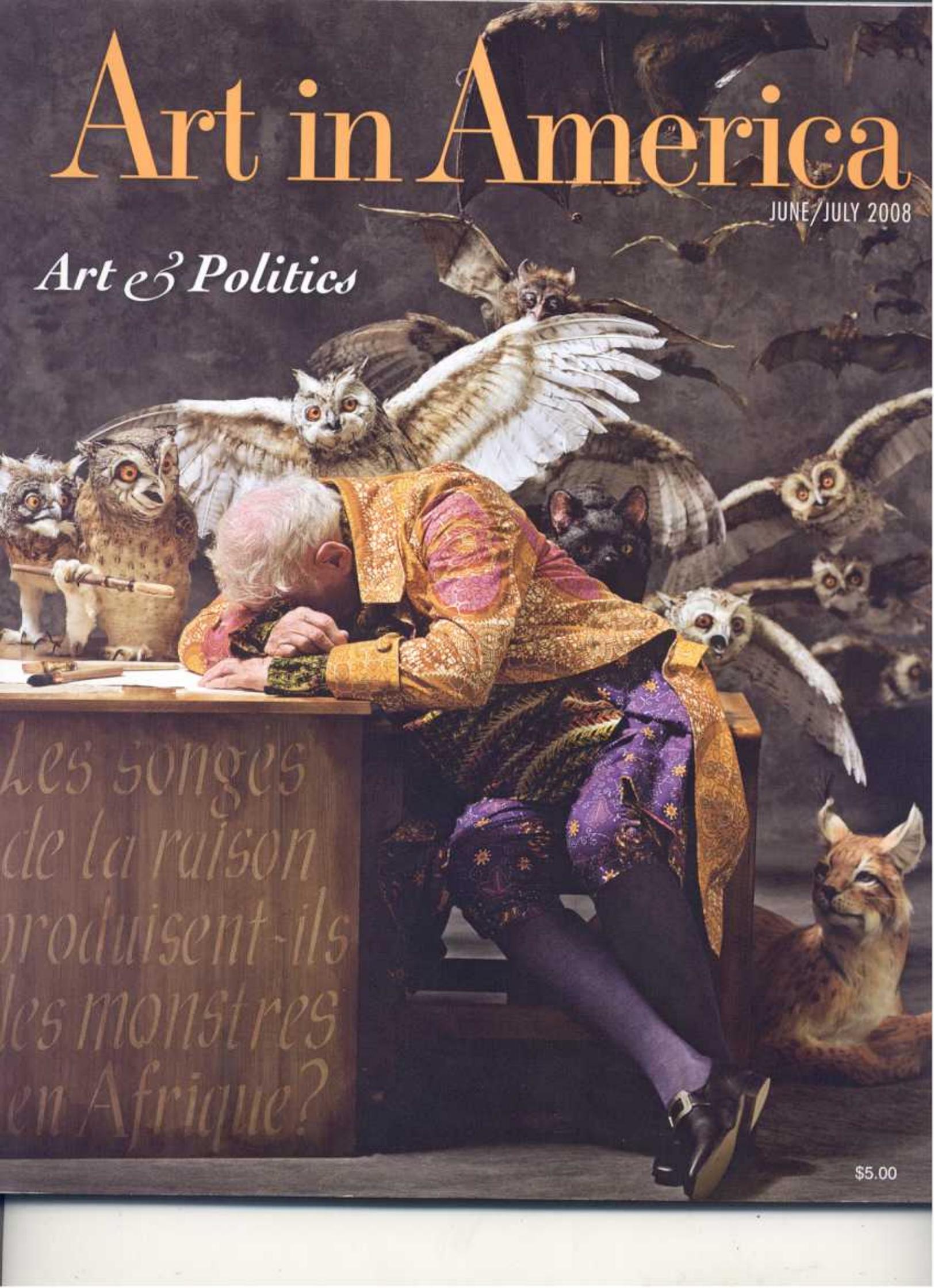


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POLITICAL GRAPHICS

The Revolution Will Be Visualized

The compelling graphic designs of Emory Douglas, “Revolutionary Artist” of the Black Panther Party, helped shape the group’s public image and reflected its evolution from politically militant to socially mitigating.

