

# SEANKELLY



Awol Erizku

## *Delirium of Agony*

Sean Kelly, New York

September 8 – October 21, 2023

Opening reception: Friday, September 8, 6-8pm

Book signing: Saturday, September 9, 2-3pm

Sean Kelly is delighted to present *Delirium of Agony*, Awol Erizku's first solo exhibition at Sean Kelly, New York. With this exhibition, Erizku examines the construction of cultural iconography through the lens of contemporary hip-hop, street culture, art history, sports, and entertainment. Occupying the entire gallery, the exhibition features paintings, neon installations, photographs, sculptures, and works on paper. A series of basketball hoops are transformed into a pan-African flag; a coffin into a human-sized mouse trap; and an ancient Egyptian bust into a gleaming disco ball. There will be an opening reception on Friday, September 8, from 6-8pm. The artist will be present.

Erizku transforms the linguistic conventions surrounding music, popular culture, and sports symbolism into images and sculptures that offer an alternative to the Western gaze. By remixing cultural signifiers, he weaves together different narratives that interrogate the canons of art history, philosophy, and linguistics, creating unexpected connections that highlight the artist's interest in

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contronyms found within the hip-hop vernacular. A recurrent theme throughout Erizku's practice is the questioning of Eurocentric standards of beauty and art historical tradition, to create work that represents a uniquely Afrocentric aesthetic, one the artist refers to as "Afro-Esotericism."

Riffing on forbears as varied as Marcel Duchamp and David Hammons, Erizku uses a postcard of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, 1503 as his point of reference. Informed by Duchamp's infamous readymade, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919—comprised of a similar postcard upon which the artist drew a mustache and beard on the *Mona Lisa*—Erizku in his work depicts the infamous subject with a zipper adhered to her face, also a knowing reference to artist David Hammons' iconic *Fly Jar*, 1996. Appropriating the presentation of Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre, Paris, Erizku similarly encases his work behind thick bulletproof glass, drawing attention to the value placed upon the original within the canon of Western art history, while simultaneously addressing issues of race, representation, and value in the arts.

The exhibition also includes a series of large-scale paintings featuring the insignia of popular sports teams. Erizku's paintings are derived from the addition, removal, and obfuscation of logos associated with individuals found within street culture. Again, mixing visual emblems, tropes and metaphors from disparate cultures, such as ancient Egyptian manuscripts in which the original writing is removed, yet traces are left behind, in these works Erizku borrows his aesthetic from Los Angeles' urban culture. As acclaimed writer, Doreen St. Félix, has observed, "as much as Erizku is drawn to creation, he is also thinking about obliteration as a means of reflection." By creating a palimpsest of urban history and youth culture, he informs and shapes local identity.

Inspired by the fantastical coffin culture of Ghana and the duality of hip-hop language, the exhibition also features two traditional fantasy coffins and a sculptural installation created in collaboration with celebrated Ghanaian coffin maker, Paa Joe. The coffins take the form of a bottle of promethazine cough syrup (otherwise known as "Lean") and a mouse trap. In these hand-carved and painted works, Erizku remixes and expands the implications and connotations of words beyond their initial meanings. Each of the sculptures acts as a catalyst that plays on slang language and the underpinnings of grim realities that infiltrate the hip-hop industry.

Incorporating symbols, imagery, and references, Erizku portrays stories, emotions, and subjects prevalent in the music genre, making them visually accessible and relatable to audiences. In doing so, he highlights the rich histories and nuances of these communities, creating a medium that blends the auditory and visual, while also acknowledging and preserving vernacular heritage drawn from African and African American diasporas.

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Awol Erizku's newly released first monograph, *Mystic Parallax* was recently published by Aperture. This comprehensive monograph spans Erizku's career, examining his studio practice in tandem with his work as a highly in-demand editorial photographer and cultural commentator. The publication features essays by critically acclaimed writers Ishmael Reed and Doreen St. Félix, curator Ashley James, and interviews with artist Urs Fischer and critic, curator, and writer Antwaun Sargent.

There will be a book signing of *Mystic Parallax* with the artist at the gallery on Saturday, September 9, from 2-3pm.

Born in Gondar, Ethiopia, in 1988, Erizku attended The Cooper Union before receiving his MFA from Yale University. He has had solo exhibitions with the Public Art Fund, New York, and The FLAG Art Foundation, New York. His work has been exhibited at prominent institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art, NY; the Studio Museum Harlem, NY; the Crystal Bridges Museum of Art, Bentonville, AR; the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto; the Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco; and the FLAG Art Foundation, NY, amongst others. His work is in the permanent collection of many institutions worldwide, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; the Norton Museum of Art, Palm Beach, FL; The FLAG Art Foundation, NY; the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, CA; LACMA, Los Angeles, CA; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, and The Whitney Museum of American Art, NY.

Erizku will be the subject of forthcoming solo exhibitions at The Momentary at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and at Savannah College of Art and Design.

For additional information on Awol Erizku, please visit [skny.com](http://skny.com)

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Image: Awol Erizku Courtesy: Sean Kelly