

LISTEN TO AWOL ERIZKU AND SOSUPERSAM'S MIXTAPE FEATURING WORKS BY THE WEEKND, RAE SREMMURD, DRAKE AND MORE

by Gary Pini | September 17, 2015



If you're looking for a nice mixtape to go along with an art opening (or vice versa), head over to The FLAG Art Foundation (545 West 25th Street) tonight, September 17th, 6 to 8 p.m., for an exhibition of new photographs by Awol Erizku called *New Flower | Images of the Reclining Venus*. They were shot in African brothels in 2013 and you'll recognize the familiar imagery of Venus and the odalisque, but incorporated here in unfamiliar settings. The conceptual mixtape expands on the ideas from the images and was produced as a collab with LA-based DJ SOSUPERSAM and can be heard at the show and also above. It includes tracks by The Weeknd, Travi\$ Scott, Rae Sremmurd and also Drake's "Hotline Bling mixed with soundbites from artist Kerry James Marshall. There's also an interesting group show opening tonight on the foundation's 9th floor called "Surface Tension" that features works by 12 artists including El Anatsui, Mark Bradford, Ryan Sullivan and Rebecca Ward. Give the mixtape a listen, above, and take a look at a few (NSFW) preview images from *New Flower*, along with the full track listing, below.

REIMAGINING THE RECLINING VENUS

By Antwaun Sargent | Friday, September 18, 2015



Awol Erizku, *Elsa*, 2013. Digital C-print. 40 x 50 in.

In the summer of 2013, Los Angeles-based interdisciplinary artist Awol Erizku flew to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, with not much more than his camera and photographs of Edouard Manet's *Olympia* and Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque*. Through the trip, he aimed to challenge the mythologized art historical roles of Venus and the odalisque in Western painting, resulting in a new body of work currently on view at The Flag Art Foundation in New York. "Awol Erizku: New Flower | Images of the Reclining Venus" is a compelling series of portraiture, depicting sex workers reclining nude on beds in colorful hotel rooms throughout Addis Ababa. They mimic the poses of Olympias and Odalisques, but infuse the figures' histories with new meaning.

"I was thinking about Manet's *Olympia*, and it's one of those things I have always had an issue with because of the hierarchy," Erizku says. In *Olympia*, a white woman lies nude on a bed, with a flower tucked into her hair, black necklace tied tightly around her neck, and wears pearl earrings, while an African woman stands bedside presenting a bouquet of flowers. Manet's painting has played a large role in defining ideals of beauty and aesthetics in western culture, so for Erizku, his own images present "updates" that he considers missing from the trajectory of contemporary art.

Unlike works by artists Mickalene Thomas and Rénee Cox, Erizku considers his work having less to do with creating liberating feminist images and more to do with elevating the universality of blackness. In this way, Erizku's guiding impulses for the polychromatic show expand upon themes explored in past solo shows, including "Black and Gold" and "The Only Way Is Up," as well as a recent screening of his video work *Serendipity* at the Museum of Modern Art. The video references Duchamp's readymades, the Bust of David, and Vermeer's *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, which he also reimagined as a brown girl in a 2009 portrait entitled *Girl With a Bamboo Earring*. He continuously explores questions surrounding the representation of beauty in contemporary art.

When looking at "New Flower | Images of the Reclining Venus," it is undeniable that the images also lend themselves to a conversation about commercial sex work, prostitution, and women's rights. In Ethiopia, both sex work and prostitution is legal, and Erizku, who paid the women to take their photographs says, "They could take off as much or little clothing as they wanted." Additionally, the women could choose between recreating Manet's or Ingres's Venus, because for him, "it was a collaboration."

Hours after the artist landed in New York to install the portraits, we spoke with him about the show and his practice.

ANTWAUN SARGENT: Did you know what you wanted to do when you landed in Addis Ababa?

AWOL ERIZKU: I knew exactly what I was there to do. It was like a mission to be accomplished. I had a friend who was doing a Peace Corp mission in Ethiopia, who came back and ask me if I had thought about looking into the sex work industry in Ethiopia, because she spoke to a lot of women who were in that position. Around that time I was thinking about Manet's *Olympia*, and you have a prostitute in the foreground—not a sex worker, but a prostitute, this is a well-known fact—and the bed becomes a platform. Then you have this black figure offering a flower to her, and I think it's a fact that Manet put her there as a compositional device, as an after thought, so there wasn't a negative area. That interested me a great deal.

SARGENT: Why?

ERIZKU: Looking throughout history, the reclining Venus is a recurring theme in art history, and now you have the Mickalene Thomases and the Renée Coxes, but no one has really done it from a male perspective.

SARGENT: I feel with Mickalene Thomas's work, you get a feminist reading of the black female body, but we also know the history of women sitting as muses for men. So why is it important for you to use the black female body to create this body of work?

ERIZKU: The reason why all of these women are in similar poses is because it's not just Manet's *Olympia*, but also the Odalisque, which is a reclining Venus. It's about not seeing enough of those bodies, and it goes back to that conversation of people not being ready to see the presence of a nude black woman. If we are not comfortable with the black female body by now, when will we be ready for it? As an artist, I wanted to solidify that and create a series of reclining Venuses.

SARGENT: In the image that leads the show, *Brukawit*, the figure isn't even looking at the camera. Her back is turned. Are you exploring the politics of the gaze with that portrait?

ERIZKU: There's another one where she looks at the camera and it's the only time she looked at the camera during the whole sitting. It's about the power that these women have. Granted, they are sitting

for me, and their occupation is sex work, but I didn't want to take their power away from them. So if she didn't want to show me her face, it was up to her. It was collaboration; it wasn't me saying, "Take your clothes off and do this."

SARGENT: But given the circumstances, power was at play.

ERIZKU: The power play between myself and these women, was that they are getting paid to sit for me, but within that sitting, the only requirement I had was that they choose one of the two reference images and that they take off as much clothes as they would like in order to look like the images.

SARGENT: And given the choice, they all took off their clothes?

ERIZKU: Most of them, some of them have underwear on. There are a lot of cultural taboos in Ethiopia that doesn't make it acceptable to take your clothes off and to be photographed in the nude.

SARGENT: You were born there, right? And then moved to New York?