BY SARAH VALDEZ

Looking beyond the gallery scene, deeply rooted in his conviction that all art is political, and valuing real-life action and change above all else, Emory Douglas used his prodigious graphic skills as Minister of Culture and Revolutionary Artist of the Black Panther Party from 1967, the year following its inception, through 1984, promoting the group’s agenda of African-American self-determination, employment, decent housing, education, health care, land ownership, and an end to police brutality and war. Organized for the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art’s Pacific Design Center by Sam Durant—L.A.-based artist, aficionado of the political upheavals of the late 1960s and of Douglas in particular—the exhibition “Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas” took stock of the esthetically compelling, emotionally charged and still-relevant output of a man who forged spirited images of race relations (ordinary black people of all ages unrepentantly decimating greedy oppressors); clever and often quite morbidly funny renderings of the “Establishment”; illustrations of the plight of black people struggling to get by in the ghetto; posters calling for the freeing of such political prisoners as Angela Davis, Erika Huggins, Huey Newton and Kathleen Cleaver, who became so familiar they were popularly known on a first-name basis; and, ultimately, death notices of Panther luminaries like Bunchy Carter, Fred Hampton, Jon Hug-

gins and Bobby Hutton, whose lives were cut short as tragically and inevitably as they had predicted for themselves.

As a child in 1951, Douglas moved with his mother to San Francisco, where he still lives and works as a production artist for the *Sun-Reporter*, the city’s oldest African-American newspaper. He progressed from a boy who liked to copy cartoons to a juvenile delinquent to a student of advertising art at City College of San Francisco with a keen social conscience. He encountered founding Panthers Huey Newton and Bobby Seale at a Black Arts Movement meeting at the very time they were in the process of launching *The Black Panther* (and the two masterminds were somewhat awkwardly trying to compose headlines with pencils). Douglas offered his skills, and quickly gained respect for his ability to seductively illustrate the party’s platform with his signature chunky black lines and frequent use of pattern. In its early days, of course, the Panther program famously included armed self-defense. And indeed, in the Panthers’ inaugural year, Douglas took to illustrating mothers with babies (that predictable pair onto which political values so often get projected) with guns as an immediate means of conveying Panther family values.

To this object lesson in protecting oneself from hostile forces (maybe the first time in U.S. history that blacks broadcast their intention to fight back

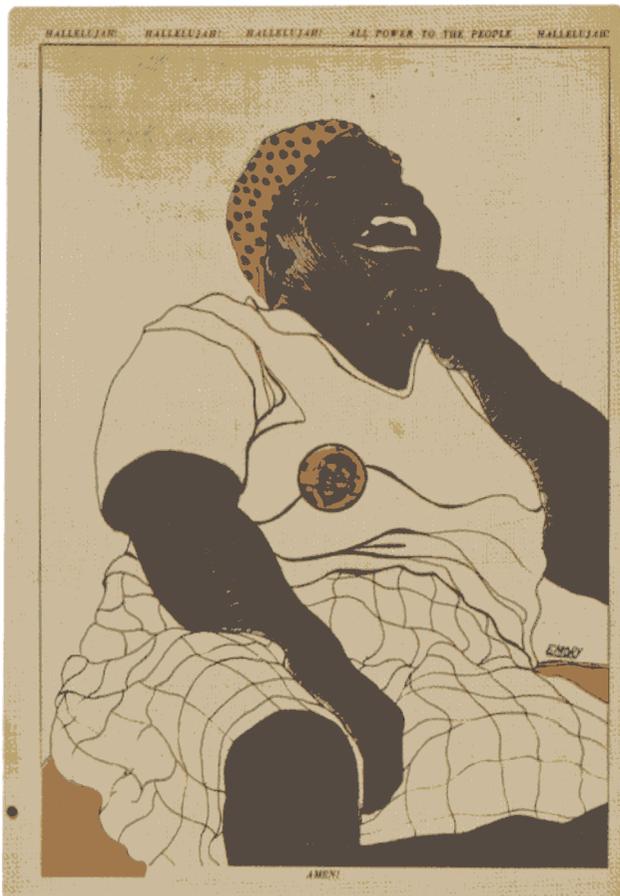
against those who sought to exploit them), Douglas added magnificent textiles, elegant drapery and the power of a high-contrast, geometrically balanced composition. In one mother-and-child drawing, a woman facing away from the viewer carries a baby who looks back over her right shoulder, their jet-black skin so void of detail they might be read as symbols rather than individuals. Inky, leopard-like spots cover her shirt; a gray headscarf tied at the nape trails gracefully down her back. The child clutches a pistol in its hand, and the image gives pause either as a warning or a fact—scary or inspiring, debased or right on—depending on one’s perspective.

