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Awol Erizku: This Los Angeles Artist Is Throwing Out All The Rules

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Multimedia artist Awol Erizku wants his art—and his music—to flip conventions. He talks to us about his first solo show in Asia

Awol Erizku is working on the mixtape for his next show when I call him in his Los Angeles studio. The 29-year-old multimedia artist makes what he calls conceptual mixtapes for all his exhibitions, and he's currently debating whether to include a recording by experimental producer Yves Tumor of a New York ambulance rushing past 42nd street and Times Square overlaid with drums.



Awol Erizku, *I Was Going To Call It Your Name
But You Didn't Let Me* (2006) (Photo: Courtesy of Nina Johnson)



American rapper Rich the Kid's Plug Walk is also on his radar, as are a couple of songs by Kendrick Lamar. "I probably won't decide the final tracks till a few days before the show," he says. "I always try to think of the viewers, but also the place—what kind of city, museum or gallery I'll be presenting in. It's a constant work in progress."

In this case, the place is Hong Kong, where Erizku's first solo exhibition in Asia is now drawing fans to Ben Brown Fine Arts. Titled 慢慢燃燒Slow Burn, it features a group of seven new light works that draw on both his previous experiments with neon and the iconography of Hong Kong's own neon-lit streets and skyline.

It is Erizku's first show exclusively focused on this specific medium. "Hong Kong is an incredibly condensed metropolis," he says, "and lights are such a big part of it. There's neon everywhere. I found that quite interesting, as it's something we're losing in the States. I remember that as a child in New York, I was used to my local bodegas and liquor stores having neon lighting out on their store fronts, but that's disappeared over the years, or shifted into LED lighting, which doesn't quite hold the same aesthetic value. Part of me wanted to comment on that through this show. But I also wanted to explore light works in a deeper way."



Awol Erizku (Photo: Vanity Fair)



A man of many mediums

Neon is just one of Erizku's artistic interests. In his short but remarkable career—he landed his first New York gallery show before he had earned his Master of Fine Arts degree from Yale—he has branched out from painting and photography into sculpture and video installations.

Besides the mixtapes he makes for his shows, he DJs, too, and some 18 months ago launched his own music label, Tra\$h Money Record\$. In the age of the multi-hyphenate talent, he's a poster child for creativity.

"I like to try different things," he says. "The way I've set up my studio here in LA reflects that. On one corner you have a turntable-equipped DJ booth; behind a partition is where I have some photos. The rest of the space has a mix of different pieces and works, and I'm now building a residency room where my musician friends and I record. When I come in, I just walk around and pick one thing and then the other. I'm here and there all the time."



Awol Erizku, Black Panther (Green Neon), (2018) (Photo: Courtesy of Ben Brown Fine Arts)



A rebel with a cause

What his eclectic body of work shares is a focus on challenging the white aesthetic that dominates art —“which is what pushed me towards art in the first place,” he says. “This realisation I had in high school that there weren’t many people like me, or my sisters, or my parents, represented through history. Nor many visual artists besides Basquiat and a few others I could look up to and feel understood. I wanted to change and challenge that.”

Born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Erizku grew up in the South Bronx, New York, and moved to [Los Angeles](#) in 2014. He studied painting at Cooper Union and graduated from Yale with an MFA in [photography](#), and was set on addressing issues of race, identity, politics and cultural history from the very beginning of his career.

In Erizku’s early photographic work, he replaced figures in famous paintings with black subjects. His 2009 work *Girl With a Bamboo Earring*—a take on Dutch painter Vermeer’s famous *Girl with a Pearl Earring* for which Erizku had one of his sisters sit—caused a sensation and landed him representation from a New York gallery at the age of 24.

Later, his short 2015 film *Serendipity*, which features the artist smashing a bust of Michelangelo’s David and replacing it with one of the Egyptian queen Nefertiti, was a big hit when it was shown at New York’s Museum of Modern Art.

Make America—I mean art—great again

More acclaimed works followed. For a photographic project in 2015, Erizku paid sex workers in Ethiopia to mimic the models in paintings by French masters Ingres and Manet. His *Make America Great Again* exhibition last year at Ben Brown Fine Arts in [London](#), Erizku’s most political show to date, was also a success.