ERIZKU: My family moved here when I was a baby, but it's a culture that I know from my parents but had never really seen it as an adult. Going back into the work, the women are posing for money, but there's this pride that comes with being Ethiopian—a lot of that is saying, "You know, maybe I'll take my top off, but I don't think I'll take my underwear off," and I was okay with that. The girls without their underwear, they are comfortable doing that.

These women that I photographed moved from a smaller city to the capital and realized they needed to do something to make a living. They found the best way to keep money in their pockets, and for them, it's sex work. One of the sex workers became my assistant.

SARGENT: How did that happen?

ERIZKU: I had a male assistant and he was taking some of the money from the girls that I was giving them. He was my translator and it was hard to negotiate with the girls because I couldn't talk to them directly. So when I came across this other woman, I knew I could trust her to make sure the girls were getting everything that they wanted.

SARGENT: Did you have any other issues while shooting these portraits?

ERIZKU: While I was shooting the portrait that became *Meskerem*, in the green room, I had moved the bed around and had my strobe lights on. The manger came up and thought we were shooting a porno, which considering the culture...

SARGENT: ...And that you are making something called "contemporary art" far away from New York...
[laughs]

ERIZKU: Right! It didn't come off as, "Here's Awol Erizku doing his next art project talking about Manet's *Olympia*." So the manger locked the door and called the cops and my assistant and I paid the girls and ran. For the rest of that project I couldn't work in that area.

SARGENT: Did the women like posing for the photographs?

ERIZKU: I took test shots and had Polaroids. A lot of the women did keep a copy for themselves, and some

of them didn't care. I showed them some of my other work; some were at ease and some simply wanted the money.

SARGENT: Did you choose these women off the street?

ERIZKU: I didn't choose the women; I picked the room, and my assistant brought the women, and I worked with who came and sat for the session. For *Feker*, the girl in the red room, I thought I wanted to see someone taller when I was making the images. It became one of my favorite portraits from the series, but I did not know that when I was making it. In the moment, my mindset was, "I have someone to shoot today, let me make the best image I can."

SARGENT: Conceptually, what are you trying to achieve?

ERIZKU: What I have always been doing: When I made *Girl With the Bamboo Earring*, I didn't have to announce that it was about having the black presence in this form. Every time I do a show, people are like, "Is this about blackness?" So conceptually, I try to move around it because that context is a way for people to put [my work] in a box. No. This is what it is; this is a reclining Venus as much as Manet's reclining Venus.

Shaken & Stirred by Beauty: Review of Awol Erizku's New Flower (Addis Ababa) Exhibit

September 21, 2015



New York (TADIAS) – Conceptual artist Awol Erizku's *New Flower | Images of the Reclining Venus* exhibition, currently on display at The FLAG Art Foundation in New York City's Chelsea Gallery District, is his latest body of work challenging mainstream narratives and representations of beauty.

A few weeks prior to the opening of *New Flower* Erizku had posted Manet's Olympia portrait on his Instagram account and shared "I've always had an issue with this painting." Olympia had created controversy in its time primarily because the reclining nude in the portrait was a prostitute. The problem Erizku points to, however, is what Manet's audience ignores – the side presence of the black servant bringing flowers for the model. Where is the black beauty that is front and center in a work of art? That's the central question that Erizku focuses on as he pays commercial sex workers in Addis Ababa to strike the same pose. Climbing up the stairs to the 10th floor exhibition space one is greeted at the entrance with large-frame portraits of Ethiopian women, unconventionally nude, lying on beds that seem to take up the entire space of claustrophobia-inducing, minimally furnished hotel rooms.

Turning the corner and heading into the gallery's main space white neon lights burn on a wall emblazoning the words Addis Ababa in Amharic font – it's the literal translation of the exhibit title, *New Flower*, which is also the name of Ethiopia's capital city where Erizku traveled to and made these portraits in 2013. A mixtape co-produced with DJ SOSUPERSAM played during the reception highlights Ethiopian Canadian music sensation The Weeknd (Abel Tesfaye) as well as songstress Aster Aweke. Across from the neon sign a table

features copies of the exhibit press release and an elaborate flower arrangement – fresh flowers among the flowering beauty of Ethiopian reclining nudes.

Born in Ethiopia and raised in the Bronx Erizku seeks an alternative interpretation of the spaces that black bodies are allowed to inhabit in portraits. While his 2012 show at Hasted Kraeutler Gallery challenged Vermeer's portrait, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, with a photographic reinterpretation of an Ethiopian woman entitled *Girl with a Bamboo Earring*, his current exhibit focuses on introducing a more universal image of the reclining Venus.

Erizku's reclining Venus is a black beauty. In one portrait entitled *Elsa* an empty chair replaces the space where Manet's black servant once stood bearing flowers; it's an invitation for a visitor to enter the space, or perhaps join and jumpstart a conversation on what is considered beautiful. The environment for this conversation is narrow, just like the windowless rooms that the nudes inhabit, but Erizku is pushing for this space to grow. Out of the thirteen images in the exhibit there is only one photograph of a room with its windows flung open, finally revealing a glimpse of the city's scenery; the model in this portrait also appears more relaxed. It feels like a flicker of the artist's hope for the acceptance and wider inclusion of universal blackness in modern art.

No matter how elegant a reclining pose the young Ethiopian models may hold, however, none of them are smiling. Their eyes are hauntingly sad; the girl in the portrait entitled *Aziza* looks downright bewildered. This is not an effort to make commercial sex work appear glamorous or a campaign for women's sexual liberation; it's impossible to brush away the harsh realities of their lives. According to the U.S. Stated Department's Trafficking in Persons report from last year cited in the exhibit's press release "the central market in Addis Ababa is home to the largest collection of brothels in Africa, with girls as young as 8-years-old in prostitution in these establishments." This is an untalked-of cost of rapid progress and globalization in Ethiopia's capital city. And yet, to an Ethiopian audience, it is striking that the names of Erizku's models (pseudonym or otherwise) are anything but gloomy; Desta (happiness), Tigist (patience), Zewditu (the clown), Worknesh (you are golden), Bruktawit (blessed), Aziza (cherished), Feker (love), and Meskerem (the month of September when Ethiopians celebrate the new year). Here again is beauty hidden in plain sight, the inherent royalty and humanity of the black model. The black servant does not exist in Erizku's reconceptualization of the reclining Venus and the girls' names further nudge the windows open.