In 1966, before he joined the party, Douglas produced another striking illustration of a black (again, utterly sable and featureless) woman with a baby on her hip and a shotgun strapped to her back; it was later used to promote a Panther fundraiser. Douglas, who signed his artworks simply “Emory,” opted to portray a woman, again, as a caretaker with a keen fashion sensibility, evidenced by the richly illustrated patterns on her clothing. Standing in an optically pleasing contrapposto, she wears large, African-style hoop earrings, and even the sheath for her weapon has a nicely drawn wood-grain pattern. This representation of radical blacks nurturing their own was in stark contrast to the “official” view of them fashioned by the then-director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, who in 1967 had declared the Black Panthers the biggest threat to the country’s internal security and had set COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program), an extraordinarily well-funded, covert and ultimately illegal government agency, to infiltrate, sabotage and eliminate them.

Though Douglas has occasionally shown his work in galleries, his intended audience was always the inhabitants of the ghetto: namely black people who, especially in the Panthers’ early days, had rarely if ever seen themselves publicly represented as other than variously disempowered caricatures. Indeed, to shed light on Douglas’s opinion of the role of art in the Black Panther Party, we have a 1968 illustration of four lynched pigs (actual animals, not law enforcement!) identified with typewritten text as L.B.J. and members of his cabinet.¹ This spectacle is accompanied by a rare quote signed by the artist (usually the text accompanying Douglas’s drawings came anonymously from the party’s collective principles). It reads: “ON LANDSCAPE ART ‘It is good only when it shows the oppressor hanging from a tree by his mother-f-kin neck.’” Giving a talk titled “Art for the People’s Sake” at Nashville’s historically black Fisk University in 1972—a year after some would argue the Black Panther Party had met its demise with the East/West Coast split² (Douglas continued working with the West Coast faction)—Douglas exercised his skill for stating the obvious regarding the function of



View of “Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas” at MOCA Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles, 2007. Photo Brian Forrest.



Works this article offset lithographs from The Black Panther. Above, July 10, 1971. Collection of Alden and Mary Kimbrough, Los Angeles.



August 21, 1971. Collection of Alden and Mary Kimbrough.



September 21, 1974. Collection of Alden and Mary Kimbrough.



May 11, 1969. Collection Center for the Study of Political Graphics, Los Angeles.

art in relation to the Panthers' agenda: "We cannot do this in an art gallery, because our people do not go to art galleries. . . . The [ruling class] perpetuate[s] the worst violence on planet Earth while they have us drawing pictures of flowers and butterflies."

With what he regarded as working-class tools—markers, tape, pen, paper, gouache and occasionally an airbrush—Douglas drew many big-bellied pigs with flies swarming around them: one such pig with dollar signs in his eyes, another colonizing the moon with a sign reading "white only," another pig labeled "U.S. IMPERIALISM" with four guns held by brown hands pointed at its head (each weapon has one of four sentences by it: "GET OUT OF THE GHETTO"; "GET OUT OF LATIN AMERICA"; "GET OUT OF ASIA" and "GET OUT OF AFRICA"). Another large red pig created in 1970 graced the cover of *The Black Panther*. Beneath the word "IMPERIALISTS," a nasty-looking swine-headed fat woman with "U.S.A." on her breast sits enthroned, surrounded by a swarm of baby pigs labeled as France, West Germany, Israel and Great Britain, among other countries, who clamor to suckle at the beast's breasts.

As the Black Panthers' tactics evolved from armed revolution to raising consciousness and running social programs (after the right to publicly bear firearms was repealed in California in 1967, derailing the Panthers' penchant for appearing in public with guns and dressed in their super-suave uniforms of black beret, black leather jacket and shades), community outreach and engaging in electoral politics became more prominent components of the Panthers' program. Douglas's project shifted accordingly. He took to depicting buttons on people's clothing to convey messages. "U.S. GOV'T APPROVED" reads one button affixed to the shirt of a black man shooting up drugs;



March 16, 1968. Collection of Alden and Mary Kimbrough.

