

# THE ART OF SELF DEFENSE

**An exploration of art as a spiritual and political means for manifesting power**



Greetings friends, comrades, and fellow members of humanity! For those of you who have a hard time hearing or if you prefer to read things on your own time, I have attached a transcript of my presentation in the chat box of this zoom room. It is in the form of PDF so, if you like, you can open it up and read along with me. If you have trouble accessing it, you can email me for a link to the PDF after this presentation. My email is also in the chat box. Before I begin my presentation, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to everyone here in attendance! It means the world to me that you would take time from your lives to share this moment with me. I hope I can share something new and meaningful with you! Special thanks to all my family and friends in attendance, your support and love is what makes all this possible. Finally, Enormous thanks to my thesis committee for inspiring me and helping me develop my voice and the necessary skills to complete this body of work.

The focus of this presentation is to highlight the spiritual and political significance of my work. I will speak in my own voice in a way that I hope will best help you see my attitude and orientation in the

world. Because my thesis paper was focused on contextualizing my work within specific art movements and philosophies, this presentation will be more focused on my personal experiences and opinions. My creations and existence are built upon my belief that art can have a healing effect on the viewer. This, of course, means that I believe humanity needs healing. In our society, which is plagued by generational trauma, it is my hope that my art can be a necessary medicine. Before I outline how my spirituality informs my work, I want to express how politics is foundational in my art.



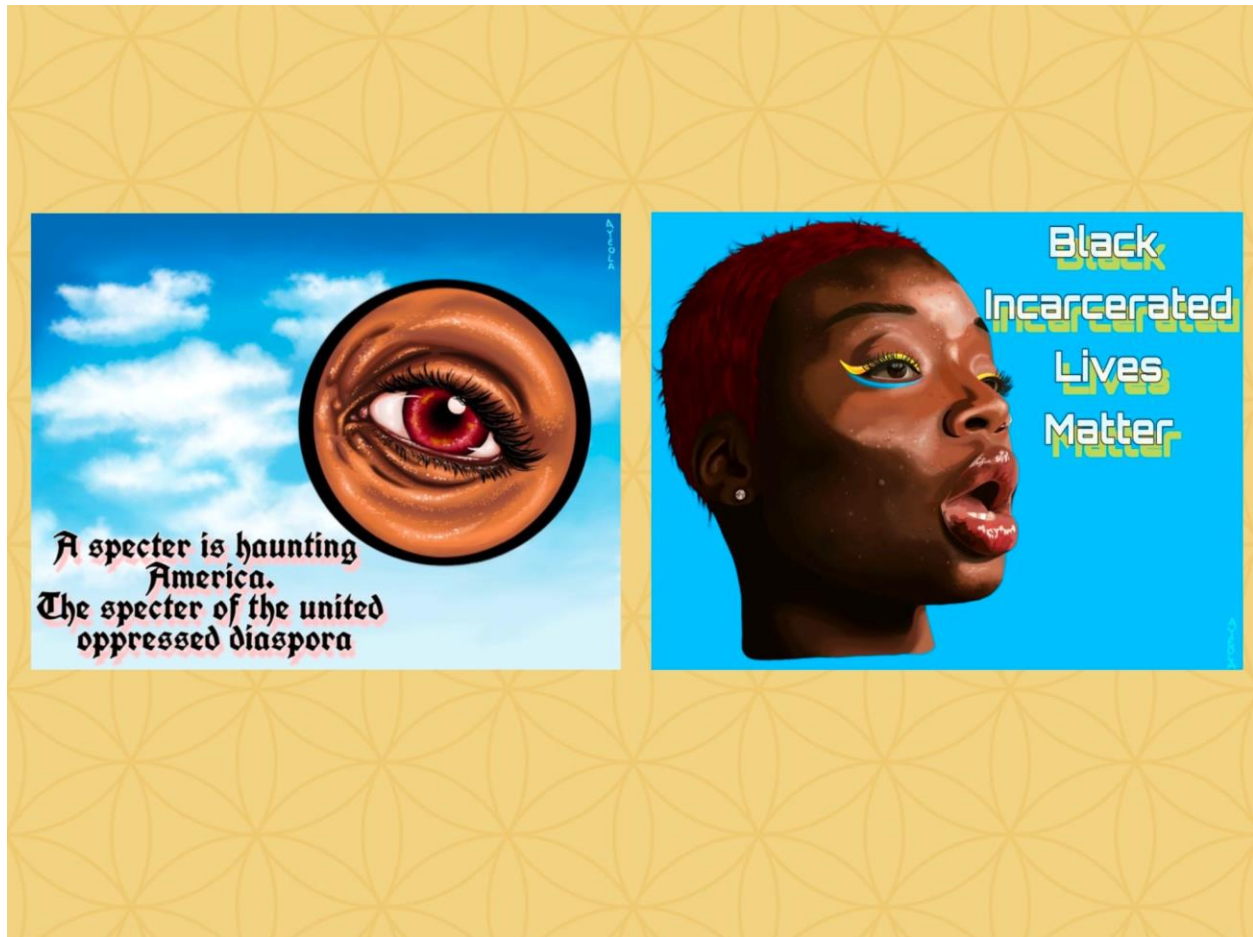
Today, in America, we are witnessing incredible levels of gun violence, environmental destruction, and hopelessness in the face of urgent issues like the pandemic, homelessness, police brutality, and unnecessary wars. Many of these issues have been experienced by our ancestors in different forms. For example, our ancestors experienced the trauma of slavery and colonization. The impact of these two phenomena on our body, mind and spirit cannot be understated. While our conditions have improved in some ways, they remain stagnant in others. Today we

