



the return, 2016

GOOD ART CAN HEAL MIND, BODY AND SPIRIT.  
 GREAT ART ELEVATES THE SOUL.  
 - ARTURO LINDSAY

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Conversation with the artist, June 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Fahamu Pecou, *DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance*, unpublished essay (2015), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on Egungun masquerades, see Henry John Drewal, "Whirling Cloth, Breeze of Blessing: Dancing for the Departed—Ancestral Masquerade Performances among the Yorùbá," in Henry John Drewal, John Pemberton III, and Rowland Abiodun, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* (New York: The Center for African Art, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> I coined the term "performance art ritual" in the mid-1980s to identify a sacro-secular genre of performance art that, while presented as contemporary art, borrows very heavily from various religious traditions. For more on this subject, please see Arturo Lindsay, "Performance Art Ritual as Postmodern Thought: An Aesthetic Investigation," DA diss., New York University, 1990.

(Editor's note: the artist selected the Gadsden's Wharf location because it is estimated that over 100,000 West Africans were brought to the port between 1783 and 1808, the peak of the international slave trade.)

<sup>6</sup> Coolness can be defined as possessing a quality of composure, especially in the presence of chaos. Thompson refers to it as "transcendental balance." See Robert Farris Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool," in *African Arts* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1973): 40–43, 64–67, 89–91.

<sup>7</sup> Pecou has entered the final stages of his PhD program at Emory University. This exhibition is presented as his doctoral thesis.

<sup>8</sup> An *orisha* is a deity in the Yoruba belief system. Each *orisha* has domain over forces of nature and human relations. Obatala, also known as Ochalá, Oxalá, Orichalá, Orixalá, and Obatalá, is the father of all *orishas* and the divinity in charge of creativity. His color is white and he is often associated with Jesus Christ.

<sup>9</sup> Babatunde Lawal, "Art in Yoruba Religion," in Arturo Lindsay, ed., *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, (Washington, D.C., London: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Drewal, "Whirling Cloth, Breeze of Blessing: Dancing for the Departed—Ancestral Masquerade Performances among the Yorùbá."

<sup>11</sup> Babatunde Lawal, "Some Aspects of Yoruba Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 3 (1974): 239.

<sup>12</sup> For an in-depth discussion on this subject, please see Babatunde Lawal, "Art in Yoruba Religion," in Arturo Lindsay, ed., *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, (Washington, D.C., London: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 12.

<sup>13</sup> Fahamu Pecou, *DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance*, unpublished essay (2015), 2.

<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to Yoruba art historian Rowland Abiodun for introducing me to the concept of a visual *oriki*. An *oriki* is a praise poem, often in the form of a narrative intended to honor an individual and his/her family legacy. In Yoruba literature there are many *orikis* praising the *orishas*. That said, I find the term very appropriate to describe Pecou's work in this exhibition as well as the work of many other contemporary visual artists who honor the *orishas* with their art.

<sup>15</sup> Text communication with the author, Thursday, July 7, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Roland Abiodun, *Yoruba Art and Language, Seeking the African in African Art*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 95.

<sup>17</sup> Babatunde Lawal, "Art in Yoruba Religion," in Arturo Lindsay, ed., *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, (Washington, D.C., London: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Text communication with the author, Thursday, July 7, 2016.

Cover Image: *old gods, new names*, 2016

**Arturo Lindsay** is an artist/scholar/educator who conducts ethnographic research on African spiritual and aesthetic retentions in contemporary American cultures. His research findings are manifested in works of art, scholarly lectures and articles. A native of Colon, a seaport city on the Caribbean coast of the Republic of Panama, Lindsay migrated with his parents to New York City at age 12 and settled in Brooklyn.

Lindsay's work is represented in important private and public collections nationwide and abroad. As a scholar, Lindsay has lectured and published several essays on "New" World African aesthetic retentions. He is the editor of *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art* published by the Smithsonian Institution Press.

