

NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021

nightgallery.ca

AWOL ERIZKU

Scorched Earth

September 18 – October 23, 2021

Night Gallery is pleased to present *Scorched Earth*, an exhibition of new photographs and sculptures by the Los Angeles-based artist Awol Erizku. This is the artist's third solo exhibition with the gallery.

In this new body of work, Erizku addresses enduring contemporary issues and challenges conjecture while evading didacticism and dogma. Upon entry, a photograph on the gallery's landing wall presents a flower at a dramatic scale, its abstract composition prompting a critical reassessment of nature in-relation to current contexts. As the first work viewers encounter, Erizku makes an immediate invitation for a shift in perspective to allow for a more holistic conception of the individual and universal spheres. By subverting expectation, Erizku presents his images as a living and breathing entity—something as transformable as our personal understandings of the world.

Erizku blurs the boundaries between the organic and the artificial, dislocating objects of nature and commercial iconography from their original contexts. In a prominent sculpture, a found spray painted branch affixed with clothing zippers invokes David Hammons' groundbreaking sculpture *Fly Jar*, in which the artist plays on the multiple linguistic meanings of the plural "flies" to meditate upon social conditions in modern society. In the diptych *Rerock (Some Fly, Some Die)*, objects commonly associated with the moon are held in a human hand, yet remain in close proximity to their planet of genesis. A dahlia on fire disrupts our usual encounters with these iconic symbols of delicateness and beauty. A tropical flamingo lily rests atop a newspaper, partially encircled by a heavy metal chain. While several photographs offer opportunities for interpretation, Erizku also gives direct treatment to pressing social and political themes: in *Dirty Sprite (Variations on Mud)*, a bottle of Aunt Jemima syrup, flecked with condensation and surrounded by melting Jolly Ranchers, acts as a pictorial metaphor for Lean. Notably, this photograph cites Erizku's growing lexicon surrounding contronyms in hip-hop vernacular, which the artist conceptualizes as a key to unlocking the covert meanings within his other images and sculptures. Through *Dirty Sprite (Variations on Mud)*, Erizku addresses the linkages between the deeply personal and the commercial, and alludes to the broader interrogation of recognition and relationality taking place throughout the exhibition. Each photograph becomes a site for reflexivity and the open-ended propositions of the audible and visual.

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This presentation marks a departure from Erizku's previous works, which took figuration as a central component. In *Scorched Earth*, Erizku evades the formal traditions of portrait photography as to altogether refuse the objectification of the Black body. His subjects require deep attention, calling forth expanded modes of inquiry rather than striving for legibility: figures are captured from behind or the side, signaling an intervention in the impulse to optically consume or ascribe racial biases onto the Black body. In other portraits, womens' nude silhouettes are blurred and distant, bypassing quick labeling as commercial representations of the feminine body. A blonde figure poses nude holding an African mask, the head cropped just above the chin. Here, Erizku gestures toward the contemporaneous discourse in hip-hop communities surrounding the Black male gaze and white women and makes reference to his own experiences without providing viewers with the convenience of explicit meaning.

Within the unexpected quietude of his work, Erizku provides a rare opportunity for self-reflection and acknowledges the instability of the distinctions between private and public life. Taken as a whole, the exhibition is united by a sustained refusal to exist as one thing or fit into a singular category. As the planet makes little use of linguistic gestures, *Scorched Earth* speaks for itself.

Awol Erizku (b. 1988, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia) has recently exhibited at Les Rencontres d'Arles, Église Sainte-Anne d'Arles, Arles, FR; Night Gallery, Los Angeles, CA; Bortolami Gallery, New York, NY; Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University, New York; Crystal Bridges Museum of Art, Bentonville, AR; Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), Dublin, IE; Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Toronto, ON; Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, VA; and Phillips, London, UK, among others. Recent solo exhibitions include *New Visions for Iris*, presented by Public Art Fund, New York and Chicago, IL; *Mystic Parallax* at FLAG Art Foundation, New York; *SLOW BURN* at Ben Brown Gallery, Hong Kong; *Menace II Society* at Duchamp Detox Clinic, presented by Night Gallery, Los Angeles; and *Purple Reign* at Stems Gallery, Brussels, BE. His work has been acquired to the permanent collections of FLAG Art Foundation, New York and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA. He lives and works in Los Angeles.