Erizku is not the first Ethiopian-born artist to photograph commercial sex workers in Ethiopia. In a 2011 interview with *Tadias Magazine*, award-winning photographer and artist Michael Tsegaye described how he spent close to two weeks "talking, eating meals together, drinking tee and coffee" with commercial sex workers in the *Sebategna* area of Merkato (known unofficially as the red light district) and spending time in the rooms where they live before photographing them. He noted that most of the commercial sex workers came to Addis Ababa from different towns across the country, lured as much by financial prospects as the desire to remain anonymous in their line of work.

While Tsegaye spoke directly to commercial sex workers and took monochrome photographs of them in their natural setting, Erizku hired a translator to help him communicate with the girls – who themselves were selected by his assisting – as they agreed to recline in the nude in hotel rooms chosen by the artist. The walls of the rooms are painted in solid bright red, sunshine yellow, lime green or baby blue colors and otherwise unadorned except for the jarring presence, in four of the portraits, of either a poster of a white Jesus or a westernized image of the Virgin Mary. Christianity was introduced in Ethiopia long before its advent in Europe and the walls and ceiling of ancient Ethiopian churches traditionally depict the Virgin Mary and her Son as well as angels more commonly with brown faces. In Erizku's portraits one of the white Jesus posters contains a verse in Amharic stating: "For him who believes in me there is eternal life." The masculine

tone and non-black representation is out of place and in stark contrast to the models' personal belongings including handmade wooden crosses in traditional Ethiopian design worn around their necks on black string. As much as this exhibit is about the status of blackness and interpretations of beauty in the art world, it is also about breaking cultural taboos and shattering globalized western narratives.

The day after the opening reception Erizku Instagrammed "I like making art that evokes an emotional response from people, I hope I was able to show you all something new & different." Not only does Erizku share new images of the reclining Venus but he is taking both the art and media establishments to task, shaking and stirring up a much-needed conversation about moving black bodies from the sides and bringing them to the foreground in modern art portraiture. Can we do without slipping into simplified narratives that label the artist primarily as a "black artist" when he/she attempts such interpretations? That is the second challenge.

Erizku stirs in us the possibility to reconceptualize the space for black beauty in the new global art history being made. His work is soaringly hopeful and gut-wrenching in its honesty at one and the same time.

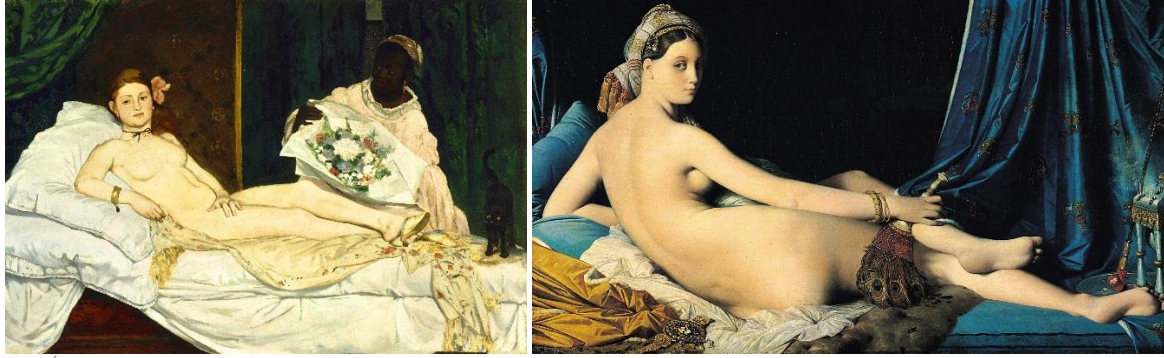
Up and Coming: In Ethiopian Hotel Rooms, Erizku Puts the Black Figure on a Pedestal

By Janelle Zara | September 22,, 2015



Photo by Megan McIsaac for Artsy.

In 2013, artist [Awol Erizku](#) traveled to the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa to explore the nation of his parents' birth. There, with the help of new acquaintances—namely, translators and pimps—he embarked on a photographic series of nude sex workers posing on the loudly printed bedsheets of hotels throughout the city. The female subjects assume familiar poses, reminiscent of Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque* (1814) and [Manet's Olympia](#) (1863), but where these late French painters once placed white reclining nudes, Erizku places black bodies spanning all body types and hairstyles. In contrast to pale Olympia, the warmth of their skin tones electrifies the saturated colors of these monochrome hotel rooms, and their expressions of vulnerability bring new life to their 19th-century counterparts.

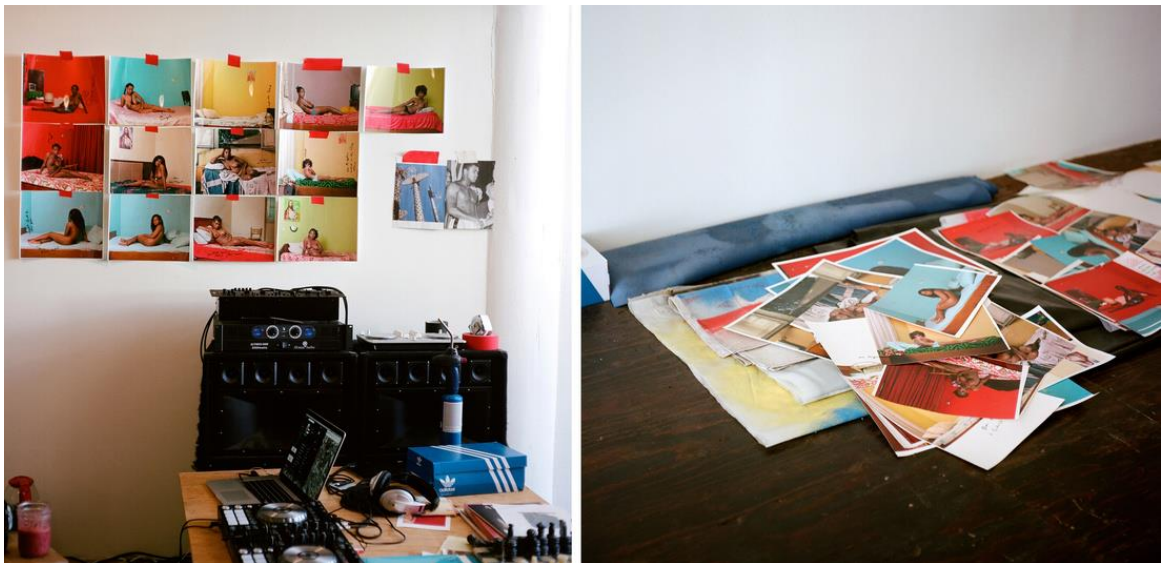


Left: Édouard Manet. *Olympia*, 1863. Musée d'Orsay, Paris; Right: Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814. Musée du Louvre, Paris

