



Isobel Thompson, "Awol Erizku, Beyoncé's Instagram Portrait Artist, Will Hate This Headline About His Trump-Inspired London Show," *Vanity Fair*, Apr 21, 2017

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MUSLIM ARTIST TRUMPS TRUMP

Awol Erizku, Beyoncé's Instagram Portrait Artist, Will Hate This Headline About His Trump-Inspired London Show

In an age of overly reductive clickbait, the Los Angeles artist says his new show, "Make America Great Again," is designed to ask audiences to look deeper.

→ by ISOBEL THOMPSON

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Photograph by Mark Wrice.

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Earlier this year, Awol Erizku made history; he doesn't really want to talk about it. In February, Beyoncé posted a portrait by the 28-year-old artist on her Instagram account. Kneeling in front of a giant arc of colored flowers and shrouded in a sorbet green veil, she cupped her pregnant stomach and announced, via the caption, that she was expecting twins. Within just a few hours, the picture had been liked 5 million times, an outpouring of approval that broke Instagram records.

Now, Erizku is opening a new exhibition at the Ben Brown Fine Arts gallery in London, which he has called, boldly, and with more than a hint of savage irony, "Make America Great Again." But he doesn't really want to talk about this either—at least initially.

"Here's the thing," he said in a recent phone interview from L.A. a few hours before he boarded a plane to Europe. "I know it's easy to slap a clickbait title on it, but you've got to understand: if there's anything Beyoncé or anti-Trump in the headline, I'm just not really interested. I just don't want—I wouldn't want to see an article be like 'Beyoncé photographer says this.'"

Does Erizku not think that, in borrowing Trump's strident, ubiquitous campaign slogan, such headlines are unavoidably inevitable? And, well, is that not the point?



Girl With a Bamboo Earring, 2009.
Photograph by Awol Erizku.

Erizku's point is this: before the Beyoncé picture projected him to instantaneous Insta-fame, he had been steadily producing a highly regarded body of work for years, primarily focused on challenging the white aesthetic that dominates art. Born in Ethiopia and raised in the Bronx, he studied painting at Cooper Union in New York, and graduated from Yale with a masters of fine art in photography. Since then, he has shot for *Vogue* and *The New Yorker*. He is a sculptor, painter, photographer, and musician. In his 2012 solo show "Black and Gold," he repopulated classic portraits with black figures. His painting *Girl with a Bamboo Earring*—a take on Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*—caused a sensation in the art world. So did his short film *Serendipity I*, which saw him smashing a bust of David with a sledgehammer and replacing it with Nefertiti. So, for Erizku, the quick hit of fame won via his shot of Beyoncé feels, a little insultingly, reductive.



He is understandably wary, hence his hesitancy about deeming his London show unequivocally anti-Trump despite its title. Erizku emphasizes that his exhibition is not simply a lampooning of America's new president. Instead, it is a wider meditation on a nation whose values are under siege and, also, a celebration of the values that Erizku believes really do make America great. Broadly, Erizku had been thinking about some of the concepts in the show for a couple of years. As the 2016 presidential campaign began to veer down its historically bizarre track, those ideas immediately took on a clearer, tangible form.

"I didn't think he was going to become president and a lot of my generation will say the same," he says. "It seemed like this ongoing joke."

"Being both black and Muslim is just, you know. . . It's not the friendliest time it's been in America for both those groups of people," he says. "And so it was natural for me to use the platform I have to voice my opinion."

In defiance of Trump's razing of nuance, Erizku took the campaign's catchphrase and subverted it, stretching it out as far as possible, and packing it with interpretation.

"That's the theme," he says. "Making America great again. Using Trump's slogan and flipping it on its back and kind of reclaiming it."

Working across multiple disciplines, Erizku approaches his shows, he says, in the same way a musician might create an album: "I do the whole thing." He even produces his own merchandise: tops, T-shirts, and jackets aimed at offering a takeaway for audiences who cannot afford actual pieces of art. For this exhibit, he ordered 200 of Trump's abrasively red "Make America Great Again" caps and overlaid them with the stitched, prowling form of a black panther.

His message is no less pointed in his larger works. One, called *Them Changes*, is a door emblazoned with the word "Trump" spray-painted in white across its wooden planking. The "T" is formed in the shape of a swastika. Erizku was inspired to create the piece when he was driving home one night in L.A. and saw a door tagged with "Fuck Donald Trump," the swastika a final, angry flourish. "I thought it was very poignant."

Erizku, who is also a D.J., often creates custom mixtapes to pair with his shows. The soundtrack to "Make America Great Again" is as unflinching as its visual counterparts. On it, he samples a clip from a 1968 CBS News Special titled *Black History: Lost, Stolen or Strayed*, featuring a recording of Bill Cosby, then still considered a hero to many in the African-American community, long before accusations of rape destroyed the comedian's legacy.



Left, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 2017; Right, *Them Changes*, 2017.
By Awol Erizku/Courtesy of Ben Brown Fine Arts, London; Photographs by Joshua White.

“It’s complicated, I think there are layers,” Erizku says of the inclusion, drawing a parallel to the theme of his exhibition. “There are layers to the show. It’s not as simple as saying it’s anti-Trump. It’s not just anti-Trump.

Whether Erizku is reframing canonical art, or analyzing the disjointed state of contemporary, Trumpian America, he tends to punctuate the importance of complexity in the face of dominant, looming narratives. Don’t judge an artist by his quick brush with Bey and Jay; don’t judge an exhibition by its title; don’t judge an article by its clickbait-y headline: read the whole thing.

“Honestly, I don’t want to pick on Trump too much because I don’t want to—I’m not trying to go to Europe and come back and get detained,” concludes Erizku, only half-joking. “Look, I’m not putting it past him. I’m telling you straight up, I’m not putting it past him. Nothing has happened to me yet. I like to live a quiet, private life. But I am an artist, and I do have a voice and this is what’s concerning me right now.”