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Awol Erizku's Global Afropolitanism

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Awol Erizku, Lion (Body) I (2022). Duratrans on lightbox. 125.2 x 166.7 cm. Edition of 3 + 2 AP. © Awol Erizku. Courtesy the artist and Gagolian.

Awol Erizku, the artist behind the iconic 2017 portrayal of a pregnant Beyoncé and the 2014 shot of the singer and Jay-Z on either side of the Mona Lisa, is no stranger to mixing things up. Moving seamlessly between popular culture and conceptual art, Erizku has photographed luminaries like DMX for GQ, Pharrell Williams for SSENSE, and Donald Glover for The New Yorker.

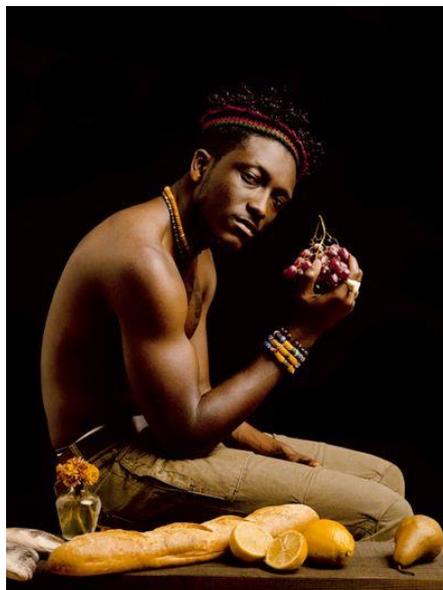
Erizku's editorial work often extends to his artistic practice and vice versa. Take his powerful 2020 portrait of Michael Brown Sr., which connects back to a series that Erizku photographed for a 2020 GQ feature honouring the fathers and father figures of Black men lost to police brutality in America: Michael Brown, Terence Crutcher, Daniel Prude, Rayshard Brooks, George Floyd, and Jacob Blake.



Awol Erizku, *Girl with a Bamboo Earring* (2009). Chromogenic print. 165.1 x 127 cm. Edition of 5 + 2 AP. © Awol Erizku. Courtesy Ben Brown Fine Arts, London.

In February 2021, a portrait of poet Amanda Gorman by Erizku featured on the cover of *Time*, released just after Gorman took the podium and addressed the nation at the U.S. presidential inauguration.

Gorman is photographed in a yellow dress against a black background, in a style recalling Erizku's body of work that restages Renaissance paintings with Black subjects. Take the *Girl with a Bamboo Earring* (2009) after Vermeer, and *Lady with a Pitbull* (2009) after Da Vinci, or *Boy Holding Grapes* (2012), which takes its pose from Caravaggio's *Bacchus* (c. 1596).



Awol Erizku, *Boy Holding Grapes* (2012). Digital chromatic print. 101.9 x 76.5 cm. Edition of 10 + 2 AP. © Awol Erizku. Courtesy Ben Brown Fine Arts, London.

'We were going for timelessness, something that felt classical', Erizku said of his Gorman portrait; the intention was to visualise the 'resurgence of a Black renaissance'.¹

Another photograph of Gorman by Erizku shows her in a pink dress holding a bird cage—a reference to 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' (1983), a poem by another inauguration poet, Maya Angelou. 'It needed a layer of depth that only poetry can explain,' Erizku has said of that picture.



Awol Erizku, Black Fire (Mouzone Brothas) (2019). Digital chromatic print. 50.8 x 67.8 cm. © Awol Erizku. Courtesy Ben Brown Fine Arts, London.

Poetry infuses the artist's striking photographic still-life compositions, defined by sharp studio set-ups and rich colour saturations. At the recent [Athens Biennale ECLIPSE](#) (24 September–28 November 2021), two such images, *Asiatic Lilies* (2017) and *Black Fire (Mouzone Brothas)* (2019), were pasted across two walls of the former Fokas Department Store.

Each digital chromatic print brings together artefacts that configure temporal relations: among them, the bust of Nefertiti, a sphinx, an Egyptian cat, lilies, Everlast boxing gloves, X-Rite ColorChecker Classic charts, and a copy of *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (1968).



Awol Erizku, Asiatic Lilies (2017). Digital photograph. Digital print on vinyl sticker. Dimensions variable. Exhibition view: 7th Athens Biennale, ECLIPSE, Athens (24 September–28 November 2021). Courtesy Athens Biennale. Photo: Emilios Haralambous.

In a city like Athens, where the ancient past—fetishised as 'the cradle of Western civilisation'—weighs heavily, Erizku's images recall Martin Bernal's three-volume publication *Black Athena* (1987), which argued for the Afro-Asiatic roots of classical civilisation.