“Some of them are wearing their underwear, and it was that part, that last bit of dignity that I couldn’t ask for them to give up,” the 27-year-old artist explains in the loft that doubles as his studio, tucked into an industrial corner of downtown L.A.’s fashion district. “I think for them, as much as they want to make money, there’s also this pride that comes with being African, or Ethiopian, or whatever it is, that these women aren’t willing to let go. There was no price on that.”

Two years later, these images are on view in “New Flower | Images of the Reclining Venus,” Erizku’s new solo exhibition at New York’s The FLAG Art Foundation that challenges art history’s overwhelming whiteness and eurocentricity. The insertion of black figures into canonical works by the likes of Ingres, Manet, Duchamp, and other white men has become a central theme of the young artist’s work since the 2010 debut of his *Girl With a Bamboo Earring*—a photograph that replaced the white subject of Vermeer’s *Girl With a Pearl Earring* (c. 1665) with a black one, and the pearl for a heart-shaped hoop, while striving to retain the cinematic effects of Vermeer’s sublime use of light.

“A woman of color as a reclining Venus is something that I haven’t seen much,” Erizku says. Historically, he says, with rare exceptions like the work of fellow artists Renee Cox and Mickalene Thomas, the status quo has relegated black women to the background, if not ignored them entirely. “This is about that maid that was offering the flower to the prostitute in the Manet painting. It’s taking that black figure and putting her on a pedestal.”



Photos by Megan McIsaac for Artsy.

Across photography, sculpture, painting, and film, Erizku's transgressions of the traditional boundaries of media and culture reflect the many facets of his own artistic formation. Although he has been based in L.A. for a little under a year, his roots are firmly planted in New York; he was born in the South Bronx and attended Cooper Union for his undergraduate studies. In those early days, he was interning for David LaChapelle and often spotted around town hanging out with his camera and the hip hop group A\$AP Mob.

Two years after graduating, Erizku went on to Yale's MFA program, seeking new directions for his work. It was there, at his final crit, in front of a panel that included Richard Prince, Laurie Simmons, Gregory Crewdson, and other "white, over-40-years-of-age artists that basically represent Yale School of Art," that he first showed the contents of "New Flower." As they discussed the pieces, he played an excerpt of a Kerry James Marshall lecture from the National Gallery of Art over a Rick Ross instrumental: "If I'm walking through a gallery and I see images of white figures, European paintings from the 14th century all the way to the present, and I don't see any images of black people, I don't veer out of my pathway to go and take a look at anything unless some other aspect of it, like a color or something like that, appeals to me."

"The message is so clear," says Erizku. "It's what I'm going through as a young artist."

In re-contextualizing the iconography of so-called high culture with pop culture, art history with hip hop, he creates work so layered with disparate references that they take on different meanings with each audience. His application of Jay-Z lyrics to an artwork in dialogue with Donald Judd, for example, was likely lost on many art critics. In a series of sculptural forms taking cues from Duchamp readymades for "The Only Way Is Up" at Hasted Kraeutler in 2014, Erizku debuted *Oh, what a feeling. Aw, fuck it, I want a trillion*, a column of seven basketball hoops with gold-plated chain nets that takes its title from a line out of Jay-Z's "Picasso Baby." "When I made this piece, I was thinking about Donald Judd with the "Stack" series and also David Hammons, obviously," Erizku explains, thumbing through the slideshow on his computer. "For me, this became this metaphor. Why seven hoops and not 10? Well, seven is a lucky number, and I always look at the game of art much like the game of basketball, where it's half luck, half talent." The resulting piece is one loaded with overtly academic references and material metaphors for black culture, and finished with a sheen of the self-reflection of a young man fresh out of art school.

In L.A., Erizku continues to seek new collaborators and sources of inspiration, and to broaden his artistic lexicon in the face of critics too eager to classify his practice. "I love Kehinde and I love his work," he says, referring to early comparisons with his fellow Yale MFA graduate Kehinde Wiley, "but people just like to jump on things so early." In short, he has so much left to show. Following a recent film premiere at MoMA in May, his next project is the Duchamp Detox Clinic, a "roaming artists' space" for which he's creating new assemblages and two-sided, large-scale paintings. (Its opening date is yet to be determined.) Furthering the multimedia aspect of his practice, for "New Flower," he and local DJ SOSUPERSAM have created a soundtrack that includes further Marshall remixes, with Drake, the Weeknd, and Young Thug. The Marshall lecture continues, "When you're not represented there, that is a problem"—one Erizku hopes to rectify. Photo by Megan McIsaac for Artsy.

10 Things To Do in New York's Art World Before November 15

By Ryan Steadman | November 12, 2015



Awol Erizku. *Aziza*, 2013. Digital Chromatic print. 40 x 50 inches. Edition of 3.
Image courtesy the artist and The FLAG Art Foundation.

Talk: Awol Erizku at The FLAG Art Foundation

Lucky us! The Ethiopian Bronx-raised artist Awol Erizku will discuss his fantastic 2013 series of photographs titled *New Flower: Images of the Reclining Venus* with journalist Alicia Quarles and collector Glenn Fuhrman at The FLAG Art Foundation. The series, made possible by the Alice Kimball Fellowship Award from Yale University, sought to create “a new reclining Venus, one with darker skin” that dismisses the mythologizing and romanticizing of Odalisques (also known as hookers). Erizku’s inspiration is no less than the top shelf of the pantheon of sex worker art: Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’s *La Grande Odalisque* (1814) and Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863).