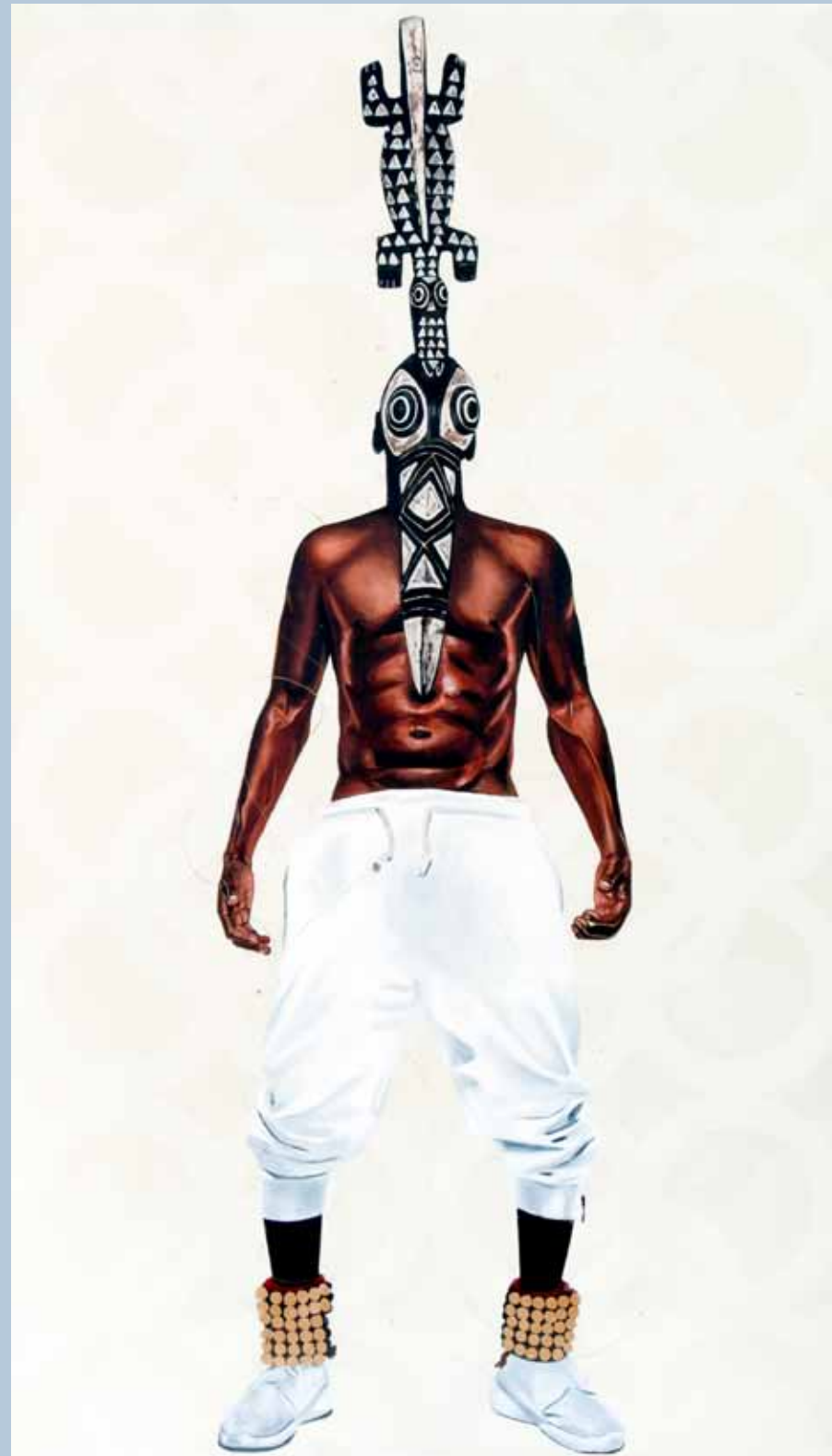
Dr. Lindsay is Professor Emeritus and former chair of the Department of Art and Art History at Spelman College. He received his Doctor of Arts (D.A.) degree from New York University and holds a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree in Painting from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He was the 2006 Distinguished Batza Family Chair at Colgate University; the 2005 Kemp Distinguished Visiting Professor at Davidson College in Davidson, NC; and the 1999 Fulbright Senior Scholar at the University of Panama.

