

Art Review

Saya Woolfalk Toys With Future Worlds

The hybridized energy of Woolfalk's art is infectious; it permeates everything we see, while prodding us to question what we imagine the future might look like.



Hrag Vartanian July 21, 2025



Saya Woolfalk, "Chimera" from the *Empathics* series (2013) (all photos Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

In Caryl Churchill's short play *Imp*, which ran at the [Public Theater](#) through May 25, an older British woman is soothed by the belief that she has an imp, or a mischievous spirit, trapped in a corked bottle. That belief gives her comfort, as her life in her armchair is a sedentary and plain one, or so it seems, while those around her are moving all about: jogging

to combat depression, traveling the world in search of adventures, or pursuing love. The chair-bound woman, named Dot, seems to feel that this imaginary spirit gives her power, and when it is inadvertently released by her cousin, she is devastated.

In Saya Woolfalk's current survey at the Museum of Arts and Design, *[Empathic Universe](#)*, you can witness the inverse. The artist has freely uncorked her spirit, filling two floors with her art for her first-ever museum retrospective. It is a brash, immersive universe that reflects on what she has called "hyperreal" work, using a term coined by sociologist Jean Baudrillard to explain the conceptual fusion of the real and imaginary. As Woolfalk has explained in the past, "the things that I'm making are more real than reality — they're almost hyperreal." Here, her uncorking of this hybridized energy is infectious; it permeates everything we see, while prodding us to question what we imagine the future might look like. The artistic jubilation is palpable.

Empathic Universe invites us to wander through decades of her worldmaking, a term that emerged with full force in the art community at the turn of this century. It has since been overused to the point of jargon, but Woolfalk demonstrates its power when executed with care. Each work allows for the bleeding of boundaries of all kinds, as furry costumes spark youthful glee and colorful patterns evoke joyful states of being. She was influenced by college years spent in Florence, where she witnessed the Renaissance love of blending architecture, design, and art. That interdisciplinary worldbuilding is in turn invigorated by her core passion for craft because it is, according to the artist, "the way the underrepresented represent themselves."

At the core of Woolfalk's art is an understanding of European colonization and the way Euro-American art viewers are conditioned to see nature and landscape, not to mention how we obscure the foundations of the natural world. In numerous museum projects, including at the Newark Museum of Art, the Currier Museum of Art, and the Montclair Art Museum, she's been in direct dialogue with older, more traditional painting in the Euro-American tradition. Whether it is the Hudson River School or a Dutch Golden Age painter like Rembrandt, she acknowledges how global dynamics and histories have impacted the built world around us. In the case of the Hudson River School, she points out how imperialists forged the painted landscape in their image and "exported these speculations globally as an empire-building strategy." In one of the museum installations, "Utopia Conjuring Chamber, Greene County, New York, circa 2012" (2012), Woolfalk reimagines Rembrandt's "The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp" (1632). While Rembrandt's scene represented a new

era of science and discovery, Woolfolk has added layers of a consciousness that flowers in unusual and vibrant ways. In her aesthetic universe, the artwork moves beyond realism to a more psychological state of being, and she mines pop culture and historical allusions at every turn.

The artist has long explained, “I think of my practice as building a scaffolding for transformative experiences to happen. The installations are liminal spaces for people to have these experiences.” Each of these works looks ready to be activated by movement — they scream “move me” or “use me” — but they stand on their own as complete works even without the promise of anything beyond the frame.

