

# GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY ARTIST ANALYSIS

## Archive Project

### Awol Erizku: Cultural Identity

Tyus Allen, Graphic Design, 2022



Awol Erizku, "MALCOLM X FREESTYLE (PHARAOH'S DANCE)," Photographs, Digital chromatic print. 2019-2020. [Malcolm x Freestyle Pharaohs Dance by Awol Erizku on artnet](#)

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Art History: Global Currents in Contemporary Art

### **Awol Erizku - Biography**

Awol Erizku is a multidisciplinary, contemporary artist who is most commonly known for his photography and sculptural installation work. He grew up in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, until his family moved to America, where he lived in the South Bronx. He studied at Cooper Union University in New York and received his bachelor degree in the fine art. Afterwards, he went on to receive his Master Degree in Fine Arts at the Yale School of Art, located in New Haven, Connecticut. Awol Erizku's works focus heavily on bridging the gap between African and African American visual culture. He does this by including symbolism in his work. His work is filled with references to art history, hip hop, and spirituality. A common theme throughout his work is the placement of Africans and African Americans next to African art as well as warm color pallets and nature. By doing this, Erizku makes a powerful statement about the pride, history, beauty, and power of African and African American people. Some of his most famous pieces include a Chromogenic print of his sister titled, "Girl with Bamboo Earring". In this piece he depicts his sister similar to the classical painting of "Girl With a Pearl Earring" by Vermeer. By recreating her in more Ethiopian inspired clothing with bamboo earrings he gives viewers an insight into his own life as well as showing how he and his sister are molded by their experiences being from Ethiopia, but growing up in the South Bronx and absorbing their culture. Another notable project of Awol Erizku is his photography work for Beyonce. Awol Erizku gained a lot of media popularity after he worked as a photographer for Beyonce during her pregnancy photo

shoot. Although he doesn't like to be known as Beyonce's Photographer, the reveal of her pregnancy photos garnered over eight million likes in less than 24 hours.

## Awol Erizku- Work Analysis

Awol Erizku's *Nigist* is a photograph of a black woman lounging in her bed beside an open window. The woman is lounging comfortably, yet confidently. She stares directly at the viewer poised with a self-assured expression returning the gaze right back to the viewer. Her head rests on her right hand as her fingers go through her hair. The background of the piece is interesting. Awol Erizku is an Ethiopian-born artist, who later moved to the South Bronx. The background of this photo depicts the woman in a more Ethiopian-stylized house. The bed sheets have floral patterns, a common symbol in Erizku's pieces. The juxtaposition of the confident black woman next to floral textures and an open, natural setting creates dialogue about the woman. For us the viewers, it further emphasizes the connection Erizku tries to make about African and African Americans with nature and the beauty black people share with nature. The way the woman seems unphased by the onlooking bodies speaks to the way she feels comfortable in this setting, despite the fact that the window is open and anyone could walk by and see her in the nude or uncomfortable with the photographer. After analyzing this piece, I've reached the hypothesis that this piece is speaking on the identity of black women. Speaking on their confidence, connection to nature, and beauty. Interestingly, Awol Erizku is a male artist. This can be controversial when thinking about the fact that he is in control of the piece and what the woman does. The idea of the "male gaze" often seeps into the art world, when male artists create pieces of nude women. This was brought up in a thesis by Leah Monsour. Monsour brought up the idea of shifting views of looking at a nude when it's presented in art. Monsour states, "This is where shifting the gaze comes into play, and why it matters. How we are trained to see, and who is allowed to be in control of this, has a direct impact on the images that are made. When the dominant lens we are trained to see through stems from patriarchal values, a

system of oppression, and the dominant perspective is male, the power dynamic inherent in patriarchy is amplified.” Monsour brings up the idea that an artist should be trained to shift their patriarchal view to a neutral view that can both respect and build up your subject in innovative ways. Monsour also brought up the work of Ana Mendieta. Ana Mendieta created various nude photographs and “earth-works” that speak a lot on women’s identity and connection to nature. Her work also challenges the male gaze of female subjects in pieces such as, *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants) (7 works), 1972*. In this piece she uses male facial hair to make herself look more masculine, this in a way challenges the male gaze where the focus becomes her and the breaking of gender appearance stereotypes.

In Awol Erizku’s *Black Fire*, he creates an installation that utilizes various objects to create an overall message. The piece contains various forms of traditional African art such as the inclusion of African masks. Interestingly, one of the masks has a red face. According to an article about Bwa Mask by Pacific Lutheran University, it mentions how red is often painted on a mask to represent life and danger. I think this can give viewers a deeper insight into the piece, especially when looking at the other objects such as the boxing gloves, Codeine, and upside down Uzi. These objects are commonly associated with actions that can cause harm to other people. There is also a candle holder with extinguished candles, the only thing remaining is the trail of red smoke. The candle could also represent death, this would be a similar technique to religious Christian symbolism in paintings, such as *Merode Altarpiece* by Robert Campin. Similar to Campin, Erizku seems to be using the smoke to symbolize a snuffed candle representing the end of a life. I think in large part Erizku's piece is speaking on African and African American identity and the connection between black Americans and African warriors.

This piece is different from Erizku's other pieces in the identity it portrays for black people. The identity portrayed here does not seem to emphasize the beauty and connection to nature, rather than an identity of strength. In a talk with the Curator of the Brooklyn Museum, Arnold Lehman, he states, "I think for this generation, and actually for several generations, there still is an interest on the part of the artists in their blackness and in black culture, which I have written in the text for the exhibition. I think they are also tackling and approaching being an artist very much like any other artist. I think they need to be sort of taken out of that category, in which they find themselves, or have been finding themselves, as African American artists." This is a similar effect Erizku does in this piece. Instead of viewing the objects as derogatory, it is important to view the objects through a cultural lense. It is just as important to see the objects as vehicles for a conversation on a lot of the problems facing the black community as well as the importance in the way the objects can represent achievements in the black community. This could be seen in the boxing gloves or in the gold faucets and gold candle holder.

In *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall talks about the experience of living in a post colonial world and the way black people's culture has been affected by colonialism. In the essay Hall states, "our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history." In relation to the work of Awol Erizku, he creates work that reflects black identity. He uses his own experiences as a black person in the South Bronx and his Ethiopian background to craft works that speak on the characteristics and history of black people in a way that typically isn't represented in Western art. His work uplifts a culture, while also telling a story of his own personal experiences and the things plaguing black culture.



Awol Erizku, "Black Fire" Digital chromatic print. 2019. [Awol Erizku | Black Fire \(Mouzone Brothas\) \(2019\) | Available for Sale | Artsy](#)



Awol Erizku, "Nigist" Digital chromatic print. 2013. [Awol Erizku | Nigist \(2013\) | Available for Sale | Artsy](#)

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