



Antwaun Sargent, "Menace II Art History," LALA, Oct 2017

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"What I'm doing with my paintings is finding and synthesizing contemporary abstraction in what I see in the street... I hope people understand that it's a reaction to the times that we are living in." — Awol Erizku



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PORTRAIT BY JEFF VESPA

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MENACE II ART HISTORY

Awol Erizku taps into the heart of the country's racial politics via a half-century-old FBI-distributed "coloring book" for a game-changing exhibition at Night Gallery.

BY **ANTWAUN SARGENT** PORTRAIT BY **JEFF VESPA** PRODUCED BY **MICHAEL SLENSKE**

WALKING THROUGH AWOL ERIZKU'S South Central studio, adjacent to Downtown Los Angeles's Fashion District, change was in the air. It was just before spring, and the Ethiopian-born artist was busy prepping for his first solo European exhibition, "Awol Erizku: Make America Great Again" at Ben Brown Fine Arts in London. *Inside the Mattress*, his diptych portrait, featuring the Oscar-winning actress Viola Davis, wearing a purple dress against an orange backdrop, was taped on one wall. Like *Girl with a Bamboo Earring* the image politely critiqued art's historical reverence for European beauty. The props he used in his Internet-breaking pregnancy photo of Beyoncé were also littered about the space as his puppy, Prince, raced around. In a corner of the vast studio is his work *How That Make You Feel?*, an American flag embossed with a large Black Panther Party logo, which marked a new direction for the 29 year-old artist: "I'm no longer responding directly to art history," Erizku says, "I am trying to make my own history."

On a drive around L.A. after the studio visit, Erizku tells me, "I got this Black Panther coloring book from the '60s I wanted to show you. I'm thinking about doing a show with it." That show, "Menace II Society," on view through

October 7 at Night Gallery, features a new body of work conceived using the 1968 coloring book as source material and is anchored by two sets of paintings that the artist—who received his bachelors of fine art from Cooper Union and his MFA in photography from Yale School of Art—calls the *Black Power Coloring Book Paintings* and the *Fuck 12 Paintings*. The works provocatively explore America's history of institutionalized racism, the supremacist structures that have maintained it, and the past and present-day counter strategies—music, art and protest—employed by African-Americans to speak out and seek justice.

On large-scale pieces of plywood and pallets, Erizku has silkscreened several violent and hopeful scenes from the so-called Black Panther coloring book—and filled them in with bright swatches of house paint. Despite the seemingly innocuous title, the Party did not commission the book; a lone member created it and the Panther leadership ordered him to destroy it. The public became aware of the coloring book in 1969 when the FBI received the would-be children's agitprop from a former Panther-turned-bureau informant. "The most disturbing part is that the FBI distributed this book in white suburbia," says Erizku, of the action that was part of a

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counterintelligence operation to discredit the Panthers.

Erizku's painting, *'Beware of the Pig' Brothers and Sisters*, features a coloring-book scene of a pig dressed as a police officer offering a little black boy candy with one hand while he holds a baseball bat behind his back in the other. The background of the painting is an abstracted field of color that evokes the expressionistic flatness of a Barkley L. Hendricks monochromatic backdrop—wiping away the outside world so the viewer can focus on the figures. It also alludes to the tradition of black postwar abstraction typified by Jack Whitten and Sam Gilliam that employed color as a political choice. On Erizku's canvas there is only the menacing pig and an innocent black child in a sea of green and police-uniform blue to signify the horrors of systemic racism.

"How much of it is relevant now?" asks Erizku. "How much of the propaganda still applies? We haven't learned from art. We haven't learned from history. Right now this is where I am at; this is the state of mind that the show was created from."

The symbolism of Erizku's *Fuck 12 Paintings*, mounted on the gallery's walls, shows that the country's current racial divide is firmly rooted in history. The Black Panther's calls for equality, liberation and justice are now the Black Lives Matter movement's demands, and the symbol of a pig as a metaphor for unjust police treatment is now represented simply by the number "12." (There are generally twelve officers in a narcotics unit, an observation made by rapper Gucci Mane on his 2016 album *Woptober*.) This all comes together in *Fuck 12 (Orange Target)*, where the Bronx raised artist employs a massive sheet of corrugated metal, which he physically beat up—"to get my rage out," he says—as his canvas. The painting's figure is a single bullet-ridden, orange shooting target that the artist created himself at a gun range. Erizku inserts the

target into the painting as a readymade, in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp and the late 1960s black California Assemblage, exemplified by Betye Saar and Noah Purifoy, who denounced the smooth euro-centricity of the white canvas by using materials from their surroundings.

"What I'm doing with my paintings is finding and synthesizing contemporary abstraction in what I see in the street," says Erizku. "Any motif I have used in my paintings all started from the street." He calls it "street abstraction" when he employs the vernacular of his community in his work. It is a vernacular presented clearly in *Fuck 12 (Orange Target)* where the artist used black spray paint to draw an X through the number "12," which sits against a purple backdrop as a gesture of black resistance. "In terms of the imagery, I hope people understand that it's a reaction to the times that we are living in," he says.

Erizku amplifies that reaction in the atmosphere he creates at Night Gallery. As you walk through the space, a diversity of sounds emanate from the artist's new conceptual mix tape—Fela Kuti's *Trouble Sleep Yanga Wake AM*, A\$AP Mob's *Walk On Water*, Big Meech's *Ca\$h Out*—filling the space with a prodding soundtrack that functions as the unifying force in the show. "Music allows me build the atmosphere for the exhibitions," says Erizku of the tape, which shares its name with the exhibition, a nod to the Allen and Albert Hughes teen hood drama set in Watts in 1993. Listening to the stripped down voice of the late poet and musician Gil Scott-Heron fill Night Gallery, as he lectures to the sound of a piano that "ain't nothing new" in America, and standing beneath *Miles Davis-Nefertiti*, a spinning disco ball sculpture of the African Queen that bathes the confrontational art in a glittering light, you realize that however menacing the totality of this Gesamtkunstwerk might seem, Erizku's mise en scene offers a space for a uniquely liberating—and dare I say uplifting—experience.



Erizku with his works *The Black Panther Thinks and Loves Black People* (2017), left, and *Neferiti- Miles Davis* (2017), right.



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