"SUPPORT THE NEEDY" reads a button on the shirt of a corpulent black woman as she throws her head back and laughs; a barefoot black man, who has tears running down his face as he stands in a room with a rat, a cockroach and crumbling walls, wears a holey T-shirt reading "FREEDOM" as well as buttons with the faces of Elaine Brown and Bobby Seale, who ran for public office in Oakland in 1973 as representatives of the Black Panthers.

In order to convey the interconnectedness of people involved in the Panthers' social struggle, Douglas also used compositional elements, often accessories, to layer more people and words on top of other individuals: a grinning child wears sunglasses with lenses bearing images of children getting free breakfast and free health care provided by the Panthers; a woman beats a tambourine with a surface showing demonstrators boycotting a business. Douglas also increasingly repurposed images; a figure that appears in the foreground in one context, for instance, might turn up in the background of a later work.

One particularly compelling image that Douglas created for *The Black Panther* portended some of David Wojnarowicz's politically pointed collages of the 1980s: a big hand covered with the logos of such corporations as Chevron, Exxon and Chase Manhattan Bank is drawn on top of a page of New York Stock Exchange listings; a line from each finger connects to the limbs of a cutout image of a balding white man in a suit with his right hand waving high as he declares, in a speech bubble, "I Gerald Ford am the 38th Puppet of the United States." Esthetically, this piece would hold up well in a gallery as a unique artwork, but it instead appeared on newsprint in *The Black Panther*, meant to appeal and belong to the many. In the museum, it was displayed,

With what he regarded as working-class tools—markers, tape, pen, paper—Douglas drew many big-bellied pigs. A 1968 illustration of lynched pigs depicts L.B.J. and three cabinet members.

like most of the pieces on view, in an old newspaper in a vitrine. And here it's also worth noting that, from a design perspective, Douglas did an excellent job branding the Panthers through *The Black Panther*, which was generally printed in black and white and one other color, like green, turquoise, or red—an attractive and budget-conscious alternative to a four-color process.

Much of the strength of Douglas's oeuvre lies in his giving humanity to those customarily portrayed as social pariahs; at the same time he helped those in his community get a handle on hopelessness and shame with common sense. He created an affecting black-and-white image in 1975 called "HYPERTEENSION KILLS." It shows a troubled-looking black man with a furrowed brow gazing over his shoulder and holding a sign that reads "I'M HUNGRY," "I'M UNEMPLOYED," and "I'M BLACK." By contrast, appearing particularly majestic in the exhibition was a colorful mural with a design that originally ran in *The Black Panther* but that Douglas has re-created a number of times. It appeared twice in the show: once as a small framed work on paper with an elegant palette of purples, gray and orange, and then again, some 14 feet high, in red, pink, yellow, orange and silver on a gallery wall. It shows a woman with an Afro, a gun strapped to her back and a spear in her hand, with beams of light radiating from behind her like the sun. To the left of her head are the words "Afro-American solidarity with the oppressed People of the world." And like all of the work on view in this exhibition, the image feels plenty potent in the here and now. After all, the work of Douglas and the other members of the Black Panther Party—audacious as they were to not just hope for but make a radical attempt at affecting real change—remains sadly unfinished. □

1. The term pig was coined by Seale and Newton to refer to law enforcement as well as politicians, members of the capitalist-industrial complex, and anyone deemed to be racist or oppressive.
2. The split in the early '70s, which contributed to the party's decline, involved Newton, who was based at national headquarters in Oakland, announcing the party's intention to abandon violent tactics and to focus on social programs. Prominent party member Eldridge Cleaver continued to advocate armed revolution, with the support of the New York chapter, and would go on to lead the Black Liberation Army faction.

"Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas" was on view at L.A. MOCA Pacific Design Center [Oct. 21, 2007-Feb. 24, 2008]. A 224-page catalogue with texts by Sam Durant, Bobby Seale, Amiri Baraka, Kathleen Cleaver and others was published by Rizzoli in conjunction with the exhibition.

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July 28, 1973. Collection Center for the Study of Political Graphics.