For it, the artist painted the gallery walls black, displayed a door scrawled with the graffitied word “Trump”—the T as a swastika—plastered the logo of the revolutionary Black Panther Party onto the American flag, and created his own “Make America Great Again” merchandise (including a tongue-in-cheek red baseball cap).

“It was my way of grappling with this new reality we’re faced with,” Erizku says, “rather than merely being an anti-Trump show. As a contemporary artist living in America, watching what’s happening, it’s hard not



to use the mediums I know to speak out and comment on things. But it was also a celebration of the values I do think make the nation great.”



Awol Erizku, Girl with a Bamboo Earring (2009) (Photo: Courtesy of Ben Brown Fine Arts)



Awol Erizku, Leango (2016) (Photo: Courtesy of Ben Brown Fine Arts)



That Beyoncé pregnancy photo

Given the weight of Erizku’s practice—whether it’s reframing canonical art or examining modern America—it’s odd to think the hype around the artist took off, mostly, because of an **Instagram photo**. In February last year, he was revealed to be the photographer behind Beyoncé’s visual announcement of her pregnancy with twins.

It features Queen Bey, kneeling in front of a giant wreath of **flowers** and covered in a light green veil, cupping her swelling abdomen. This broke all Instagram records; to date, the original post has been liked over 11 million times.

The media frenzy that followed—profiles in *Vanity Fair*, *Rolling Stone* and *The New York Times*—pointed at a pre-Bey and post-Bey Erizku in a way the artist has called reductive. “I understand the draw a title like ‘Beyoncé’s photographer says’ has, but I’d rather the conversation be a little deeper than that,” he says. Because of a non-disclosure agreement, Erizku can’t discuss the shoot with the singer.



Photo: Awol Erizku



“One thing I’m interested in, though, is to see what will match and surpass that [image] and how it will shape social media culture. What will be next, you know? Instagram might not even be around in five years. So I’m curious in that respect. But I don’t want a post to overshadow anything else I’ve done so far.”

Has the experience changed his approach to social media at all? “I’m sort of taking a sabbatical from it,” he jokes. “We are this ADHD generation that’s constantly hungry for content. We post, scroll, like, and I have definitely become wary about that. I prefer to focus on the work in front of me instead of being preoccupied with what people expect to see online.”

Using music as his muse

The work in front of him—and the music that goes with it, I point out.

“Music plays a huge role in the way I think of my work,” he agrees. “My vernacular is borrowed from it. The installations or paintings or sculptures are visual representations for it. I approach my exhibitions in the same way musicians approach albums. There are always a few pieces in there that I know are for sure going to be the big hit, and then there are other works—what I call the deep cuts—that aren’t the friendliest and will have you scratching your head but might ultimately leave a real mark on you. Much like a record.”

The week before our interview, Kendrick Lamar was awarded the Pulitzer music prize for his album, *Damn*. I ask Erizku if the songs he mentioned earlier are from the album, and whether he thinks he’ll include them in the mixtape for 慢慢燃燒 *Slow Burn*.

“Still playing around, but I think so,” he replies. “Not because of the award, even though it’s obviously major. I always look for music that I feel reflects the times the show is taking place in. Sort of like a time capsule. Some of Lamar’s songs just work really well in that sense.”



Awol Erizku, Nefertiti—Miles Davis (2017) (Photo: Courtesy of Ben Brown Fine Arts)

Does he feel working across disciplines widens the reach of his work? “I suppose, although it’s not something I do with a calculated plan in mind. I want my work to deepen the conversation on art and race and representation. People are embracing blackness in a whole new way and within a new universal context. Lamar’s win is a case in point. So is doing a neon show in Hong Kong that’s about identity and urban culture and being African–American. I want to move the needle.”

Slow Burn runs until July 7 at Ben Brown Fine Arts, 301 Pedder Building, 12 Pedder Street, Central, Hong Kong, +852 2522 9600, benbrownfinearts.com



Awol Erizku, How That Make You Feel? (2017) (Photo:Courtesy of Ben Brown Fine Arts)