

## VANESSA WOODS

*Divination, 2012*

Photomontage, Silver Gelatin Print, 14 x 11 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## CHRISTIAN KIEFER

# The Great Black Hope

I'm embarrassed to say it now, but that's something of an understatement. Flabbergasted is a better word. Look, the thing is—and this was how it was in the beginning, you know—I mean look, we had all worked hard to get where we were, and then this Hollywood type shows up, not just for a meet-and-greet but for the whole thing, the long haul. At first I was sure it was some kind of mistake or practical joke or something like that, but it just kept going on and on, and finally I went to the chief and I asked him point-blank to explain the situation—you know, I was mission commander—and the chief told me that it was all true, and to be prepared for a barrage of questions from the media. Make no mistake, Charlie, he told me, you are to put a positive spin on this.

Jesus, Alan, how old is this guy anyway?

When he told me, I laughed. Seriously? I said.

He's in good shape, Alan said.

Good shape? I said. Then I said some things that I probably shouldn't have. I mean look, I'm not part of the program anymore, but let's just say I was pretty upset about it, and when I was done ranting, the chief only shook his head and said something like, You see, Charlie, that's exactly what I *don't* want you to say. If it weren't for him, you wouldn't be going at all. You keep that in mind.

The thing you have to remember here is that the mission was never intended to be what it turned out to be. I mean, people can't talk about it without talking about race, but that's a kind of chatter that I've never paid any attention to. If you want to become an astronaut, you put your nose to the grindstone and work hard. Was it more difficult for me because of my ethnicity? If it was, it was only because politicians and journalists keep talking about race like it's some kind of debate. I'm an astronaut. Evans and Johnson and Malcolm are all astronauts. Period. There's no debate about that.

When they first started assembling the team in Houston, the crew was going to be myself as pilot, Cornell as copilot, Ed Yu as systems engineer, Tom Wieland in communications and navigation, and Muhammad Kansanni as medical officer. I don't think I'd been told I was going to be commander yet, but that probably came soon after. Then Cornell got the flu and Wieland broke his ankle playing in his weekend soccer league. They slotted in Gabe Evans for Cornell and Robert Malcolm for Wieland,