experience the mass incarceration of people of color, people with mental disabilities, low-income people, homeless people, and political prisoners. Outside of prisons many of us experience the trauma of wage slavery which keeps many of us bound to low wage jobs and robs us of the time to heal, study, and organize for justice.

On top of all this our communities experience a continued stream of media that instills fear rather than hope. Much of our existence is painted by an illusion that our future is not in our hands. Our conditions keep many of us focused on survival instead of liberation. When we begin to accept our current situation as normal, we allow ourselves to practice patience instead of action. When we accept that a struggle for justice is futile, we begin to ignore or distance ourselves from people who are suffering. We may begin to actively avoid conversations about poverty or prisons. Or even worse, we may decide that politics is something we must avoid altogether.

I work hard to assert that my work is political because I believe that it is in the political realm that human rights issues can be faced head on. I find that whenever I speak about my race and the history of my ancestors, I am being called political. When I talk about prisons, poverty, and homelessness, I am called political. If it is political for me to question why human suffering is excused for the sake of building extreme wealth for a privileged few, then I assert that my work is indeed political.





I create with the hope that my art can help inspire more people to engage actively and continually in politics. When politics becomes something, we can choose to opt in and out of, we avoid tackling the root of many human rights issues. My artwork is created to stimulate political dialogues because I believe the issues, I am concerned about should not be ignored or considered inappropriate to discuss. My work aims to make politics less taboo and political conversations normal. When the politics we are introduced to in grade school and in the media is so limited, it is so important for us to take our political education in our own hands. Through dialogue with people who have different experiences and passions than us, our perspectives can be widened. I do not propose that the political divisions in this world can be healed entirely by dialogue alone, especially at the international level, but I do believe it is of primary importance. Before we can move beyond just dialogue, we must first make meaningful conversations a widespread phenomenon. A society that is unable to communicate about its most pressing issues is a society that is unlikely to develop solutions or take actions to address those

issues. There is this old saying that the squeaky wheel gets the oil. My art is a part of a chorus of squeaky wheels.



However, I want to express that the political nature of my work is tied to its spiritual nature. I see the two as a sort of yin and yang. With every step I take with art, I try my best to be aware of its spiritual and political implications. I operate under the assumption that I, and everyone else, was born for a purpose. I believe that the human experience is one of constant evolution towards a more blissful existence. I believe that my life experiences equipped me with the necessary tools and passion to help contribute to the pursuit of justice and peace through art, while other people are equipped to fight for justice with their words, music, physical strength, culinary abilities, leadership skills and many other ways. I believe every person is uniquely suited to heal societal wounds in the specific way that their life experiences have shaped them for.

