

# Nettrice Gaskins



*My Steampunk Dream (with "Lalee's Kin"),*  
2010. Courtesy of the artist.



# The Liquidity of the Virtual Body: A Conversation with Nettrice Gaskins

by Michele Prettyman-Beverly

Nettrice Gaskins is an artist, educator, digital media practitioner, and theorist who creates multi-dimensional worlds that allow past, present, and future to interface, creating multi-layered sensory experiences in virtual installations. She creates space for her “beings” to have an almost tactile encounter with remnants of history, experience, dance, and objects, disseminating a stimulating flow of cultural consciousness.

As part of *liquid blackness*'s research project into aesthetics and blackness, I wanted to explore the digital sphere by asking Nettrice about the contours of her work and gain some perspective on the notion of the “liquidity of blackness” and the aesthetic markers that make liquidity both possible and resonant. I am also interested in her response to potential tensions in the juxtaposition of her digital and virtual worlds to a contemporary time that is increasingly marked by an excess of both embodied and digital hostility and outright assaults on black bodies.

MPB: My first question takes shape around the explosion of visual, new media, and new ways to imagine and construct human-ness and embodiment and the pervasive uses of violence to limit the mobility of black bodies in public space. Like many of us, I have been contemplating (and mourning) the spate of violence and trauma imposed on black bodies, specifically of young men and women who have been brutally murdered simply for existing, or often times, when seeking help: Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, and Renesha McBride among many others. While my work tries to free black artists from the expectation that their work do something

explicitly political, we know that the body is political and that our creative and scholarly impulses are not detached from our experiences of pain and grief. How can we articulate a context for the work that you do in the midst of this kind of violence. In other words, is the digital body political?

NG: My answer to this first question is: it all depends on the intention of the artist/maker. The standard techno-optimist argument in favor of expanding the Metaverse goes something like this: Virtual worlds hold the promise of communication without regard for distance, physical ability, gender, or race. Every aspect of the avatar is flexible, rendering prejudice obsolete.

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It appears such wishful thinking might be snagged on the heated issue of race. There's a little noticed study that shows that avatars responded to social cues – as well as revealed racial biases – in the same ways that people do in the real world.<sup>1</sup> One of the first choices I had to make for my avatar was the “skin” it would wear. Skinning an avatar involves choosing from a collection of 2D textures that are applied to the base 3D avatar figure. The textures/figure does not have to be representational (i.e. human). In *Second Life* I chose to be black/African American as well as a machine/cyborg (think “fembot”) with lovely afro-styled hair in various colors. However, I could have also chosen to be a ball of light. If an avatar is black other users may attach labels based on existing perceptions and experiences. I was always surprised when I met users who were black in *Second Life* but non-black in real life.

