

LIFESTYLE &gt; ARTS

# Artist Saya Woolfalk's 'Monstrous Feminine Bodies' Exemplify Urgent Need To Embrace Empathy And Celebrate Womanhood

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Saya Woolfalk *Chimera* (from *The Empathics* series), 2012. Natural and synthetic fibers, mannequins, handmade paper, spandex bodysuits, beads, notions, shoes, poly fill, paint, gel medium, single channel video projection, sound; dimer ... [More](#)  
COURTESY YERBA BUENA CENTER FOR THE ARTS, PHOTO: JOHN WHITE IMAGE DIMENSIONS: 3837PX X 2832PX

Derived from cells of two or more genetically distinct individuals, life-sized fictional figures evolve from a whimsical science fiction universe bursting with vibrant color and layered with textures. The chimera appear to float toward a star, as if drawn into -- or perhaps emerging from -- another plane of existence.

Composed of natural and synthetic fibers, mannequins, handmade paper, spandex bodysuits, beads, notions, shoes, poly fill, paint, and gel medium, [Saya Woolfalk's](#) *Chimera* from her 2012 *The Empathics* series challenge the viewer's perception, as they are led into a narrative fantasy reality.

African, African American, Japanese, European, and Brazilian cultures collide, as life-sized and larger-than-life female figures inhabit two floors of gallery space at the [Museum of Arts and Design](#) (MAD) in New York. These strange yet sublime figures offer an escape from a world that's become increasingly misunderstood amid raging geopolitical strife.

The first retrospective of Woolfalk's two decades of world-building installations, *Saya Woolfalk: Empathic Universe*, on view at MAD through Sept. 7, introduces audiences to an imagined race of women called Empathics.



Woolfalk's Empathics form truly immersive and interactive installations that invite close inspection. She wants viewers to become intimately acquainted with her array of vivid imagery, symbolism, and folklore. Her garment-based sculptures, video, paintings, works on paper, and performances break down cultural boundaries and re-imagine a universe by inviting viewers into her feral, fantastical feminist dialogue.

The emergence of Empathics is timely and urgent, as we grapple with semantic rage that divides folks encumbered by the hateful, inhumane pettiness of political sunder. First introduced in 1909 by psychologist Edward B. Titchener, the English term empathy derives

from the German *emfindung*, meaning "feeling into." Art that stirs emotions fosters empathy and enables people to see beyond their own socioeconomic and cultural entanglements and understand the struggles of others.

Controversy swirls from both sides of political duopoly in the United States. Self-described conservatives have been recklessly dispensing nonsense terms like "selective empathy" or "toxic empathy". Some conservatives claim that an overemphasis on empathy may lead to policies that favor certain groups, especially those aligned with liberal causes. While empathy has long been associated with liberal ideals, new psychological research published in *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin* suggests that liberals may struggle more than conservatives to empathize with political opponents.



Saya Woolfalk Lovescape, 2004  
 Saya Woolfalk: Empathic Universe at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Photo by Jenna Bascom; courtesy the Museum of Arts and Design. Image dimensions: 2048px x 1366px  
 JENNA BASCOM

On a blazing summer day in New York City, Woolfalk's otherworldly world provided an oasis for the body, soul, and creative spirit. Earlier this week, Woolfalk engaged in conversation with her longtime creative collaborator, MAD Curator Alexandra Schwartz.

"I think that the work that I make, it's called The Empathic Universe, is very much not just fiction. It's actually something that I try to embody in my life, as well as fictional universes that I built, and in my relationship with Alex and in the projects that we built together," said Woolfalk. "I think that that ethos is very much present in 2011 when we met, I was pregnant with my first daughter, Aya, and Alex saw this pregnant woman traipsing through the New York City art world and thought, 'oh, I should give her a solo museum show'. And I really do think that my work is about feminism and female empowerment and ecology and generosity and creating a generous community around me and the work that I built so that I can distribute that to other people, and Alex is very much a part of that."

Woolfalk's firebrand feminism, using art as aesthetic activism, is exemplified by her fierce female figures and how they interact with the spaces they occupy. Woolfalk, who studied with Paraguayan-American artist Faith Wilding at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, said: "She really influenced how I was thinking about the work, how I was thinking about femininity, how I was thinking about desire, how I wanted to build these alternative bodies, these monstrous feminine bodies in 2002 to 2004 that represented my relationship to my body and my relationship to feminine desire."