10 Striking Photos That Challenge The Perception Of Sex Workers In Art (NSFW)

By Sara Coughlin | November 13, 2015



Awol Erizku. *Tigist*, 2013. Digital Chromatic print. 40 x 50 inches. Edition of 3.
Image courtesy the artist and The FLAG Art Foundation.

Interdisciplinary artist Awol Erizku is making a name for himself in art history by looking back at what's come before him. Since his very first art show, in which he reimagined Johannes Vermeer's renowned painting *Girl with the Pearl Earring* as *Girl with the Bamboo Earring*, Erizku has fought for the visibility of people of color in fine art. His latest project takes on the romantic portrayal of prostitutes in works like Édouard Manet's *Olympia* and Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque*. Erizku's exhibit, *New Flower | Images of the Reclining Venus* is on display now at The FLAG Art Foundation in New York City.

Both Manet's and Ingres's paintings depict sex workers as beautiful white women, luxuriating in their dimly lit, silk-laden bedrooms. *Olympia* even features a Black servant beside the prostitute, seemingly at her beck and call. These images depict a narrative that no longer exists, if it ever did. With that in mind, Erizku pursued a more realistic image of sex work in his home country of Ethiopia.

Addis Ababa, the country's capital city, is known for its booming sex industry: It contains the largest number of brothels anywhere in Africa, with 150,000 women (and some girls as young as 8 years old) working as prostitutes every night. They charge as little as \$1 for their services — for many, it's the easiest way to make any money at all in a country with an unemployment rate over 50%.

Once Erizku's subjects agreed to be photographed, he made it clear that the women were in control. "I left it to them to create the poses based on the art historical images I showed them," he explains. "Some

chose a direct gaze, like Manet's *Olympia*," he adds, while "some chose to look away." Ultimately, he says, "I respected their choices."

Each image is arresting in its own right. Shot in hotel rooms around the city, the photos present prostitution in a very different light than the original paintings do. No one waits on these women. Posters of Jesus and the Virgin Mary hang over their heads, and it's difficult to say if they are posted for protection or judgment. Erizku successfully strikes an incomparable balance, making his viewers both customers and voyeurs. Some of the women confront the camera with their gaze so directly that they seem to ask what you're doing there.

Gone are the luxury and glamour of Manet and Ingres' paintings, and what is left is reality. "Awol represents the Black figure, specifically the female, in the context of art history as a focal point and an icon of beauty," states FLAG director Stephanie Roach.

Erizku will appear at The FLAG Art Foundation in NYC this evening for a conversation with journalist Alicia Quarles and FLAG founder Glenn Fuhrman. West Coasters can check out an exhibit of his work in painting and sculpture at an art space in downtown Los Angeles that he has temporarily named Duchamp Detox Clinic also about breaking cultural taboos and shattering globalized western narratives.

The day after the opening reception Erizku Instagrammed "I like making art that evokes an emotional response from people, I hope I was able to show you all something new & different." Not only does Erizku share new images of the reclining Venus but he is taking both the art and media establishments to task, shaking and stirring up a much-needed conversation about moving black bodies from the sides and bringing them to the foreground in modern art portraiture. Can we do without slipping into simplified narratives that label the artist primarily as a "black artist" when he/she attempts such interpretations? That is the second challenge.

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Awol Erizku Talks Creative Voice and *Duchamp Detox Clinic*

By Kilo Kish | November 25, 2015

awol
erizku

I met Awol a few years ago when we were both living in NYC. Since then he's gone to grad school at Yale, had screenings at the MoMA, and moved his studio to LA. I figured it was time to catch up and see what he's up to next.

As a painter and sculptor, Awol Erizku is best known for his art debut exhibit titled *Black and Gold* at Hasted-Kraeutler gallery in 2012, featuring black figures in classic art-historical portraits. His *Girl with a Bamboo Earring* became an art world sensation for spinning Johannes Vermeer's famous *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. His strong arts education—a BA from Cooper Union School of Art and an MFA from Yale's Visual Arts program—makes him a force to be reckoned with, while his Bronx-raising and high schooling with rapper A\$AP Ferg granted him street cred. He can talk about being an insider to the art world while simultaneously being an outsider and vice versa. His works don't suffer from it though, they are in fact powered by it. His portraits are powered by colorful characters and backdrops while his sculptures are a nod to conceptual masters.

After graduate school, Erizku went on to assist the likes of David LaChapelle and Lorna Simpson. His aesthetics reference cultural trends like hip-hop and basketball, while his works maintain an intersection between Pop art and minimalism. Earlier this year, he showed films and photos at MoMa's *PopRally*. NBD. His work continues to evolve and disrupt. Here is an interview of the two of us talking about art controversies, art school hang-ups, and working with mixed mediums.

Kilo Kish: How old are you?

Awol Erizku: 27

And, you're from where?

That's a weird question now, because I still think I'm a New Yorker, but when people write about me, they say "LA-based artist." So I guess technically I'm from New York but I was born in Ethiopia and came here as an infant.

You recently received backlash for your *New Flower: Images of the Reclining Venus* exhibit at The Flag Foundation for Art in New York, where you photographed commercial sex workers in Addis Ababa and posed them in traditional art compositions.

Oh, hell yeah. As if I was going to go photograph prostitutes and that was cool. They [Ethiopia] don't really want anything negative leaving the country. The sex workers issue is something that needed attention. I did the research and I went there to photograph it. When the show was up, I got a threatening email from an attorney saying, "This is the damage of this work... I'm going to speak to the ambassador" and all this shit. I knew it was going to happen. I made the work in 2013, I just held onto it. These girls are real. They're living a real life and I didn't want anyone threatening them because if they can get ahold of me, they might be able to get ahold of the girls.

I know you do stuff that relates to race a lot. And I know it gets annoying to constantly have the conversation about it, and people always saying, "So you're a black artist that makes art about blacks."

Exactly, exactly, that's the worst thing.

Yeah, just because you choose to put black subjects in your art. The purpose of that is that it should be normal.

Exactly, it shouldn't have to be pointed out.

The purpose of the art is that it's not pointed out. So do you ever feel pigeonholed by the subjects you choose?