MPB: This is a follow-up to the previous question. In the broad context of

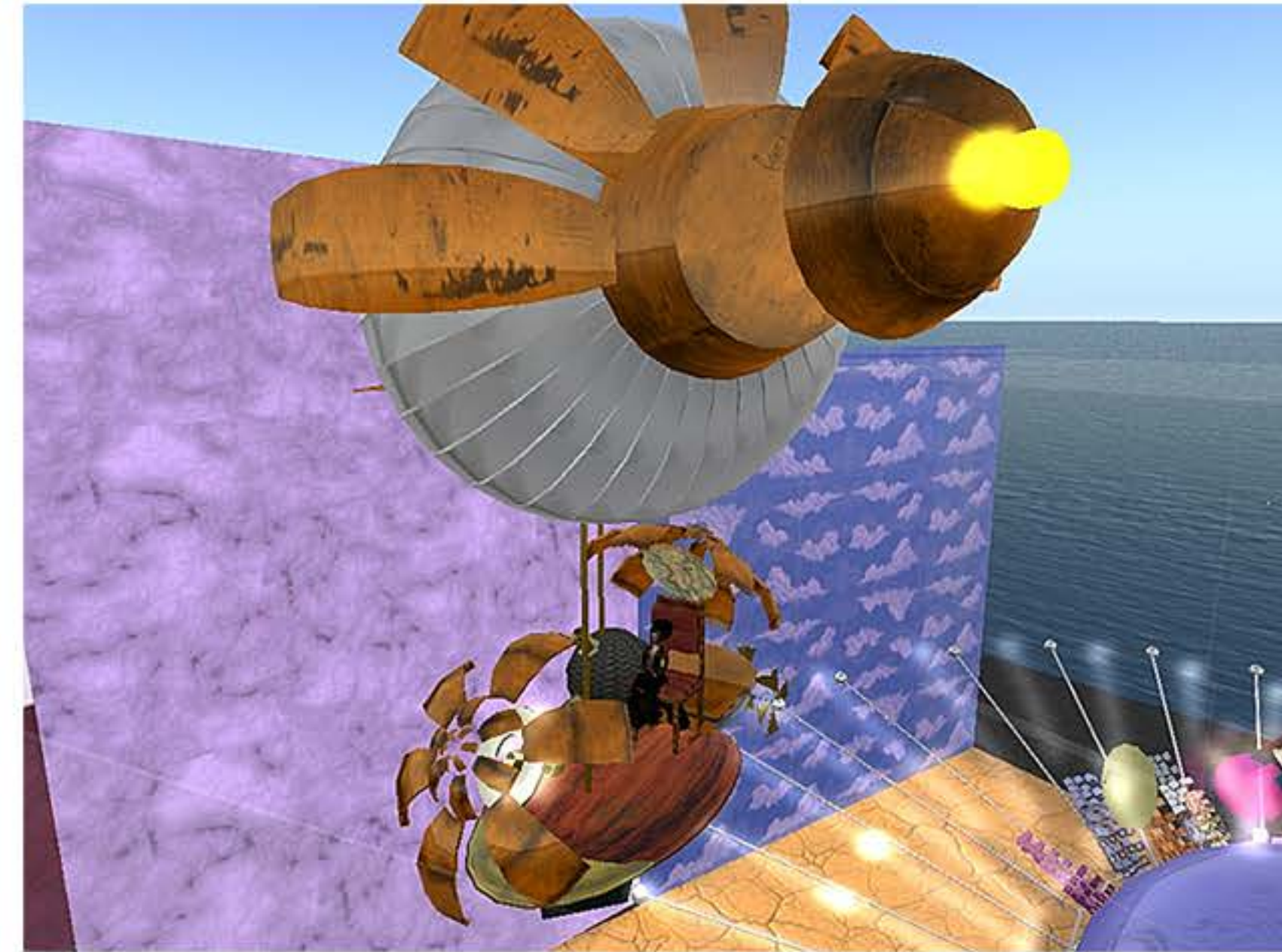


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the Afrofuturist paradigm are a range of themes, objectives, and aesthetics, but issues of time, space, remaking bodies and the worlds that these bodies inhabit are paramount. If you could for a moment, speak to someone unfamiliar with this context. I think some might view this practice and theoretical approach as an escape from lived experiences or the “real world,” and one that attempts to evade or ignore them. I think the term ‘escape’ here is very important. On one hand it could be viewed as a lack of concern about the real challenges that black bodies face. Yet on the other hand “escape” has always been a necessary metaphorical and literal pursuit for black people. Can you speak to the question of Afrofuturism as escapist?

NG: When creating my Afrofuturism simulation (installation) in *Second Life* for IBM, I was tasked with simulating utopia and dystopia or the two themes that frequently come up in science fiction, fantasy, etc. The challenge for the dystopia side was how to simulate surveillance such as how to get users to feel what it was like to always be watched, whether they are black or non-black. I created a large wall of three-dimensional eyeballs that were scripted to follow avatars wherever they went in the installation. This side of the installation was more intriguing to the visitors. I also saw a lot of avatars in the Skybridge section where avatars became immersed in Afrofuturism-related artifacts and mini-universes. My intention was to show a broad range of things, not just escapist spaces.

MPB: Central to the notion of the *liquid blackness* research project is to find language and visual objects and experiences to capture the notion of



Nettrice Gaskins  
*My Steampunk  
Dream (airship)*,  
2010. Courtesy of the  
artist.

“liquidity.” Can you speak to the places in your work where “liquidity” might be felt?

NG: For me liquidity is about using creative tools to push and revise the fundamental constructs of reality. Artists who do not use representational images in virtual worlds may find a safe haven in abstraction/abstract art. I find it through light, sound, color and, of course, virtual 3D space. I also find liquidity in layers of imagery, collage or movement. In my research I look at how black artists recombine, remix and assemble materials in order to subvert dominant technology. Take, for example, Jacoby Satterwhite who merges his physical performances with his performances in virtual 3D space. One of the things I used to do a lot was draw portraits of the young people I worked with. Portraiture was a great icebreaker and I found that most, if not all, of the black (and Latino) children wanted to sit still and pose for me. They didn’t even mind that I kept some of them. When



drawing their portraits I am looking at lines, shapes and values, not race/color but more than that. I am giving them my undivided attention as they and somewhere in that exchange we discover who we really are.

