

AWOL ERIZKU'S EIGHT-TRACK

June 21, 2014 // Text by Hilary Harkness

Mixtapes, mustaches, and muses. This is just one of the possible alliterations that comes to mind after I walk through *The Only Way Is Up* with artist Awol Erizku.

Erizku is a photographer and a self-reflective curator. He tells me that he envisioned his show as a mixtape - he's got some hits mixed in with some tracks that he might need to convince you are worth a listen and he's thrown in some recording sessions - things that might evolve in later compilations.

This frame helps me feel my way through the exhibition and I confidently nod in appreciation to the authoritative beats of his photographs in the front room - *Portrait of a Muslim Boy* (2014) is a soulful counterpoint to the upbeat *Heads* (2013), a grid of men and their hair flair.

In the middle rooms are more experimental tracks anchored by what seems intended to be a hit single, a towering sculpture that is both a basketball play on Donald Judd's stack sculptures and Erizku's own career. He has gone from the *Oh, what a feeling, fuck it, I want a Billion* (2014) to this, *Oh what a feeling, aw, fuck it, I want a Trillion* (2014). A hefty appreciation!

But even art stars can't risk being one (or two) hit wonders. With his photograph *Girl in Park* (2014), an updated version of a classic nude in nature, Erizku spins an art party-jam. I'm chilled out and going with it until I do a triple take at the framed Beyoncé shopping bags hanging on an adjacent wall. He's given the bags Paris Metro-style graffiti treatment - complete with armpit and beard hair fashioned from his locks and branded with silver stickers with his name on it. This is where I need Erizku the emcee to lay down some explanatory tracks. He tells me he had one of the bags in his room for six months when one day he woke up to Jay-Z singing about how only white women are held up in our culture as idols and his inspiration came in a flash.

My mind jumps forward a hundred years from now, imagining a future art collector coveting Erizku Beyoncé bags as much for the chance to own a famous 21st century artist's hair as for their value as a works of art. Like relics of an art idol.

As it is with albums I've listened to in the past, there's a certain track that sticks with me. In this show, it's the back room melody that I replay over and over. It's here where Erizku has sampled his muses with a rack of silk screened shirts calling out those who have come before. Each black jersey has the name of an artist that has influenced him, with the number referencing the year of the artist's birth. From hair to sweat to hair, here we are with the ultimate DNA moment - the birth of a potential hit record.

The room is long like a basketball court, with the jerseys in the center. On either end, where the hoops would be are the impermanent *#TRILL*



Portrait of a Muslim Boy, 2014

(2014) and *#WAVY* (2014). Erizku hints at Barack Obama and Michael Jackson as having some modicum of significance as well, but just a hint as this is where he has left room for improvisation and remixing as the times may require.

There is much to rewind and erase when you're an emerging artist. Some of the process happens alone in the studio, but it continues once the viewers see your work. Your evolution as an artist is on display.

Some artists are lucky to have hit after hit. And those hits can become seductive for some and paralyzing for others.

Erizku's approach is refreshingly honest. He publicly acknowledges his influences while creating his own flow with a show that doesn't only showcase his photography - the more certain hits at this point in his career - but with works whose reception may be less sure.

By the time he has his next show, his play on Judd's stacks may have reached another income bracket and Obama may no longer be 'wavy,' but his flow will still be his - trill and likely to keep the viewer moving to his beat.