I don't mind talking about it or making work about it, because it's something that needs to be there. Like the *Reclining Venuses* need to be out in the world. *Girl with the Bamboo Earring* needed to be out in the world. I make things that I want to see in the world. And people just choose to call it and say it's about race or it's about this or about that. Honestly, I'm deeply interested in color and composition and how things come together. If you look at my studio, I just take found objects and then I repurpose them so they can have a meaning, and they look like hopefully interesting objects to look at, but deep down inside, it's all from the way I look at the world and how colors speak to me. But people want it to be about race even if it's not. For me, anything I'm working on right now, once it gets outside of the studio, will somehow make its way back to being about race.

So how do you stay inspired and motivated within that, to keep pushing forward into your creative ideas? Because sometimes the shit that people say about your work can weirdly get in your brain and start focusing you work a certain way and you think: I don't even care about this, why am I even thinking about this?

It's funny you say that. After my MoMA show, people said, "How can you make this work if your girlfriend is white?" And it's like, wow, really? I thought this was 2015! Someone can change their sex and that's cool, but we can't have interracial dating? It's because people don't know who you are, or who any of us are, and they have this projection of us. They don't know where my girlfriend came from! We've been together for a while and it's more of a serious relationship. But do I need to explain that to people? No. Does it seep into your mind because it's out there, because someone fucking said that? Yeah, you think about it. But it's not going to change my work, it's never going to change my work. Because at the end of the day, I have a black mother, and I have the rest of the world to remind how black I am every fucking day you know what I mean.

I'm not a part of the art world, but I know it can be a little...

Elitist?

Yeah. So I wonder, do you ever feel uncomfortable? Or do you always go into it thinking, 'I feel confident in myself'?

For sure. It's the one world that I am 100% myself. I walk into a gallery like I fucking own it. Funny story, though: two weeks ago I was at Grand Central Market and I was with a couple friends. We were actually going to the Broad Museum, and there was this old lady and this young guy with a hat on, but I had no idea who these people were.

I happened to be behind them to get a falafel at one of the stands, and I'm like looking over at it, just chilling, and this lady turns around and clutches her purse. And I just thought, "What a bitch," but you know, she's an old lady and whatever, fucking old people. And then when she did that, this guy turned around and was like "Oh, shit, hey!" It was like this guy who owned this restaurant and he knows me because a gallery in New York that was interested in my work introduced us. So he knows me, he thinks, *this kid is cool, this kid is popping*, and then there's

this old lady who doesn't know who I am thinking I'm some fucking thief. And that's just my reality, but in the art world I don't give a fuck.

What makes you the proudest about your work?

Damn, I don't know if I'm there yet. This goes back to your original question about not being satisfied. I was at MoMA at 26 and I think I need to do more.

You make such beautiful things as an artist and you never allow yourself the grace of enjoying it.

I don't even know how to enjoy something like that, because that's when you fall back on the shit you've done. What are you going to do, keep talking about it forever? There's more to do. I remember the Dean of the School of Art at Yale, Rob Storr always said that you're not guaranteed tomorrow so make the best work you can today. I always live by that rule. Most days I just wake up and go straight to painting or making sculptures. I'm always pushing to get to that next thing. Those backboards that you're looking at, those came this week, but that whole shit downstairs, I've been working on that since I got to LA. I've pushed myself further to get to this point, and I don't know where it's going to go from here, but I was so happy to start painting on backboards.

Do you feel that you need to work every day?

My day job is to make art. I wake up, and I have to make art. I'm able to do it full time, so it's awesome. Until I can't do that, I'm going to keep making work as much as I can.

Have you worked a regular job?

I managed a photography studio four or five years ago. I almost worked at Apple, like on the floor. I've never told anyone that. I had just graduated from Cooper and I got the studio, but I had to find a way to pay for it. My friend worked at Apple and said he'd hook me up. I don't know if you know anyone who works there, but the process of getting that job is worse than trying to get into an Ivy League school. Seriously. I went through the whole process and the day before I was about to start, there was a shadow day, where you follow around someone that works there. So on this day, at lunchtime I sat down to talk about some people that worked there and this kid said "Yeah, I'm an artist, too! I'm a photographer, too!" I suddenly saw myself in like a year telling that to someone who just got hired. I didn't want to be that guy. I dipped on it and thought that I had to give myself a real chance to actually do something that I actually want to do before I have to work for someone else.

How did you know you wanted to be an artist?

I've had an interest in art since I was a kid. I used to watch a lot of films and I think that had something to do with the way that I saw the world. But it wasn't until I got in trouble in junior high school that I ended up in this art class. Me and my friends were setting toilet paper on fire. I was sitting at the principal's office, and then someone pulled the fire alarm, and she had to go deal with that. She told us to stay in that classroom and it turned out to be a high school portfolio preparation class, and they were preparing for LaGuardia and Art and Design. So we walked in there, and I was like, these kids are artists? And they go to school with us? I went back week after week after and I started preparing what I considered to be a portfolio, which was drawings and a little bit of paintings, and then I applied to Art and Design, and got in.

I applied to LaGuardia and did not get in, and you know, looking back I can see why. My portfolio wasn't a portfolio. It was like two construction papers stapled together. I'm just a kid from the Bronx, I wanted to be an artist, but I didn't know what the right way was.

How did you get into Cooper Union? How the fuck did you complete the Cooper home test?

I don't even know how I got into Cooper. I didn't even complete it, that's the amazing thing. I missed two questions out of six. I remember I was like, I don't want to draw. I don't want them to think I'm whack because I didn't draw well. At the time it was a lot of film and graphic design. I did a bunch of shit, I still do it to this day. Whenever I do a show, I do the graphics for it, I do everything, because I was just brought up that way. I never limit myself to doing just one thing. I could do graphic design if I want to. I have the eye for it. I won't sit there and go head-to-

head with the best graphic designer, but if I see the kernings on a typeface looking all weird, I can go in and fix that.

Do you feel that's helped you or hindered you? Some people would say that to become a master at something, it's good to hone in your skills.

I don't know if I believe that. I get where that comes from, but I don't think knowing more about any field hurts you. It all starts with composition and color for me. So if I'm making those paintings, I'm looking at where I'm placing the colors, this block of color, where the letters go. And that could be something you could apply to graphic design or to photography. So how can you say that you should only focus on one thing? If I just focused on photography, then I wouldn't be making the work that I'm making now.