**Fahamu Pecou** is an Atlanta-based visual artist and scholar whose works combine observations on hip-hop, fine art and popular culture. As Pecou states: "My work seeks to provide a crucial intervention in contemporary representations of Black masculinity. I began my career experimenting with the branding strategies employed in hip-hop music and entertainment. These experiments ultimately led me to question not only the stereotypes engendered by the commodification of hip-hop culture, but more, to consider how the influence of historic and social configurations of race, class and gender impact and inform these representations."

Pecou's work is featured in noted private and public national and international collections including: Smithsonian National Museum of African American Art and Culture, Societe Generale (Paris), Nasher Museum at Duke University, The High Museum of Art, Paul R. Jones Collection, Clark Atlanta University Art Collection and Museum of Contemporary Art Georgia.

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FAHAMU PECOU

DO or DIE:  
 AFFECT, RITUAL, RESISTANCE



something eternal, 2016



the way, 2016

## DO OR DIE IS A STORY ABOUT LIFE

Arturo Lindsay

“Fahamu Pecou is the Shit.” So declared the artist early in his career as a way to brand his name and create an art persona. Assuming the moniker of *the shit* in contemporary black culture is synonymous to claiming to be the greatest—a bold claim that must be defended at all cost when the inevitable challenges present themselves.

Similarly, Muhammad Ali also proclaimed himself to be the greatest. In both cases the braggadocio manner of the pugilist and the painter called attention to their black bodies, the difference being that Ali literally placed his black body in harm’s way, ultimately leading to his death. Conversely, Pecou’s black body figuratively inhabits works of art. While still using his body as the central figure in his paintings, Pecou’s recent work has shifted to an examination of the “spectacle of death” surrounding young black men and boys that is far more thought-provoking. At the core of this work is an investigation of the social epidemic violently devouring the lives of young black men and boys in violent crimes committed by the police and at times by their own design as a way to have some semblance of agency over their lives.<sup>1</sup> Pecou writes:

*Violence against Black bodies is endemic. Historically used to strip Black people from having any agency, the terror of physical harm or death has historically worked to contain and dehumanize communities of Black bodies. From the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, to Jim Crow, to this era of mass incarceration, Black men’s bodies have maintained a peculiar proximity to death. This spectacle of death remains a visceral inevitability instilling fear and panic, but perhaps worst of all—despair.*<sup>2</sup>

Performing mourning rituals to mark the transition of a member of a community from the world of the living to the afterlife is fundamental to virtually all cultures. Mourning rituals also have the power to heal a community during its period of grieving. Pecou’s concern about black lives’ “peculiar proximity to death,” however, is focused on the violent separation of the soul from the body in cases like the 2015 massacre at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, as well as police involved shootings in Ferguson, Missouri, Staten Island, New York, Baltimore, Maryland, and Falcon Heights, Minnesota, among countless other cities.

The sense of despair in black communities often erupts into a rage that ultimately destroys even more black bodies. The 1968 riot/rebellion in Harlem after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. is a case in point. In its aftermath Harlem resembled a war torn zone, with rows of homes and commercial establishments burned to the ground. In an effort to heal his community, Panamanian-born, Harlem based artist “Franco the Great” Gaskin started a trend when he began painting murals on the security gates that merchants were installing in their stores. The original murals memorialized Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X as well as other slain African American heroes and heroines. As these murals gained popularity in Harlem, graffiti artists began memorializing their slain young friends in RIP (Rest in Peace) murals. This trend can now be seen nationwide in other urban communities.

Seeking solutions to address the carnage brought on by the “spectacle of death,” Pecou turned to Yoruba theology wherein life after death is seminal. In order to guide his investigation Pecou raised two provocative questions:

*Under the looming threat of death, how might we inspire life? Through what mechanisms could we resist the psychological violence and despair inspired by the threat of violence while at the same time usher in hope?*<sup>3</sup>

While examining Yoruba theology for answers Pecou became interested in the Egungun tradition of memorializing ancestors through masquerade. An Egungun masquerade in Yorubaland represents the incarnate spirits of ancestors who return to the village to interact with the living.<sup>4</sup> Pecou’s Egun series is a direct result of this research.