MPB: I became acquainted with a set of still images from a series of works that you did some years ago and then viewed your *Second Life* digital installations. I found your still images to gesture toward what your virtual work somehow makes possible. What do you think the digital medium offers that is different from traditional visual art i.e. still works? How is your experience of creating the work different?

NG: For one thing, I can't move through my physical works but I can in virtual 3D space. I often apply my tangible artworks as textures on virtual 3D objects that can be scripted to move, become transparent, or permeable. Virtual 3D space allows me to extend the 2D picture plane into three and four dimensions. Also, I explored how to take some of the characters (avatars) from my 2D work and create virtual 3D sculptures out of them. I tend to move back and forth between dimensions.

MPB: In a number of your works, you bring to life aspects of black culture and experiences from the past. For instance, in your *Cry* series, which is almost a kind of adaptation of the classic Alvin Ailey performative piece, *Cry*, the bodies in your works seem to inhabit multiple spheres or dimensions and multiple subjectivities simultaneously. Can you describe your approach to constructing time and space?

NG: W.C. Abraham and M.F. Bear came up with the term "metaplasticity" to describe a conceptual state of the mind and art process in virtual 3D space. Plasticity refers to plastic reality, or the synthesis of virtual and real art — bending the rules of how we define reality and how artists create images/objects. Historically, in 2D art such as Salvador Dali's *The Persistence of Memory*, the syrupy plasticity of the artist's painted objects

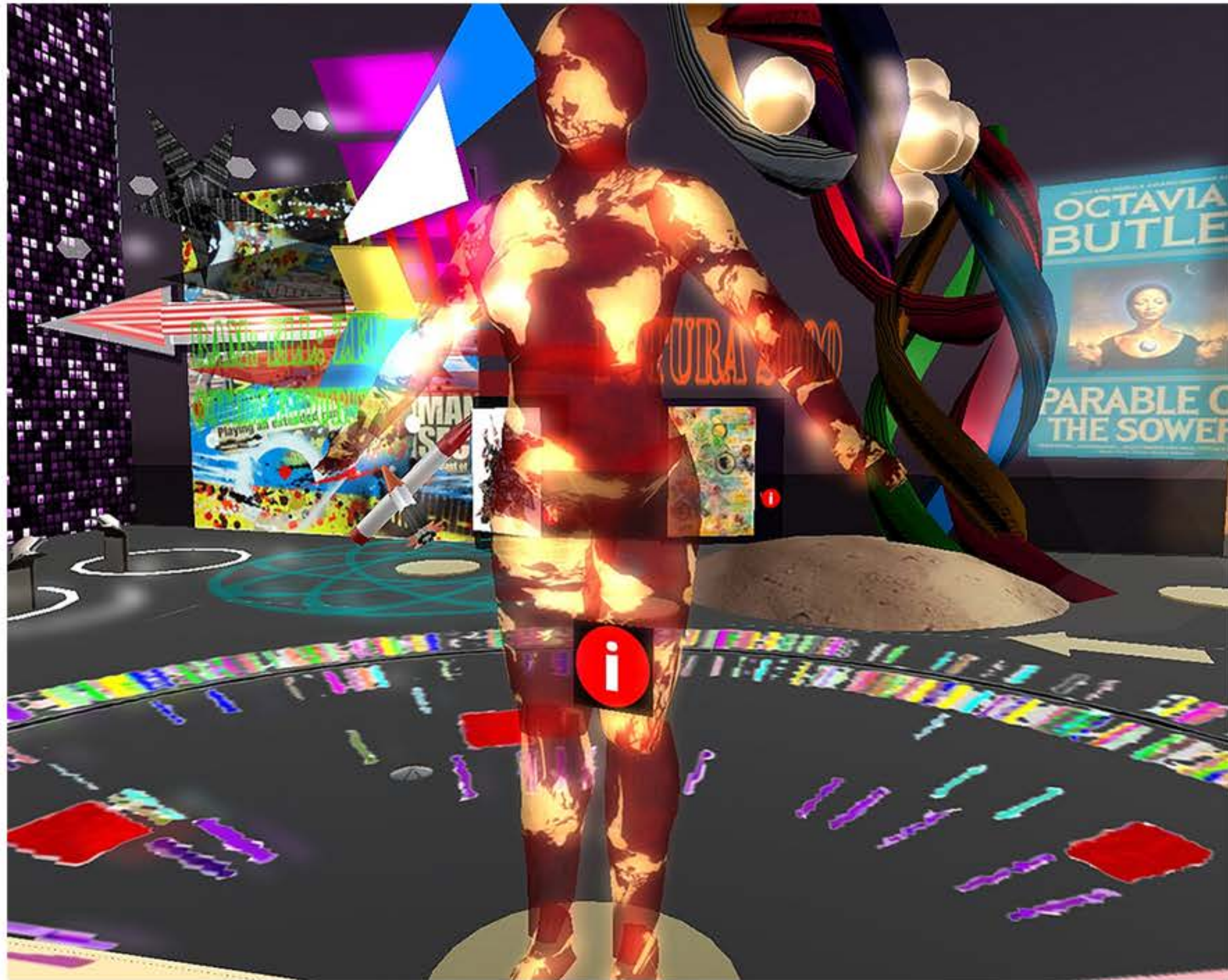
suggests the possibility of time slowing to sludge the flow of the invisible river of time. The key revelation enabling *SL* artists to push and revise the fundamental constructs of plasticity (brain, space, time, light) is the use and control of the avatar in virtual 3D space. In other words, it is through the avatar that the user/person inhabits multiple spheres, dimensions and subjectivities.

