

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Forbes
From Art To Space Walks: Space Suits As Symbols Of Equality
Eva Amsen
October 18 2019

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After a seven month delay, today NASA astronauts Christina Koch and Jessica Meir finally carried out the first all-women spacewalk. Unlike in March, they now had two spacesuits of the correct size at the space station.

For some people, the spacesuit debacle has become symbolic of the inequality in space. After all, if there had been more women, there would have been earlier opportunities for two of them to need a well-fitting suit at the same time.

But long before the current space mission, some artists already used space suits to point out that space exploration has never been equally accessible to everyone. Both Cristina de Middel and Yinka Shonibare have used spacesuits in their art to highlight that predominantly Western nations have been to space.



Cristina de Middel speaks about her serie of photographs, The Afronauts, during the Lagos Photo ...
[+] AFP/GETTY IMAGES

On the surface, space suits look like the ultimate equalizer. They're bulky, somewhat shapeless, and hide most of the astronaut. It seems like a uniform that everyone can wear - but in reality, not everyone has.

Setting aside the issue of gender in space for a moment, another inequality is that of nationality. Of the more than five hundred humans who have been in orbit, more than half have been American. Russia and former Soviet states account for another fifth. A few Asian countries are starting to catch up to North American and Europe, but the rest of the world is underrepresented in space. Africa, in particular, is not doing well.

A few African countries have space agencies, but they mainly focus on satellites and remote sensing. None of them have launched crewed missions.

However, in 1964, Zambian Edward Makuka Nkoloso set up his own very quirky space agency, and was adamant that Zambians would be the first on the moon, thanks to his space programme, that - if we can judge it by archive footage - mostly involved people rolling down hills in barrels and jumping up and down.

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The amateuristic and optimistic nature of the Zambian space program has inspired films and art works. One of them is Cristina de Middel's 2012 work *Afronauts*. Through a method best described as fictional photojournalism, she photographed models as if they were part of a reimagined version of the Zambian space program.

In some photos from her collection, models in space suit pose as if they're walking on the moon or a remote planet. But their suits are not the white plain space suit we're familiar with. They're colorful, like some African fabrics are. Even without seeing the face of the astronaut, the suit identifies them as African.

De Middel is not the only one who recreated spacesuits with African-style patterned fabrics. For British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, the astronaut has been a recurring theme in his work. His series of "Refugee Astronauts" draw attention to survival on planet Earth, commenting on issues such as climate change. His use of patterned fabrics also gives these sculptures an African identity, and invokes thought of the process of Western globalization - and Western space exploration.



Yinka Shonibare's work *Refugee Astronaut III*, on display at the Wellcome Collection in London CC-BY
STEVEN POCOCK | WELLCOME

De Middel's and Shonibare's work incorporate space suits as a reminder of the lack of Africans in space. Meanwhile, Koch and Meir's real spacesuits have become a symbol of the shortage of women in space.

Now you might be asking yourself: Wasn't it just about size? Wouldn't two short men not have had the exact same problem? Oh, absolutely. There were never enough short people in the space program to warrant having enough available suits for them. But there would have been if there had been more women overall, who are shorter on average. This is one of those situations where everyone benefits from having more diversity overall.

Another common reaction to hearing that an entire spacewalk was delayed because of the wrong size suits is puzzlement. Isn't it so obvious? It's not...rocket science. No, it's not, and that's exactly the problem.

Math and physics can take humans into space, but when it comes to humans - whether they're in space or on Earth - we also need the social sciences, arts and humanities, to think about questions like the representation of different people in space, and of the practicalities of having the right equipment on board.

It's not rocket science, because there's more to space travel than rockets alone.