For this body of work, he created an all-white “New” World Egungun costume, consisting of a hoodie, sweat pants, athletic shoes, a flywhisk, and a beaded cowry-shell mask. Sixteen brass bells wrap his ankles, completing the costume. Pecou performed his version of an Egungun dance for a photo shoot, the results of which became the basis for his drawings. Strips of cloth with names—Martin & Medgar & George & Malcolm & James & Virgil & Jimmie & Ben & Herbert & Clementa & Emmitt & Abram & Sam & Michael & Anthony & Saxe & Dan & Henry & James & Amadou & Oscar & Sean & Trayvon & Michael & Eric & John & Jordan & Tahir & Walter & Freddy—replaced the highly decorated lappets of garments with amulets that appear on a traditional Egungun costume. In so doing the artist defied the finality of death by invoking Malcolm, Martin, et al., and permanently locating them in works of art, thereby answering the first question—“Under the looming threat of death, how might we inspire life?” The incarnate spirits of these black men and boys *live* in Pecou’s Egun drawings.

To answer the second question—“Through what mechanisms could we resist the psychological violence and despair inspired by the threat of violence while at the same time, usher in hope?”—Pecou recreates a traditional Egungun masquerade, leading a procession from Gadsden’s Wharf on the Cooper River in Charleston to the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art in a performance art ritual<sup>5</sup> designed to open his exhibition. Essentially, the artist invites the ancestral spirits of the community to enter the gallery with him and his audience bringing joyfulness, coolness,<sup>6</sup> and, most important, hope. With this exhibition Pecou is presenting a new way of thinking about the Egungun tradition in the “New” World.

Pecou’s art-making process has also evolved with his recent work. At his core Pecou remains a very fine artist whose painting skills have entered a mature stage. As an emerging scholar,<sup>7</sup> he has adopted a cutting-edge experimental research method that includes elements of participant observation, phenomenology, critical theory, and art history. As a devotee of the Yoruba *orisha* Obatala,<sup>8</sup> Pecou uses his privileged knowledge as an insider in the religion to inform his art. Note the predominant use of white—Obatala’s color—in his work. Also note the abundant use of cowrie shells, once used as currency in Africa, to depict wealth. In essence, the artist is honoring his *orisha*. According to African art historian Babatunde Lawal, “. . . the orisa are expected to have artistic tastes similar to those of humans. Art is therefore used not only to attract their attention but also to dignify their images.”<sup>9</sup> Fabric plays a major role in honoring an *orisha*. According to African art historian Henry John Drewal:

*The Yorùbá have been active cloth traders for many centuries (and continue to be today), buying and selling fabrics of every imaginable type and style. When they put together an Egúngún ensemble, they prefer the most expensive, most fashionable, most up-to-date styles to celebrate their ancestors. Thus, to honor the past, families want to demonstrate its vitality and sophistication—its active engagement with the present and with the global economy. They want to obtain the finest cloth they can find in the marketplaces of Nigeria, Benin, and the world, for this is an expression of their “buying power,” status, and devotion.*<sup>10</sup>

In recent years Pecou’s work has gained national and international acclaim through exhibitions in major museums, art centers, and galleries. According to Lawal, “If a devotee attributes his success in life to his *òrìsà*, he reciprocates not only with costly sacrifices but also by making its shrine as beautiful as possible.”<sup>11</sup>

There are three main functions for art in venerating the *orishas*—honorific, representational, and communicative.<sup>12</sup> Pecou accomplishes all three traditional Yoruba functions with his elaborate Egungun costume. That said, his Egungun costume also functions as a soft sculpture in a contemporary art exhibition, demonstrating that Pecou is simultaneously well grounded in both traditional Yoruba and contemporary Western art traditions.