### **Liquidity is about using creative tools to push and revise the fundamental constructs of reality**

MPB: Do you think of your work as constructing blackness in a virtual context, or is there another kind of subjectivity that you are trying to access?

NG: One of the issues I have with new or next wave academic terms such as "intersectionality" is that it often operates from a foundation of white supremacist patriarchy. We get caught up in discussions over who is "left out" of the current model because the actual model itself is exclusionary. In Beth Coleman's view, race can exist *as if* it were on par with an instrument. When race is "denatured" from its historical roots, it can then be freely engaged as a productive tool. For example, in *SL* I can say, "I'm a cyborg" and it becomes real to me and the others who can only see my avatar. The experience of being a historical "subject" changes when I can teleport, fly around, or walk through permeable 3D objects. I am still creating from the same mental models I use in real life but with the expectation that I can change some of those models (ideas) in virtual 3D space.





Nettrice Gaskins. *Genetics and the Digital Body (avatar)*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

I asked Nettrice about the difference between the digital space and the virtual space. She explained the virtual space is about shifting our perceptual awareness and that we do not fully comprehend the virtual sphere if all we do is replicate the constructions of our lived reality. For instance, she explains that some people have trouble “letting go” and create avatars and images that do not challenge the expectations of lived

reality. She also describes digital space as configurations of data organized into a range of algorithms, whereas virtual space is all about perception.

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Lastly, I asked her to discuss her recent piece *Genetics* which was also part of a larger installation. She described in a written statement that “This image of a virtual 3D avatar explores the unboundedness of the digital body as well as the ways in which the body is coded (as a map).”

She explained that the “unbounded” nature of the body is critical as we can write, impose, and manipulate this body to do and be whatever we want it to be. Thus her piece features a digitized body marked as female, but also marked as translucent, but taking its form from an image of the earth. This body is in many ways not a body at all, hearkening back to Nettrice’s admonition that artists should fully take advantage of the capacity of technology to reimagine rather than reify bodies and objects. We can both see through this figure, while also reading the racial codes that are visible and which are often features in Nettrice’s work—a mass of hair, crown or head wrap, and a kind of bodily curvature. This mapped being hovers above a genome map, which, when taken together, redefines subjectivity as not confined solely to race, corporeality, or human-ness. Instead, we are able to see through a figure that is mapped as worldly, ethereal, cellular, and genomic, depicting how black bodies do not simply imagine alternative universes (multiverses) and forms of embodiment but create them.<sup>2</sup>

