A new speaker series will bring Black experts to campus for talks on Afrofuturism

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A new speaker series starting this month aims to highlight the experiences, expertise and creativity of Black people to the University and Tucson communities and foster a more inclusive campus culture for Black students, employees and other communities of color.

The series, titled “Out of This World: Afrofuturist Expressions Across Science, Art, Technology and Design,” will open Nov. 29 at 5 p.m. in the Kachina Lounge on the third level of the Student Union Memorial Center, 1303 E. University Blvd. The talk will feature Silas Munro, a designer and chair of the Master of Fine Arts program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts.

All talks in the series are free and open to the public.

The Black Faculty Group, a University affinity group, organized the series with support from Faculty Affairs, which is part of the Office of the Provost. The Executive Office of the President is funding the series.

"The purpose of the series is to support Black students and faculty, the Black community beyond the University, and other communities of color," said Amelia Kraehe, associate vice president for equity in the arts and a member of the Black Faculty Group. "By bringing Black intellectuals, creatives and leaders to the University to share their work, the series fosters community dialogue about Blackness and all its rich variations across time and place."

The series' theme centers on Afrofuturism, an idea born in the 1990s that reframes Black history by emphasizing the talent and success of the Black community rather than starting with the enslavement of Black people. Afrofuturism blends science fiction, art and technology to imagine a future that is freer, more just and sustainable for everyone on Earth, said Kraehe, who is also an associate professor in the School of Art and co-founder and co-director of the University's Racial Justice Studio, an initiative of Arizona Arts.

Munro, the first speaker, is a graphic designer, scholar of graphic design history and a partner of Poly-Mode, a design studio that works primarily with cultural institutions. Munro has worked with the city of Los Angeles, the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, among others.

A course that Munro designed and teaches, called Black Design in America, focuses on the origins of typography, mathematics and other graphic language systems within African diasporic cultures and movements for Black liberation, including the civil rights movement, Afrofuturism and Black Lives Matter.

Munro's talk, "Future Forces of History," will open the series by detailing how his journey as a queer, Black designer has shaped the future for his practice, teaching and life.

Speakers were chosen through word-of-mouth referrals. Kraehe, who heard about Munro from Karen Zimmerman, associate director and professor in the School of Art, said she was immediately drawn to his work.

The series' two other speakers are:

- Ruha Benjamin, a professor of African American studies and founding director of the Ida B. Wells JUST Data Lab at Princeton University, who will speak Jan. 25. Benjamin's research explores the intersections of innovation and inequity, knowledge and power, race and citizenship, and health and justice.
- Ibrahim Thiaw, executive secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, who will speak April 5. Thiaw previously served as special adviser to the U.N. secretary-general for the Sahel, a region of North Africa. Originally from Mauritania, Thiaw served for 10 years in the country's Ministry of Rural Development.

The subjects of Benjamin and Thiaw's talks will be announced later. The series also includes sessions for up to 25 students to join in an informal chat and lunch with each speaker. The speakers also will record podcasts with the Racial Justice Studio.

Tarnia Newton, another member of the Black Faculty Group who helped organize the series, suggested Benjamin for the series, having been well acquainted with her background and work.
“She's definitely a deep thinker and really about creating alternative, equitable and inclusive futures for all people,” said Newton, who is a clinical assistant professor of nursing. “She believes classrooms are laboratories for social change.”

Newton hopes the talks leave attendees with ideas that can be turned into action for their communities.

"We want Black people to be empowered to be change agents in their immediate community and the larger community," Newton said. "And we want allies of Black people to do the same – to be empowered for change for a better world, one that's equitable and inclusive."

Those interested in attending the Nov. 29 talk with Munro can RSVP via a Qualtrics survey[11]. RSVP information for the other talks will be made available on the Faculty Affairs website[1].

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