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Beyond Beyoncé Fame, Awol Erizku Expands What Black Art Can Be
With an exhibition at Gagosian, Erizku reaches a broad audience, and hopes he is seen as more than “a photographer for hire.”

Robin Pogrebin



Awol Erizku at his downtown Los Angeles studio, where he has moved beyond indelible images of celebrities. His new show, “Memories of a Lost Sphinx,” includes: “Lion (Body) II,” behind the artist; and, far right, “Last riddle (The Night of the Purple Moon),” both from 2022. Credit...Michael Tyrone Delaney for The New York Times

LOS ANGELES — True, Awol Erizku may be best known for his beatific photograph of a pregnant Beyoncé, which in 2017 was the most liked post in Instagram’s history. And Erizku has taken many other memorable images of celebrities, including the young inauguration poet Amanda Gorman for the cover of *Time* and the “Black Panther” actor Michael B. Jordan for *GQ*.

But in a recent interview at his sprawling studio in Downtown Los Angeles, Erizku, 33 — wearing Dr. Martens on his feet and a floppy hat over his dreadlocks, as the Ethiopian pianist Emahoy Tsegué-Maryam Guèbrou played on the speakers — said he considers himself first an artist, one who also works in painting, sculpture and video installation.

“It’s something that I’m adamant about,” he said. “I’m not a photographer for hire.”

The desire to bring Erizku’s work to the attention of the wider art world is part of what fueled the desire of Antwaun Sargent, a director and curator at the Gagosian, to give him the gallery’s Park Avenue space for a show opening March 10.



Erizku's "Lion (Body) I" (2022), Duratrans on lightbox. "The art world has flattened the ways in which Blackness operates," Antwaun Sargent, the show's curator, said. "Doing exhibitions like this one helps to expand beyond an overemphasis on figurative painting." Credit...Awol Erizku and Gagolian

“Awol is one of the photographers in the Black vanguard who are saying boundaries do not apply to the realities or the conditions in which we are making images,” Sargent said. “That is a refreshing perspective to have, particularly when it comes to the extremely white history of photography.”

“How are we, as an art world, going to ignore that?” Sargent continued. “You have photographers in Lagos, London, Johannesburg, New York and Los Angeles making images that defy easy categorization and that are emphasizing Black desire, Black beauty and Black community. For me, that is significant.”

Erizku’s exhibition, “Memories of a Lost Sphinx,” situates six light-box photographs in a black-painted interior along with a mixed-media sculpture that reimagines the Great Sphinx of Giza as an amalgam of Egyptian, Greek and Asian influences. There is also a golden spinning disco ball, “Nefertiti — Miles Davis,” in the shape of the Egyptian queen.

“I’m deconstructing the mythological components that make up the Sphinx,” Erizku said. “It’s important for me to create confident, powerful, downright regal images of Black people.”

Sargent has known Erizku since interviewing him for *Complex* magazine about his exhibition “The Only Way Is Up” in 2014. Erizku said he experienced an immediate comfort with him, feeling “for the first time I didn’t have to explain the work.”

Born in Ethiopia and raised in the South Bronx — Erizku describes himself as “from the projects” — he got into trouble in junior high school and said, “art was the only way out for me.”



Erizku in his studio. “The power of his practice is that it has an accessibility at multiple points for lots of different people,” Allison M. Glenn, a curator who has shown his work, said. Credit...Michael Tyrone Delaney for The New York Times

A sketcher and doodler, he went to the High School of Art and Design in Manhattan, started out doing medical illustrations and picked up a camera at Cooper Union, where in 2010 he received his bachelor’s degree in fine arts.

In his third year at Cooper Union, Erizku riffed on Vermeer’s “Girl With a Pearl Earring,” creating the photograph “Girl With a Bamboo Earring,” featuring a Black woman in a large heart-shaped hoop earring, which attracted public attention (an edition sold at Phillips auction house in 2017 for \$52,500).

From there it was on to Yale, where he studied with the photographer Gregory Crewdson and earned his MFA in 2014. Erizku was particularly inspired by the work of artists like Richard Prince, Jeff Wall, Roe Ethridge, Marcel Duchamp and David Hammons — “the ones who worked outside the margins,” he said.

But early on he mastered the world of social media by treating Instagram as his gallery, selectively opening his feed for public viewing at appointed hours.