Pecou further describes his practice as a fusion that includes “. . . elements of hip-hop culture, Black aesthetic movements such as Négritude and Yoruba spiritual practices as concepts of body, mind and spirit.” He writes, “In my work, hip-hop (body), Négritude (mind), and Ifa (spirit) combine to tell the story of a spirit’s journey and offer a proposal for holistic rejuvenation. *DO or DIE* is not a story of death, but one of life.”<sup>13</sup>

The results of his exploration into this sacro-secular terrain are evident in the works *something eternal, the way*, and *god*. These paintings are a visual *oriki*<sup>14</sup>—praise poetry—of a spirit being on a celestial journey wherein he encounters three female divinities. Pecou writes:

*We are all spirits on a journey. The significance in the paintings however refers to the idea that life is cyclical. The spirit figure is being prepared to return.... He is blessed by Orishas and made a warrior. This is significant in the context of this work because we are talking about resistance to the idea that we can be “ended” or destroyed through acts of violence against our bodies.*<sup>15</sup>

In *something eternal*, the spirit kneels before a very pregnant goddess with gold leaf on her body, referencing Oshun, the *orisha* of fertility, love, and beauty, whose color is gold. The *orisha* holds her divine womb with her left hand and, with her right hand firmly placed on the spirit’s head, blesses him.



Egungun, Republic of Benin, 2004. Credit: Henry John Drewal

Oshun’s womb is paradigmatic of an *igbá adù*, a round container in the form of a pregnant woman that holds “. . . Odù, Òrúnmìlà’s wife, and Ifá’s most scared items,” including “. . . *ikin*, the sixteen sacred palm nuts symbolically representing the sixteen principal Odù, all male, and a seventeenth small ivory object called *ólórí-ikin* (the principal *ikin*). This *ólórí-ikin* recalls Osun, the only female *òrìsà* and curiously also the seventeenth member of the party . . . on their mission to earth.<sup>16</sup> Collectively, *something eternal, the way*, and *god*, represent the divine female presence with which the spirit interacts in a cosmic universe. This triptych raises the “spectacle” of hope as the spirit being is consecrated and given permission to return to the physical world.

The narrative continues in *old gods, new names* as the spirit is empowered. He stands in a power pose emblematic of superheroes, very clearly exuding an air of invincibility. He wears a Guro/ni/Bwa crocodile-and-bird helmet mask in a rather unconventional manner—on his face rather than his head—



Egun Dance 1, 2016



Egungun Masquerade Costume, 2016



god, 2016

signaling the hybrid nature of African descendant peoples. In many African cultures, birds, crocodiles, lizards, snakes—essentially any animal that can navigate land, water, and the skies—are thought to be messengers from God, the ancestors, or natural forces. Encircling the spirit’s body, as well as the bodies of all of the figures in this collection of work, are thin golden lines that represent their *ashé*. *Ashé* is a concept that is seminal to the Yoruba belief system grounded in the principle that all things — animate and inanimate — are vested with a life force. Babatunde Lawal argues:

*In order to appreciate the functions and significance of art in òrìsà worship, we must be aware of its metaphysics in Yoruba thought . . . because of the special skills involved in its creation, art is often associated with the supernatural and thought to embody a kind of àsè.*<sup>17</sup>

In keeping with the Yoruba belief system of reincarnation, in the remaining paintings in this collection, *rising* and *the return*, Pecou presents us with the spirit, consecrated, fortified, and prepared for reincarnation back into the world of mortal beings.

Accompanying the paintings, drawings, and the performance art ritual, Pecou also created a video of his Egungun masquerade in performance that is:

*. . . projected in water (omi) a symbol of movement and transition in Ifa ideology. Omi represents symbolically and literally amniotic fluid. It is both life sustaining as well as a vehicle of movement, transition. Additionally, there is a music project and a short film entitled Emmett Still, a story of a young black man who . . . lives under constant threat of death and violence. He ultimately discovers strength in the power and beauty of his ancestors, a strength that affirms life and legacy.*<sup>18</sup>

In *DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance*, Fahamu Pecou has written a doctoral thesis with paint, pencil, charcoal, video, performance art, and music. With this dissertation, he has earned the right to be called the shit!

—Ashé



rising, 2016