The Art of Zero Bey: The Man Behind the Brush

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The Man Behind the Brush

Glenda Lewis, University of New Mexico

Hailing from South Central Los Angeles, Zero Bey is a second-generation African-American painter and Africanist cultural scholar. He is a recent graduate of the University of New Mexico (UNM) with a double major in Africana Studies and English Literature. His creative inspiration comes from a critical and close reading of texts of the Black experience in the United States and the broader Pan-African World. Intersecting race, class, gender, and sexuality, his artwork seeks to illuminate unequal power-relationships and disrupt oppressive forces in the promotion of social justice, equity, and inclusion.

Africana Studies and African American Literature are the primary sources of inspiration for the content of his paintings, and Zero asserts that his paintings must be read as text; the interpretation of each piece will be dependent upon the cultural literacy of the viewer. The specific social issues presented in his work reflect his interpretation of our collective social reality. These factors contribute to the socio/politico themes and the execution of contemporary ideas appearing in any socially conscious art production.

Most influenced by American writers and authors within a historical context, Zero prides himself on being a voracious reader and has been inspired by the work of Ralph Ellison, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Richard Wright, Chester Himes, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison and, most recently, the comic-book and essay writing of Ta-Nehisi Coates. Zero also credits the influence of painters and artistic movements, all of which reflect his broad geographic and trans-historical interests: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Romare Bearden, Van Gogh, and Gustav Klimt, as well as artists of Abstract Expressionism and the Harlem Renaissance. Music, too, is integral to his creative process, particularly Afro-Asiatic music modes of jazz and rhythm structured sounds.

Zero sees his artistic career as an ever-evolving process that drives him to produce more artwork than can be exhibited publicly. Interest in his work has normally resulted from viewings in private studio meetings and social media networks, along with national and international collaborations. Recently, on the campus of UNM he has shared his artwork via community engagement presentations sponsored by the Project for New Mexico’s Graduates of Color (PNMGC). In 2016, Zero had a solo exhibition at the Augusta Savage Gallery, located on the campus of the University of Massachusetts, and in 2014, he had an overseas artist residency in Bangalore, India.

Zero Bey continues to experiment and test the limits of his subject matter. For example, he no longer stretches his canvas or utilizes framing formats for exhibitions. He has come to prefer the draped tapestry aesthetic of hanging paintings. In this process, he uses less cropping and more overpainting of the edges to extend the motion of the image and to widen the audience’s visual experience. His subject matter is masterfully gaged to initiate meaningful interaction with his audience and purposefully measured for shock value, resulting in the visual repulsion and attraction of the viewer. This is a method which he uses to alternatively effect the audience response. He sees the role of Instagram and image-heavy media platforms common today as an essential element in developing this viewership. As a result, these types of social media platforms provide direct and timely audience response with little effort on the part of the artist.
Americanization of Oggabooga

Zero Bey, 2016
Acrylic paint on canvas
33 in. x 24 in.

Blind Man with Pistol
Zero Bey, 2016
Acrylic paint, graphite on paper
48 in. x 38 in.
“America is ripe for revolutionary social shifts in the practice of democracy,” Zero explains. “As an artist, I’m obligated to comment on what I witness occurring historically in our American culture.” As such, Zero intends to continue to utilize his art to express injustice in the world, while promoting social justice, equity, and inclusion.

Author

Glenda Lewis is a Ph.D. Candidate in Educational Thought and Sociocultural Studies in the Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies department at the University of New Mexico. Her scholarly interests include colorblind ideology and intersectionality.
Afro-Atlantic Odysseus

Zero Bey, 2017
Acrylic paint on canvas,
55 in. x 55 in.