In 2012, he was featured in a group show at the Flag Art Foundation and then had two solo shows at the now closed Hasted Kraeutler gallery in Chelsea before joining Ben Brown in London and Hong Kong followed by the Night Gallery in Los Angeles. He is currently not represented.

“The work has an aesthetic appeal — you want to look at it,” said the collector Glenn Fuhrman, a founder of Flag and longtime supporter of Erizku’s work. “But there is always a lot more going on beneath the surface.”



“Nefertiti — Miles Davis (Gold)” (2022), hard coated foam and mirrored tile, like a disco ball. Credit...Awol Erizku and Gagorian; Rob McKeever

Some members of the art world have already taken notice. Public Art Fund, in 2017, showed Erizku’s work on Wi-Fi kiosks in all five boroughs as part of the exhibition “Commercial Break.”

In 2019, the curator Allison M. Glenn included Erizku in her show “Small Talk” at Crystal Bridges Museum in Bentonville, Ark. “The power of his practice is that it has an accessibility at multiple points for lots of different people,” Glenn said. “He relies upon and shifts recognizable symbols. That is art history. That’s been the work of painting.”

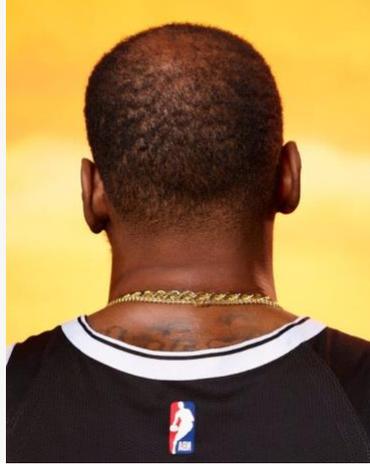
Last year, Public Art Fund featured 13 of Erizku’s photographs on bus shelters across New York City and Chicago in a show called “New Visions for Iris” that included a still-life addressing mass-incarceration and a portrait of Michael Brown Sr.

“He’s part of an art historical conversation,” said Daniel S. Palmer, the fund’s curator, “from old masters to the contemporary imagery of our current moment.”

The Gagorian exhibition is meaningful, Sargent said, in part because it expands the notion of what Black art can be at a time when Black portraiture has become the market rage.

“The art world has flattened the ways in which Blackness operates,” Sargent said. “Doing exhibitions like this one helps to expand beyond an overemphasis on figurative painting,” though he noted that figurative work is valid.

He added that it was a way to continue a conversation “beyond some of the fashionable notions of the Black figure.”



“Human (head),” 2022, Duratrans on lightbox. The subject is the basketball star Kevin Durant. Credit...Awol Erizku and Gagosian

Sargent pointed to long-overdue recognition of Black photographers such as Anthony Barboza as well as Ming Smith and the 1960s Kamoinge group, recently featured at the Whitney. “We need to use every strategy to make sure that our images are seen and appreciated,” he said, “because frankly the art world did not care.”

Showing Erizku in the Gagosian space Park & 75 — a storefront visible from the street — gives the exhibition significant accessibility. “With more Black artists showing than ever, there is still a problem with museums and galleries attracting those audiences to see the work of members of their community,” he said. “There are a lot of barriers to entry when it comes to the art world.”

Erizku often incorporates wildlife in his images — he photographed the hip-hop star Nipsey Hussle with a horse, Michael B. Jordan with a falcon and a wolf; Gorman with a bird (that now chirps in a cage by the window in Erizku’s studio). He said he was inspired early on by the radical 1974 performance of Joseph Beuys — “I like America and America likes me” — in which the German artist spent a week in his dealer’s gallery, fenced in with a live coyote.

The cost of Erizku’s work is on the low end for a major gallerist like Gagosian, with pieces selling for about \$40,000 to \$60,000. But Sargent said it is critical for blue-chip galleries to showcase new perspectives. “If we’re being honest about saying that we want to make sure that all voices are represented in the art world, we have to be serious about providing platforms for artists who are thinking in ways that are divergent from traditional notions around image making,” Sargent said.

To some extent, Erizku has bypassed the gatekeepers, given that he’s been presenting his own shows on social media for years. His primary interest, the artist said, is being able to communicate and elevate Black images, whether of the actress Viola Davis, African masks, nail salon hands, Ethiopian sex workers or the basketball player Kevin Durant.

“I want to be remembered for Black imagination,” Erizku said, “to expand the limits of Black art.”