence together,” said the exhibition’s curator, Alexandra Schwartz, MAD’s Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Craft, and Design.

“Saya, an alumna of MAD’s Artist Studios program, was also featured in our 2022 exhibition *Garmenting: Costume as Contemporary Art*. We are thrilled to now present her first retrospective,” said Elissa Auther, MAD’s Deputy Director of Curatorial Affairs and William and Mildred Lasdon Chief Curator. “Like many artists who have received their first major museum exhibitions at MAD, Saya’s artmaking synthesizes diverse and unexpected genres, cultures, and materials to explore society’s most pressing concerns. In her Empathic Universe, she envelopes us in fantastical new forms of creative expression while raising the question: what world do you want to live in?”

Multidisciplinary in scope, the exhibition exists as a multi-part work of fiction, with each chapter written by Woolfalk representing one of her major projects to date. The garments she has crafted double as costumes and the installations as sets for in-gallery original dance performances choreographed and performed in collaboration with the Alvin Ailey/Fordham University BFA Dance Program. The exhibition will also include an original audio production. Inspired by Woolfalk’s narrative written and performed in collaboration with the Atlantic Theater/ NYU Tisch School of Arts BFA Acting Program, the production will be shared on Bloomberg Connects, the free arts and culture app.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Chapter 1: *No Place* (2006–08) and *Winter Garden* (2005)

Woolfalk first developed the ideas behind the Empathic Universe in a pair of early projects called *No Place* and *Winter Garden*. *No Place* comprises an installation with costume-based sculptures, performance, and film, evoking travel narratives, science fiction, and the rhetoric of anthropology. The title derives from the English word “utopia,” coined by Sir Thomas More, from the Greek “no” (*ou*) and “place” (*topos*)—literally, “no place.” Inspired by the historical interconnections between anthropology and art, it offers a reflection upon the utopian dimensions of both disciplines’ desire to make “otherness” knowable through visual representation.

Within Woolfalk’s narrative, the No Placeans’ ancestors were characters from her previous work, *Winter Garden*. With costumes inspired by Egungun ceremonial dress and American Civil War-era biracial Topsy-Turvy dolls, these characters inhabit a traditional Winter Garden. First developed in seventeenth-century Europe, these private indoor gardens, usually attached to palaces, showcased tropical and sub-tropical plants transported from the Global South. For all its exuberant visual appeal, *Winter Garden* offers a biting critique of the history of colonialism.

Chapter 2: *The Empathics* (2009–13)

While *No Place* set the stage for the Empathic Universe, its narrative came into sharper focus with the next chapter in Woolfalk’s story-world, *The Empathics*. This chapter tells the tale of a group of humans who discover bones that had been sent back in time by the No Placeans. The bones contain a fungus that, should one choose, can stimulate one’s genetic mutation to become chimeras or, like the No Placeans, hybrid plant-humans. Through a series of rituals, the humans take on this double-DNA and transform into Empathics: a novel race who choose to believe in No Place as a future utopia; possess the ability to empathize with any other human; and have a biological kinship with the natural world.

The Empathics project comprises a series of installations based on dioramas; as a child the artist often visited New York’s American Museum of Natural History and loved its dioramas, but eventually came to question the colonialist implications of putting “other” races on display. *Utopian*

Conjuring Chamber, the largest diorama, shows four figures conducting a “guided vision” ritual that, in the parable, transforms them into Empathics.

Chapter 3: *ChimaTEK* (2013–15)

In their next chapter, the Empathics establish ChimaTEK, a company whose products transform their consumers, allowing them to transcend the limits of racism, ethnocentrism, and sexism. Woolfalk developed the *ChimaTEK* chapter through a series of works inspired by the chimera. In Greek mythology a chimera is a fire-breathing female monster with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail; in more general usage, the word signifies something that is wished for but impossible to achieve. The series comprises several large-scale installations, as well as works on paper, free-standing sculptures, and videos. The largest installations, *Chimera*, *ChimaTEK Beta Launch*, and *Virtual Chimeric Space* include elaborately costumed figures, digital projections, and painted elements, all with the rainbow-hued, richly patterned aesthetic that defines the Empathics' visual lexicon. The *Chimera* series also encompasses two narrative videos, including “ChimaTEK Life Products,” which takes the form of an old-school “infomercial.” At once optimistic in proposing that technology can facilitate understanding and empowerment, these narratives are pessimistic in suggesting that anything can be monetized for corporate gain.

