This Luke Cage Art Show Shows The Power Of Superheroic Black Skin Against Bullets

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How do you convey the power of someone who has indestructible skin? Bullets.

Luke Cage was the first widely popular African-American superhero from Marvel, and his superpower is skin that can’t be broken. It’s an amazing ability — but it also plays into the mythology that black people have tougher skin and can be worked harder, part of the narrative that was used to justify the physical abuses of slavery in the U.S.

In 2015, Luke Cage made the move from blaxploitation-inspired Marvel Comics character to Netflix superstar.

Now, he’s being brought to life in the exhibition Uncaged: Hero for Higher at UC Riverside, a title that plays on the character’s history as a “Hero for Hire,” charging for his services.

The art show features the work of Black Kirby, a duo comprised of artists/professors John Jennings and Stacey Robinson. It includes digital mixed media images of Cage, from his classic form to his Netflix incarnation. Pieces explore how Cage’s skin-based power is depicted and how black skin has been seen through history.

Because the Netflix series needs to show off Cage’s powers, they’re regularly showing a black man getting shot at, Jennings pointed out.
"He's essentially like Shaft with superpowers, right?" Jennings said. "But when you have a black showrunner who understands all of this stuff, especially in the Black Lives Matter moment, what does it mean — how empowering, or disempowering — is it to see a black superhero who can't be hurt by bullets?"

Jennings, a UC Riverside professor, wants Black Kirby’s work here to form an "illabus" — an illustrated syllabus that uses the Uncaged exhibition as a jumping off point for more learning.

Jennings sees the images on the wall as visual texts, and the exhibition has a shelf of books along with 10 prompts that form the backbone of a 10-week class around the material. He encourages teachers to visit, take pictures of the books and use them as a reading list. Each week in the illabus is named after a song by rapper Mos Def. It’s a concept pulled from the show, which uses rap songs as episode titles.

Listen to the playlist here:
Luke Cage’s character includes many elements that reflect African-American history. He’s an ex-con who acquires his powers after he is experimented on, a reflection of how African-Americans were subjected to medical experiments. He’s a preacher’s kid living in New York, representing the Great Migration of African-Americans who moved north.

For a long time, he also represented black people in the Marvel Universe. While Black Panther was a king in Africa, other African-American heroes, like Cage and the Falcon, were ex-cons, Jennings noted.

“You’re looking at, ‘Well, how do we create a black character that doesn’t make mainly white readers, honestly, uncomfortable,’” Jennings said.

During the 1970s, black comic book characters evolved, as America moved from the civil rights movement into the black power movement.

“All along this time, blaxploitation is jumping off too,” Jennings said. “All these characters are coming out because, lo and behold, black people like watching movies. Who’d-a thunk it?”

Jennings knows his stuff. He has been teaching graphic design and illustration for approximately 20 years, along with creating his own comic books and art. Black Kirby got its start thanks to the Avengers movie.
"We were like, 'Man, that made a billion dollars worldwide — a billion dollars,'" Jennings said.

At the same time, they saw that Jack Kirby, who co-created many of the biggest Marvel characters, didn’t get his due. Disney initially didn’t give Kirby’s family royalties. These characters were created as work-for-hire, which means Kirby didn’t have any rights to them or a financial stake in their immense success.

"We were like, 'Man, that is messed up. They’re treating that cat like he’s black,'" Jennings said.

They were inspired to create art as if it came from an alternate universe where Kirby was black. They started to remix Kirby’s aesthetic into what they felt would represent him as an artist in that universe.

"Instead of using Norse mythology, or Jewish folklore, Greek mythology to create these heroes, he uses West African mythology, black power politics," Jennings said. "The Mighty Thor became Mighty Shango."

Their work has an Afrofuturism feel, something Jennings has been studying as a scholar for a decade. He was excited to see Afrofuturism hit the mainstream with Black Panther.

"When they announced the Black Panther film, I was like, 'Oh, here we go! If they do a good job at it, they’re not going to be ready for it,'" Jennings said.

He compared this coming out for Afrofuturism and black sci-fi/fantasy more broadly to the way hip-hop bubbled up in the culture, with academics spending decades trying to catch up to the phenomenon in their studies.

While he has an appreciation for Luke Cage, particularly as a signifier of larger issues, Jennings’ own favorite superhero is Daredevil.

"I came up black and poor in Mississippi. [Daredevil] Matt Murdock is white and poor in Hell’s Kitchen," Jennings said.

Jennings connected with Daredevil as a hero because he just wouldn’t quit.
"That character to me is what it means to have everything against you, and still come out on top — or at least succeed, in spite of the fact that you come from this oppressed space," Jennings said. "Blackness, whiteness ... they’re not for real. So how do you work through those issues — and it’s about storytelling."

Jennings himself has continued working to teach and raise up others in the world of academia.

"Coming from not only a financially oppressed base, but also a culturally oppressed base, I think I’ve always wanted to use storytelling to elevate myself and others," Jennings said. "We got here by storytelling, and we can get out of it by storytelling."

That’s the hidden power of comics, Jennings said.

"People still kind of frown on comics as a storytelling mechanism — and that’s their secret," Jennings said. "Because you can get across so many things with a symbol, with a cartoon, that you could never say in one word."

The exhibition is open now and runs at UC Riverside’s Culver Center of the Arts through March 31.