

## NEW FLOWERS

By Ashley James

Fresh pink orchid tucked behind her left ear, a languid white woman denies the bouquet of flowers offered by a black female servant who stands behind her. The floral exchange found in Édouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (1863) establishes a hierarchy that is reiterated by an optical contrast: it is because the black maid lies at the edge of the frame, nearly inscrutable in the shadows, that the nude white woman shines in the painting's center. *Olympia* exemplifies the vexed position of black women within the Western art historical canon, for while white women have been visualized as both symbols of beauty and objects of desire, non-white women have been made to stand as foils—or are absent from the picture plane altogether.

It is against this devastatingly blank scrim that Awol Erizku's series *New Flower: Images of the Reclining Venus* emerges, willfully centering black women who pose as "odalisques" beneath the photographer's strobe lights. Recalling Manet's *Olympia*, in *Meskerem*, we find a black woman at rest upon a shiny red sheet, her orbicular kinky hair manifesting unapologetically African origins. In *Brukawit*, a wavy hairweave flows down the brown back of a black woman in recline and facing away, recalling Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque* (1814).

By centering the black female figure, Erizku advances the significant counter tradition of the revised odalisque, one formed by black feminist artists such as Renée Cox, Deana Lawson, and Mickalene Thomas. But as these radical revisionists well know, the spotlight has never been a neutral space for the black female body as popular depictions of the black female nude—particularly within the medium of photography—have historically served to dehumanize and hypersexualize black women. For this reason, black artists have been drawn to the conventions of the reclining nude, but have worked to undermine them, as conceptual artist Lorna Simpson famously did through her probing of the anti-portrait—or rückenfigur—in the late 1980s. The images of women in *New Flower* are in dialogue with this history; here they are never entirely nude, almost always wearing underwear, and while the rotated position of the sitter in "Looking Back" mimics that of Velasquez's *Venus at her Mirror* (1649-51), this concealment might also be read as a Simpson-esque refusal of the viewer.

By metaphorically shifting "Olympia's maid" into the spotlight, Erizku affirms the importance of black women's presence within the grand art historical tradition. Here they are centered and rendered gorgeous, the metaphorical recipients of the flowers.

The particular circumstances of the photographs' making renders this series all the richer: Erizku executed the series in Ethiopia's capital city of Addis Ababa, which translates to "new flower," and is home to the largest collection of brothels in Africa. The photographic subjects themselves are sex workers whom Erizku paid to pose for the session. By choosing Ethiopian sex workers as his subject, and photographing them within a number of lushly decorated hotel bedrooms, Erizku also draws our attention to the enduring entanglement of race, beauty and labor. Here, one cannot ignore the imbrication of labor and the aesthetic: a photographic transaction is bound up in monetary exchange. Thus, while *New Flower* importantly revises the homogenous tradition of the "odalisque," the series also complicates the counter tradition by highlighting the tension between labor and the aesthetic—through a framing that is definitively and defiantly new.

In *Brukawit*, a nude black woman rests in a space that appears almost mythological: lying on sky blue sheets, among cerulean blue walls, she appears godlike, as though resting among clouds; In *Betty*\* there is a similar aesthetic abundance, as a black woman rests in a room with sunset peach-colored walls, upon a shiny, cherry-blossom pink duvet; In *Asrat*, a black woman seemingly floats above a mint-colored, floral-patterned sheet. The vibrant rooms of *New Flower*—buttercream yellow, peach, aqua, plum, and crimson red—are almost *excessively* beautiful in their richness. Yet as we bask in their beauty we are always inevitably returned to the question of labor, reminded that it is in and through these very rooms that this exchange of labor takes place. Indeed, we might well believe that the aesthetics of these rooms have the power to affect the amount of work one might secure within them.

This aesthetic tension is everywhere present in *New Flower*, and to dynamic effects: in *Zewditu*, a black pleather chair interrupts the blue and pink symphony, and in *Aziza*, a television breaks up a wall's solid mauve—both reminders of the rooms' utility. In *Brukawit*, two white electrical outlets—one of which presumably charges an unseen device—punctuate the blue room's serenity,

The labor of aesthetics and the aestheticization of labor might urge us to recall that in Manet's aforementioned work, both the flowers *Olympia* is offered, and the pink orchid that she dons are indications of the odalisque's own illicit occupation. Though there are some overlapping concerns, *New Flower* reflects increasingly intricate circulations of capital. While pink and red roses are visible in *Tigist*, here they are not presented in a tidy bouquet, but lie limp on a side table, their bearer unknown. Indeed, the majority of flowers are stitched into cotton sheets and decorative duvets, likely manufactured across the globe. If the exchange of flowers symbolizes the exchange of labor in *Olympia*, then it is the glass Coca-Cola bottle on a nightstand in *Betty*—its shape instantly recognizable—that reflects today's global economies.

The *New Flower* photographs detail even the minutest entanglements of beauty and work: in *Brukawit*, nicks on a worn bedframe; in *Zewditu*, hair plaited into two tight braids. In these images, we see every crease and blemish, mark and mole—in *Naomi*\*, even a Band-Aid. And in *Betty*, nails freshly painted purple, meticulously speckled pink.

\*Included in the original series of photographs but not included in the exhibition at The FLAG Art Foundation.