Chapter 4: *ChimaCloud* and *Visionary Reality Outpost* (2016–21)

The next chapter in the Empathics' story centers on “ChimaCloud.” Woolfalk imagines ChimaCloud as a digital repository of the identities that ChimaTEK customers left behind. Each time a user interacts with the ChimaCloud, they help create an alternative digital future. The project stemmed from the artist's increasing concern about the impact of online spaces and communication on our “real” lives, including how we interact with our communities and enact our politics. ChimaCloud is a metaphor for real-life online communities, especially those formed on social media platforms. While the installation *Expedition to the ChimaCloud* introduces audiences to the technologies used to store, visualize, and access the ChimaCloud, *Visionary Reality Outpost* asks visitors to imagine themselves as ChimaCloud users and to experience the “future worlds” created by it. *Landscape of Anticipation 2.0*, and *Floating World of the Cloud Quilt* represent further examples of these future worlds.

Chapter 5: *The Empathic Universe* (2022–)

In this most recent series, Woolfalk blends her specific interest in landscape with her broader preoccupation with the ideologies of spaces. Commissioned by major American museums, these large-scale installations incorporate glass and textile-based sculpture, video, and augmented reality to imagine a new kind of utopian landscape. The artist remarks, “I am working towards creating landscapes that decentralize and dislocate patriarchal Eurocentric ideologies, and that people can inhabit in real time and space.”

The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated scholarly catalogue, *Saya Woolfalk: Empathic Universe*, published in collaboration with Hirmer Publishers. The first monograph on the artist's work, is edited and includes an essay by Alexandra Schwartz, with contributions by art historians and critics Naomi Beckwith, Lowery Stokes Sims, and Jasmine Wahi.

EXHIBITION CREDITS

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Saya Woolfalk creates works of art that incorporate the African American, European American, and Japanese influences of her family background. Also alluding to science fiction, feminist theory, mythology, anthropology, archaeology, Eastern religion, craft, and fashion, she imagines a utopian, empathic world through painting, sculpture, video, performance, multimedia installations, and public artworks.

Born in 1979 in Gifu City, Japan, Woolfalk was raised in the United States. She earned her B.A. in visual art and economics from Brown University in 2001 and her MFA in sculpture from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2004. A Fulbright grant to study in Brazil the following year and a 2007 residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem are among the many honors and awards she has received.

Woolfalk has presented multimedia works and performances at museums, galleries, and alternative spaces throughout the U.S. and in Asia including solo shows at the Newark Museum of Art, NJ; the Nelson Atkins Museum, Kansas City, MO; the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH; the Mead Art Museum, Amherst, MA; The SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA; the Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln, NE; the Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA; and the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY, among others. She has also participated in group shows at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York; the Brooklyn Museum; the Fowler Museum, UCLA, Los Angeles; the Seattle Art Museum; the Studio Museum in Harlem; MoMA PS1; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; and many other museums and galleries throughout the U.S., Europe, and Asia.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN

The Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) champions contemporary makers across creative fields and presents the work of artists, designers, and artisans who apply the highest level of ingenuity and skill. Since the Museum's founding in 1956 by philanthropist and visionary Aileen Osborn Webb, MAD has celebrated all facets of making and the creative processes by which materials are transformed, from traditional techniques to cutting-edge technologies. Today, the Museum's curatorial program builds upon a rich history of exhibitions that emphasize a cross-disciplinary approach to art and design, and reveals the workmanship behind the objects and environments that shape our everyday lives. MAD provides an international platform for practitioners who are influencing the direction of cultural production and driving twenty-first-century innovation, and fosters a participatory setting for visitors to have direct encounters with skilled making and compelling works of art and design. For more information, visit madmuseum.org.

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