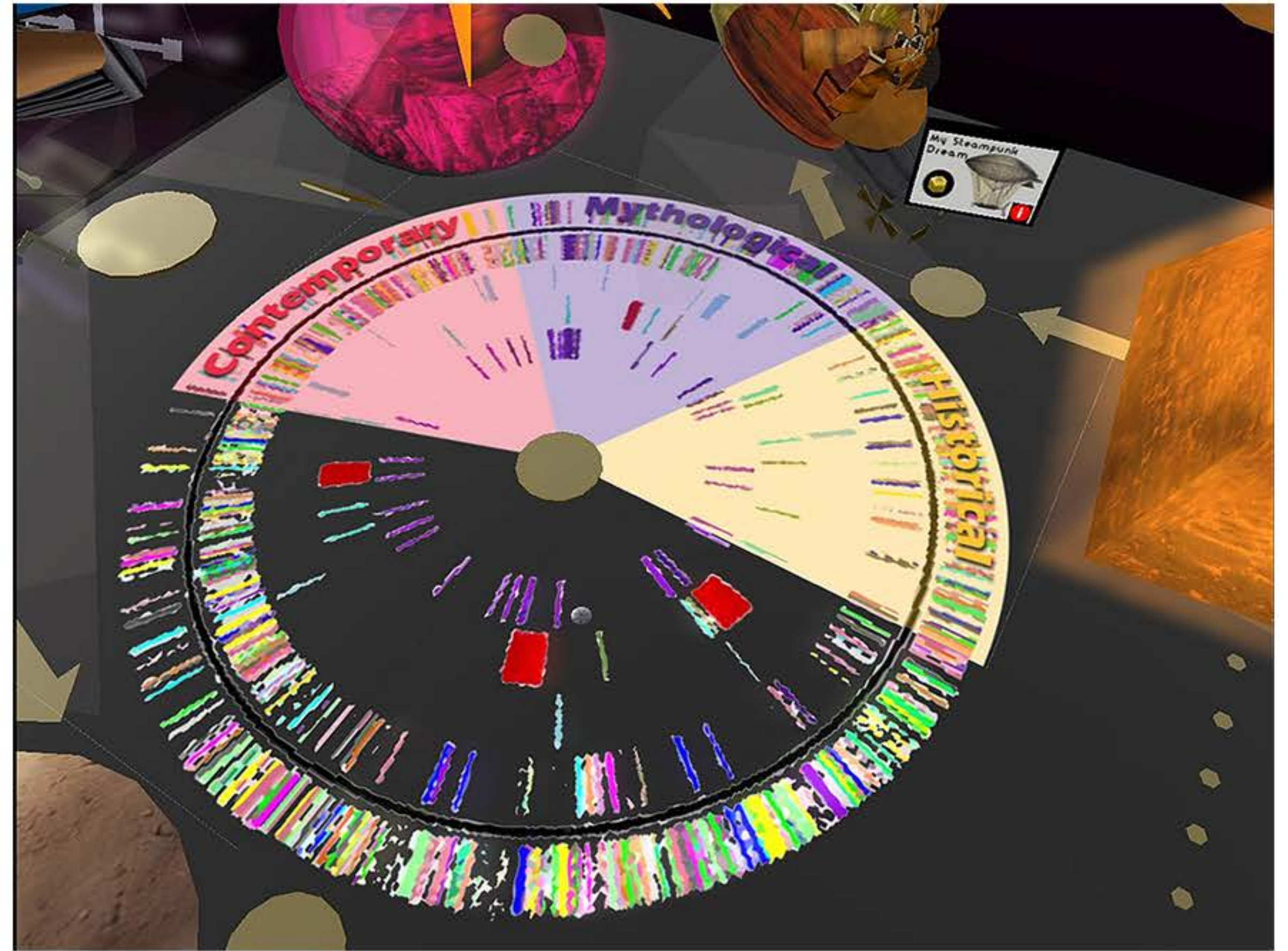
Gaskins’s work evokes racial inscription just long enough to for us to experience the sonic and visual pleasures of what bodies create, but then simultaneously frees us from the rigid, intractable nature of time, space,



and convention and, using the constructs of digital space and virtual technology, compels us to leave our old ideas of the world behind.

<sup>1</sup> Northwestern University. "Real-world Behavior And Biases Show Up In Virtual World." *ScienceDaily*. [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/09/080909074104.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/09/080909074104.htm) (accessed April 3, 2014)

<sup>2</sup> See Drew Ayers. "Humans without Bodies: DNA Portraiture and Biocybernetic Reproduction." *Configurations*, 19, no. 2 (Spring 2011).



Nettrice Gaskins. *Genetics and the Digital Body (map)*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.