You're becoming a more well-rounded creative. But will you be a genius at one thing?

I'll risk it. When I was 23, I had my studio in New York. I was getting a lot of attention for my photographs and I only started photographs when I was already in college (late in the game for a lot of people). I wasn't the kid photographing my mom at age six or whatever. So I figured out my voice with this medium. I know how to use this medium to say what I want. But, can I do gang paintings with photography? Probably not. I find the medium that suits the work, not the other way around.

Any new art projects you are excited about?

Duchamp Detox Clinic. It's a roaming art space. I'm not in a position where I can open a gallery so conceptually, if the concept ties in together, I could do a show in the bathroom of somewhere. The reason I'm doing my first solo show outside of a gallery is because I want to give it integrity, and I've been working really hard on this show for a while, so I want to open it with that. For me, it's mainly about allowing good friends who are making good art who aren't being shown anywhere to have a platform, to give them a springboard so they can go on to their next thing. I don't want it to be under my name. It's not about me, it's about the art. It's concept-based, mostly sculpture and painting for now, but the work will define what it is.

How to put coloured girls in the MoMA

This artist has an aim to break down and transform an elitist art world still largely marked by its whiteness

By Monique Todd | October 22, 2015



Photography Awol Erizku

Awol Erizku isn't content with the glaring whiteness of art history. In fact, much of his multi-disciplinary repertoire calls for viewers to re-think representation in visual culture, whether that's through his fine art revisions (see his 2009 work "Girl with a Bamboo Earring") or his hip-hop x art theory mashups. Now, the Ethiopian South-Bronx-raised artist is currently showing *New Flower: Images of the Reclining Venus* at The FLAG Art Foundation in NYC, a stunning photo-series capturing sex workers as reclining nudes in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, referencing Manet's *Olympia* and Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque*. Applying a lens void of sexualisation, objectification or patronisation, the images invite viewers to think about the black body as a universal body, whilst also provoking discussion on prostitution and the politics of sex work.

At only 27, Erizku's name is quickly making the rounds on the art circuit – he even showed at the MoMA PopRally earlier this year, to which he says, "I've never seen that many people of colour at the MoMA at the same time. If this happened more often then we could change so much about this elitist art world!" Below, Erizku speaks on this very aim, breaking down some steps that can be taken to transform an art world still largely marked by its whiteness.

"The black figure, mainly the black female figure is the most powerful image in the world"

FEARLESSLY TACKLE REPRESENTATION

"*New Flower: Images of the Reclining Venus* is based off Manet's *Olympia*, and that's a painting where I had a problem with the hierarchy. You have a prostitute in the foreground and then you have a black maid serving her. That, for me, was very problematic and something I wanted to revise. I wanted to say 'what if we turn the tables and put these sex workers on a pedestal?'"

For me, growing up, I never really saw a black *Reclining Venus*, so this is me throwing things into art history and saying we need more of this stuff! It was a proposal, if you will. I think there are more and more

emerging young black artists who are kind of doing it and more power to that, but we need a whole lot more because we have a lot to catch up on.”

UNIVERSALISE BLACK AESTHETICS

“What I try to do with my work is make black aesthetics as universal as European aesthetics or white aesthetics. The black figure, mainly the black female figure is the most powerful image in the world. It’s especially powerful in a gallery or museum setting because we’re still not used to seeing ourselves represented. It’s not yet a natural gaze – there’s still this sort of voyeuristic aspect about looking at the black body on display. I never feel the need to sexualize the woman in my work; I just present them as they are. That’s powerful enough for me. Working with the women from *New Flower* was easy because it was a collaboration in a lot of ways, they told me what they were willing to do and not do and I just worked with how they allowed me to photograph them.”

**“What I try to do with my work is make black aesthetics as universal
as European aesthetics or white aesthetics”**

USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO REMIX ART HISTORY

“When I make my work, I think about how it will be received in a gallery space and then I question, ‘how will this also look on Tumblr? How does it look when someone takes a selfie in front of it or when someone reblogs this?’ That’s something that younger artists have to grapple with now. If you’re ignorant to that then you’re not doing yourself a favor.

The first piece I was recognized for was my version of ‘Girl with a Pearl Earring’, which was called ‘Girl with a Bamboo Earring’. I once had someone come up to me to say ‘Wow, I really like that piece you did and I just noticed that there was another painter from whatever century who did the ‘Girl with a Pearl Earring’... I saw yours first’ When the MoMA shared it, I think it had around 23,000 likes – that’s the most they ever got on their social media at the time. For sure, you can reach more people on the Internet than say on museum shows, and that’s not to say that one is better than the other – it’s just a fact. This is just the time we live in when someone can see the work I made in 2009 and then tell me that they like that better than the original work from centuries before.”

QUESTION THE BOXES PEOPLE PUT YOU IN

“When I first showed art, at around 22 or 23, my strongest body of work was photography. However, people had a tendency to call my work ‘urban portraits’ and I’m like, ‘what about them is urban?’ The images just happened to be of people of colour.

I think it’s the same way when you meet someone for the first time and they ask, “Where are you from?” I always hate that question because you know it’s a power play. There are a lot of things that people do to put you in a corner, and kind of make you feel less than what you are.

I think when you identify with blackness, the majority of the time your work is categorized as black art. A lot of artists and my peers would disagree with me when I say this but the fact of the matter is that it’s just a label, that’s just a box they put you in. There’s this preconceived notion about it that I don’t like. I am proud to be black, I’m born black – its not something I can change and its not something I want to change – it’s who I am. But for me, as an artist making work in 2015, I don’t really need to put a definition on it. You can call it white, you can call it black but if it doesn’t speak to you, if wasn’t meant for you.”

Awol Erizku: *New Flower | Images of the Reclining Venus*

By Loring Knoblauch | December 8, 2015



Installation view of Awol Erizku: *New Flower | Images of the Reclining Venus*, 2015. Photography by Art Echo LLC

JTF (just the facts): A total of 13 large scale color photographs, framed in custom color-matched frames and unmatted, and hung against red and light blue walls in the North and South galleries, the office area, and the elevator lobby on the 10th floor. All of the works are digital chromatic prints, made in 2013. The prints are each sized 40x50, and are available in in editions of 3.