This was the point of that Athens Biennale, after all: to reject the erasures and reductions of a violently monochromatic false-universal imposed by European patriarchs who defined ancient Greece as their birthright.



Awol Erizku, Malcolm X Freestyle (Pharaoh's Dance) (2019–2020). Digital chromatic print. 50.8 x 63.5 cm. Edition of 3 + 2 AP. © Awol Erizku. Courtesy Ben Brown Fine Arts,

Erizku is fully invested in what he calls 'a global Afropolitan perspective' and 'Afro-esoteric iconography'. Speaking with Gagosian director Antwaun Sargent on the occasion of his 2020 exhibition *Mystic Parallax* at FLAG Art Foundation (26 September–14 November 2020), he said: 'I'm interested in the Black imagination and the wealth of history that being Black can afford us.'²

The 13 images that Erizku created in 2020 for the Public Art Fund, and presented across 350 JCDecaux bus shelters across all five boroughs of New York City and throughout Chicago, extend these ideas.



Awol Erizku, Arrival (2020). Roosevelt Av. between 69th St. and 68th St. in Queens. Exhibition view: New Visions for Iris, New York City and Chicago (24 February–20 June 2021). Commissioned by Public Art Fund. © Awol Erizku. Courtesy the artist.

Conceived as a conversation with the artist's newborn daughter Iris, *New Visions for Iris* draws on Erizku's still-life works, which he describes as 'intellectual snapshots' of 'ideas that I'm processing at that particular moment', which 'function in multiple dimensions'.³

Poetry infuses the artist's striking photographic still-life compositions, defined by sharp studio set-ups and rich colour saturations.

Compositions include *632* (2020), showing Africa rendered as a cake iced with the colours of the Pan-African flag—red, black, green—that sits on a carpet of flowers, and *Letters for the Nigist* (2020), whose name refers to an Ethiopian queen. An elephant-shaped walker buggy hosts a bust of Nefertiti, Amharic alphabet tiles, a majestic stretch of purple irises, and a stem of pink orchids.



Awol Erizku, 632 (2020). Roosevelt Av. between 63rd St. and 64th St. in Queens. Exhibition view: New Visions for Iris, New York City and Chicago (24 February–20 June 2021). Commissioned by Public Art Fund. © Awol Erizku. Courtesy the artist.

'The thing that separates me most from everyone is my ability to kind of combine...two cultures,' the artist has said, referring to his birth in Ethiopia and upbringing in America. 'Having that duality allows me to have like a very unique kind of vision for the kind of art that I make.'⁴



Awol Erizku, Letters for the Nigist (2020). Commissioned by Public Art Fund. © Awol Erizku. Courtesy the artist.

The falcon appears across Erizku's images like a moving thread across cultures and associations. Whether in portraits of Tessa Thompson for *The Cut*, Michael B. Jordan for *GQ*, or in the *New Visions* for *Iris* photographs. In Zuhr (2020), a figure wearing a Kobe Bryant jersey kneeling down on a forest floor for mid-day prayers, whom Erizku met at his Mosque, is watched by a falcon perching on a motorbike parked next to him.

The bird, whose symbolism draws connections across the African continent and beyond, also shows up in Erizku's latest body of work for [Memories of a Lost Sphinx](#), the artist's first show with [Gagosian](#) organised by Sargent in [New York](#) (10 March–16 April 2022).



Awol Erizku, Falcon (wings) (2022). Duratrans on lightbox. 154.5 x 125.2 cm. Edition of 3 + 2 AP. © Awol Erizku. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian.

Exploring the hybrid cultural roots of the sphinx, which stretch and morph across Ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Asian mythologies, are six new photographic lightboxes that fragment the figure's singular form into a series of evocative parts.

There is the creature's human head, represented by *Human (head)* (2022), a portrait of NBA star Kevin Durant from behind; its falcon wings, reflected in *Falcon (wings)* (2022), a shot of a bird flying onto an arm; and its tail, here, constituted by a bird's-eye view of a snake tail in *Tail of a sphinx* (2022).



*Awol Erizku, Last riddle (The Night of the Purple Moon) (2022). Duratrans on lightbox. 156.4 x 125.2 cm. Edition of 3 + 2 AP.
© Awol Erizku. Courtesy the artist and Gagolian.*

The sphinx's lion body is reflected in two lightboxes showing a lion photographed against the backdrop of a great conjunction between planets Saturn and Jupiter—a cosmic cartography that offers a clue to the final piece of the puzzle. Last riddle (The Night of the Purple Moon) (2022) shows a tarantula seemingly speaking into a man's ear, as if whispering oracles of a future to come. —[O]