

Rising Star Awol Erizku Immortalizes NYC's New Black Creative Elite With Art-Historical Flair  
By: Ashton Cooper



You can call Awol Erizku's art history-inflected photographs whatever you want — just don't call them "urban." "I hate when people label my work urban," he says. "Just because it's African American subjects or people of color it's not urban."

His recent Renaissance-inspired portraits at Hasted Kraeutler replace the stiff aristocrats of centuries past with young New Yorkers wearing Louis Vuitton, Versace, and sometimes nothing at all. The pieces are poised and precisely lit while the subjects stand alone against a black background, boldly staring directly into the camera. Works like "Girl with a Bamboo Earring," "Boy Holding Grapes," and "Lady with a Pitbull" take direct inspiration from Vermeer, Caravaggio, and Da Vinci.

In the past two years, the 24-year-old photographer has graduated from Cooper Union, been accepted to Yale's MFA program, and been picked up by a Chelsea gallery. His portraits of New York's young black creative elite have made an impression on big players in the industry (Glenn Fuhrman of the FLAG Art Foundation was an early champion of his work), and this month he has two solo shows in New York — one at Hasted Kraeutler closing July 20 and the other at Rivington Design House Gallery opening July 19.

Erizku was born in Ethiopia, but grew up in the Bronx. He started taking photographs seriously in college after an internship with David LaChapelle. In both his gallery work and on his very active Tumblr, Erizku is working to insert a young black voice onto the white walls of the art world. "There are not that many colored people in the galleries that I went to or the museums that I went to," he said. "I was just like, 'when I become an artist I have to put my two cents in this world.'"



Erizku updates his Tumblr, called "Thank You! Come Again," nearly every day. The Tumblr photos are more relaxed than his gallery work, foregoing perfect lighting and precise posture for silly, playful poses against a plain white wall. Everyone who visits his studio is photographed (including this reporter). The Tumblr photographs document Erizku's extensive network of fashionable friends, people he calls "movers and shakers in the city." Street Etiquette style bloggers Joshua Kissi and Travis Gumbs, members of hip hop collective A\$AP Mob, A\$AP Rocky and A\$AP Bari, and recently Mos Def have all made appearances.

While Erizku primarily photographs people of color, he expressed frustration with the way his work is sometimes described by critics, and is irked by frequent comparisons to painter Kehinde Wiley. While he respects Wiley's work, he feels that they have little in common besides African American subjects. "Whenever I make something I want it to be compared to Andy [Warhol] or to Richard Avedon," he said.

While Kehinde Wiley also portrays young black men in classicizing portraits, the aesthetic fundamentals of their practices are drastically different. Erizku's work feels more honest, more genuine. He mostly takes photographs of friends and his erudite yet easy-going look onto a specific scene of downtown creatives is what makes the work original. Where Kehinde's paintings have taken on a manufactured character, Erizku's photographs feel warmly personal.

His big ambitions, however, will be temporarily put on hold when he heads to Yale this fall. "Making this move is a bit drastic because this will be the first time I'm leaving the city to settle somewhere else," he said. At Yale he wants to develop his sculpture; he says he's interested in working with readymades. It will be interesting to see how someone so embroiled in the New York scene will fair in the much quieter New Haven. Erizku, however, is excited for the time away and says he is "up for the challenge." We think so too.