

## ***"From Bones We Rise: The Empathics" By Saya Woolfalk***

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*Installation view of the exhibition, From Bones We Rise, The Empathics. Artworks featured (from left to right): Chimabot (Bird), Encyclopedia of Cloud Divination Plate 1, Plate 2, and Plate 3. Artworks by Saya Woolfalk. Image courtesy of Rowan University Art Gallery. Photo Credit: Jack Ramsdale, 2021.*

New York-based artist Saya Woolfalk is a world builder, a storyteller, and above all, a dynamic interdisciplinary artist. Through installation art, sculpture, textiles, and digital technology, Woolfalk dreams up a detailed, complex, and fully-formed society in her exhibition *From Bones We Rise: The Empathics*. And who are “The Empathics”? They are a “futuristic utopian culture and society of an interspecies female race. Their mythology and story of origins began with the discovery of chimeric bones that triggered them to metamorphose into a plant, animal, and human hybrid creature.” Through Woolfalk’s eyes, we see this technicolor future, a utopian space of colorful, beaded beings and creatures with skin with quilt-like patterns.

*From Bones We Rise: The Empathics* was on view at Rowan University Art Gallery in Glassboro, New Jersey from February 17 - May 1, 2021. When discussing Saya Woolfalk's groundbreaking work, the gallery states, "Drawing upon her own experience as a Black, Asian, and white American [Woolfalk] explores ideation of cultural hybridity as a pathway toward an equitable society." The artist's vision is perhaps what we want of our future, perhaps it is what is possible for society to be. What can at first appear fantastical and illusory, can also show us truth. The world that Woolfalk has built may be dreamlike, but perhaps there is a utopian future that *is* possible. I hope that it is not so dreamlike to imagine a world that embodies Woolfalk's notions of equity—and perhaps this world will include a different kind of ethereal and vivid beauty, one that is akin to the artist's work in *From Bones We Rise*.

**Bio:**

Saya Woolfalk (Japan, 1979) uses science fiction and fantasy to re-imagine the world in multiple dimensions. She has exhibited at museums, galleries, and alternative spaces throughout Asia, Europe and the United States including numerous solo exhibitions and group shows at the Studio Museum in Harlem; MoMA PS1, Long Island City, NY; the Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA., the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, among many others.



*Installation view of the exhibition, From Bones We Rise, The Empathics. Artwork featured: Mindfulness-Activated Future Possibility Generator 1.0 by Saya Woolfalk. Image courtesy of Rowan University Art Gallery. Photo Credit: Jack Ramsdale, 2021.*

**Let's start with discussing your journey getting to where you are now. You have such a distinct style—did you study art?**

I did study art, and did a double major in Economics at Brown University. I then went to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and studied sculpture for my masters. I loved Chicago because it was an interdisciplinary program where I studied with Candida Alvarez in the Painting program, and Faith Wilding in Performance while taking art history and theory classes with Gregg Bordowitz and Kym Pinder. My art education was formative for me, I wanted to build research based and conceptually rigorous stories/worlds that did not hew to medium specificity.

**Your use of diverse and often unconventional materials creates unbelievable textures and intricate details. Can you talk a bit about the assorted materials within your works and the significance of them?**

The materials are sourced from so many places, but one of my first loves is textiles. My mother's family had a textile company in post-war Japan, and I spent my summers in Japan learning how to sew from my maternal grandmother. I am also really interested in experimenting with various media, and am constantly pushing myself to try new things. To do this, I often used digital technology to render possible spaces. I use modeling programs like Sketch Up and Rhino as well as Photoshop to explore the possibilities of various materials. I like the speculative space of digital technology, but am always considering how those technologies impact the limits of our imaginations, and also how they are structuring what we think is and is not possible.



*Installation view of the exhibition, From Bones We Rise, The Empathics. Artwork featured: ChimaCloud: Crystal Body D by Saya Woolfalk. Image courtesy of Rowan University Art Gallery. Photo Credit: Jack Ramsdale, 2021.*

**Congratulations on your current solo show *From Bones We Rise: The Empathics* at Rowan University Art Gallery! This exhibition seems to really be focused on a purposeful, constructed environment, as if you are building another world. Was this your intention? How is this world different from our own current one?**

I have been working on the story world of the Empathics for many years. I want the world of the Empathics to feel very proximate to ours, as if the things that happen in their world might be possible in the here and now. That is why I don't just make digital objects. I build objects, images, and often stage live performances to activate the installation spaces I create. I don't really think of the world of the Empathics as different than our own. I think of them as us, if we chose to behave or engage in a different way.





*Installation view of the exhibition, From Bones We Rise, The Empathics. Artworks featured (from left to right): ChimaCloud: Venus and 4 Virtues: Temperance, Justice, Fortitude, and Prudence. Artworks by Saya Woolfalk. Image courtesy of Rowan University Art Gallery. Photo Credit: Jack Ramsdale, 2021.*

## Who are the “Empathics?”

The Empathics are a group of people who self select to become plant human hybrids. They excavate a group of fungus infected bones in the woods of upstate New York, which causes them to begin to mutate. This process of mutation, and subsequent social and morphological transformation, is explored in an exhibition I staged at the Montclair Art Museum in 2012 that focused on the Empathics and their research institute, The Institute of Empathy.

**Can you tell us about the influence of science fiction and/or fantasy on your work, specifically in regards to *From Bones We Rise*? What do you think we can learn from these types of narratives?**

One of my biggest influences is the science fiction writer Octavia Butler. I am currently rereading her book *Kindred*. My favorite series is *Lilith's Brood*. I love that she lays out a world for us. The worlds are always so close to ours, but by changing some of the characteristics we are familiar with, we see something about ourselves that may not have been so apparent.



*Installation view of the exhibition, From Bones We Rise, The Empathics. Artwork featured: White Shed (Elephant) by Saya Woolfalk. Image courtesy of Rowan University Art Gallery. Photo Credit: Jack Ramsdale, 2021.*

### **What place does feminism have in your work (if any)?**

I studied with feminist Leslie Bostrom, Marlene Malik, and Wendy Edwards at Brown University. When I first began to make my work in college, they helped shape my practice to address urgent social issues that were also personally resonant.

### **Who or what in your life has pushed you in the direction you are currently going?**

My biggest inspiration is my family. My parents, my ancestors, my sibling, husband, and daughter are on my mind everyday as I make my work. My most recent installation for the Bronx Museum, made specifically for the group exhibition *Born in Flames: Feminist Futures*, is called Dashikimono. It was made by tracing my white grandmother's Dashiki I found in her basement when she passed away. I fused the Dashiki with a kimono to make the design for the 30 foot x 16 foot mural that is up at the museum right now.



*Installation view of the exhibition, From Bones We Rise, The Empathics. Artworks featured (from left to right): White Shed (Ram), ChimaCloud: Crystal Body D, and White Shed (Elephant) by Saya Woolfalk. Image courtesy of Rowan University Art Gallery, Photo Credit: Jack Ramsdale, 2021.*



*Installation view of the exhibition, From Bones We Rise, The Empathics. Artwork detail featured (front): Chimabot (Bird). Artwork by Saya Woolfalk. Image courtesy of Rowan University Art Gallery. Photo Credit: Jack Ramsdale, 2021.*