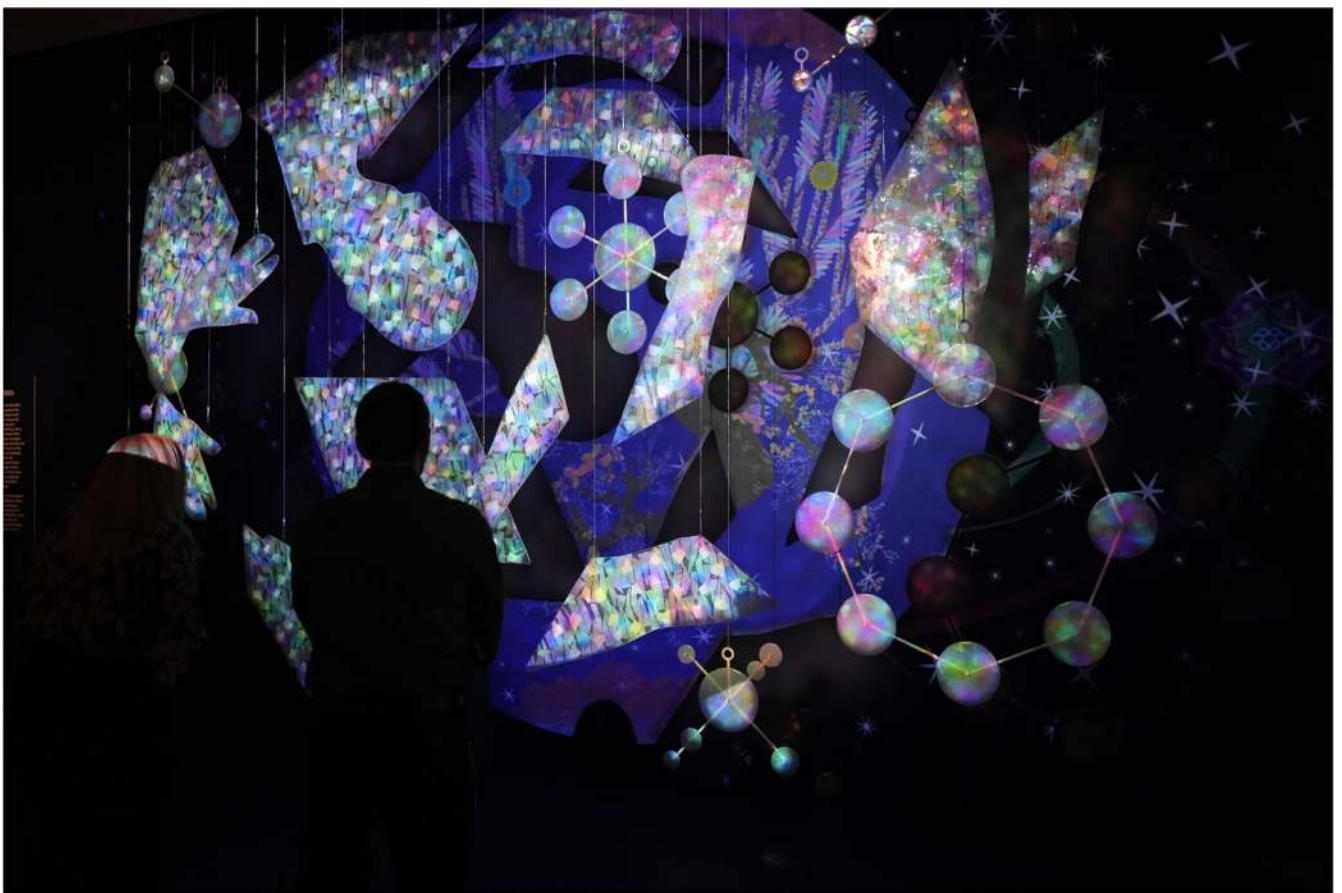


Woolfolk's "Utopia Conjuring Chamber, Greene County, New York, circa 2012" (2012) with its clear allusion to Rembrandt and various other associations the artwork conjured up for the critic (image Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic*)

These ideas and the theoretical frameworks she toys with are what make her work particularly poignant, as they echo the institutional realities of cultural presentation and how they're plumbed by contemporary art. She has even incorporated pseudo-institutions into her artistic practice (the nonprofit Institute of Empathy and a for-profit, ChimaTEK) as a way to illuminate the allegories of capitalism and how they propagate in contemporary art. What's clear is that Woolfolk is far ahead of many of her peers, as she strips away at the notions of

purity and identity to reveal a more complex existence that is sure to be more in tune with the future than anything that has come before.

An essay about toys by philosopher and critic Roland Barthes is a touchstone for Woolfalk. In it, the author writes, “The fact that French toys *literally* prefigure the world of adult functions obviously cannot but prepare the child to accept them all Toys here reveal the list of all the things the adult does not find unusual: war, bureaucracy, ugliness, Martians, etc.” With those words in mind, Woolfalk’s gloriously vibrant retrospective gives us the impression that she wants us to join her in play, if only to unlearn our worlds and reorganize them into something that can flower into a more inclusive and wondrous future none of us can imagine alone.



Saya Woolfalk, “Plucked from a Jangling Infinity (for Daphna Mitchell, My Mother-in-Law)” (2023)

Saya Woolfalk: Empathic Universe continues the Museum of Arts and Design (2 Columbus Circle, Columbus Circle, Manhattan) through September 7. The exhibition was curated by Alexandra Schwartz.