Comments/Context: When we look back across the long sweep of centuries of art history, the reclining nude holds a central position in the depiction of female sensuality. While other positions and poses might better evoke fertility, power, or purity, the lying down nude, often surrounded by symbols of luxury (pillows, silky fabrics, hanging tapestries, lush interiors etc.), seems deliberately composed to evoke desire.

In its early forms, the subject of these artworks (mostly paintings) was usually Venus/Aphrodite, the goddess of love, sex, and beauty; Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and Velázquez' *Rokeby Venus* both use the reclining nude as a compositional form, experimenting with front and back (with mirror) views. In later times, the subject was stripped of some of its mythical air, becoming more overtly human; Goya's *La Maja Desnuda* with her bold stare and exposed public hair was perhaps the most controversial of these interpretations, and both Ingres's *La Grand Odalisque* and Manet's *Olympia* extended that idea further, finding desire in the rich boudoirs of courtesans and prostitutes. But in all these cases, the sitter was uniformly a white-skinned woman – while there are black attendants/slaves here and there in the shadows, there are few if any dark-skinned odalisques lounging languidly in these works.

Awol Erizku's recent series *New Flower* seeks to rectify that imbalanced situation, forcing us to think about how these art historical tropes and references can be reconsidered in a more modern context. Using actual Addis Ababa sex workers as his subjects, Erizku has smartly reinterpreted the reclining female nude, placing his sitters in the bare-bones settings of tired hotel rooms with few furnishings aside from the bed.

While Mickalene Thomas reclaimed the form (in both painting and photography) with a more feminist stance, using couches draped in patterned African prints and black models armed with ample afros and confident poses, Erizku's images have been pared back to a more muted, pedestrian essence, and the beauty to be found in his pictures comes not from traditional evocative opulence, but from its opposite. His sitters shine in nuanced contrast to the meager surroundings and the hard reality of their circumstances, from a sense of unguarded inner strength revealed in some of their facial expressions and in the unadorned elegance of some of their nude bodies.

While Erizku's compositions have very few component parts – a bed, a model, and a painted wall, with a chair, a bedside table, a curtain, or a small picture of Jesus as the main decorative features – he has been consistently able to evoke the genre's central sensuality. Patterned sheets and bright primary colors often act as a stand-in for the luxurious satins that have enriched other boudoirs, and in one case, a bouquet of roses (left to wilt in this case) is a direct homage to Manet. But chipped paint, electrical outlets, worn bedframes, and a few blank, wary, and vacant stares quietly undermine any sense of voluptuous glamour, adding a blast of transactional dissonance to the vibrant formal echo.

And while I wasn't paying attention to it immediately, there is also a subtle audio component to this show. As I circled the galleries, Drake's catchy earworm *Hotline Bling* (part of a larger mixtape of words and music selected by Erizku) was playing over the speakers, his "good girl" lines (a mix of wistfulness, jealousy, and shaming) adding a coincidental layer of darkness to my experience the pictures. It brought home the whole reality of the roles, expectations, and choices these women face with surprising force.

Like Kehinde Wiley and his regal old master-style paintings of contemporary black men and women, Erizku is doing some clever art historical substitution here, re-envisioning an established genre through an alternate cultural lens. In updating an anachronistic form, Erizku has been able to leverage its traditional resonances and then actively reposition them into a different frame of reference. When the pieces all come into alignment, the best of these photographs finds a balance between classical lyricism and modern reality that gives them a fiery hard-hitting vibrancy.

Collector's POV: Since this is a museum-like space, there are of course no posted prices. Erizku was represented by Hasted Kraeutler Gallery, but with the recent demise of that space, his New York representation is less clear. Ben Brown Fine Art (from Hong Kong [here](#)) was recently showing this series at Paris Photo. His work has little secondary market history at this point, so gallery retail remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.

First Look: Awol Erizku

By Jessica Lynne | December 2015, print



Awol Erizku. *Aziza*, 2013. Digital Chromatic print. 40 x 50 inches. Edition of 3. Image courtesy the artist and The FLAG Art Foundation.

FOR HIS LATEST body of portraiture, Awol Erizku hired 33 young Ethiopian sex workers to pose in hotels around Addis Ababa. “New Flower: Images of the Reclining Venus” (2015), the resulting series of large-format C-prints now on view at The FLAG Art Foundation, New York, features 11 of those portraits and engages in a deliberate conversation with art history, as Erizku and his models reimagine works like Manet’s *Olympia* and Ingres’s *La Grand Odalisque*. Erizku confronts the ideals of beauty celebrated in European painting and the museums that feature it by focusing on the black female body.

Challenging the tropes of classical painting is a well-known aspect of Erizku’s multifaceted work. The Ethiopian-born, New York-raised conceptual artist garnered much attention for his photograph *The Girl With a Bamboo Earring* (2009), a playful take on Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Erizku’s revisions of such canonical figures, as exemplified in the “New Flower” series, work against the relative scarcity of black figures in contemporary art and historical museums. Most often, though not always, his models are young black women, which has led to comparisons of his work to that of black feminist artists Mickalene Thomas and Renée Cox. However, the Yale-trained Erizku is less preoccupied with feminist politics than he is with investigating and alleviating the tensions between Western art and blackness.

Like many artists of his generation, Erizku maintains an online presence that has become an extension of his practice. He has curated exhibitions on Instagram, such as “Found Flowers” and “Found Hoops,” compiling feeds by searching for images tagged #flowers and #hoops. For each exhibition, Erizku made his normally private Instagram account public during regular gallery hours, Tuesday through Friday, before locking it again on the weekend.

He has also produced work in the form of music mixes. For the premiere of his film *Serendipity* (2015) – in which he smashes a bust of David and replaces it with one of Nefertiti – at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, last May, he collaborated with MeLo-X on a two-part mix, and he enlisted DJ SOSUPERSAM in the production of *The New Flower Mixtape* for his current show. Like the Instagram series or his posts to Tumblr, the mixes place elements of Erizku’s museum-friendly work in a more populist context while extending his study of race and representation. Clips from lectures by painter Kerry James Marshall on the importance of the black figure in art are sampled on the tracks. As his experimentation with art-historical tropes continues, Erizku creates interventions that not only respond to history but also make space for new possibilities.