This may sound cheesy, but I create under the belief that if we all follow our hearts and do what is important to us, we can all engage in

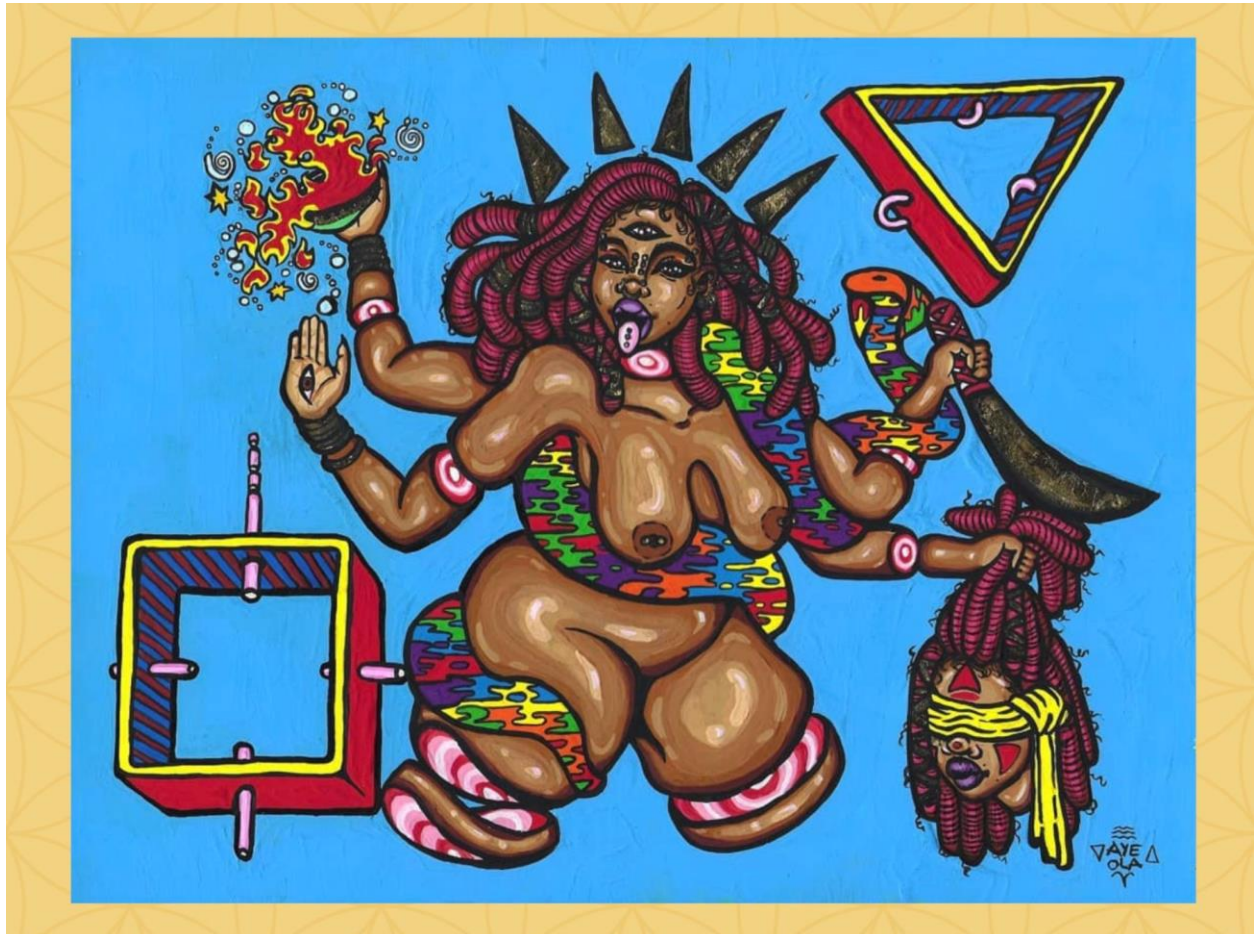


small steps that significantly alter the nature of humanity into a people that are capable of healing and inventing the ideas and movements that will liberate us. In other words, this is a butterfly effect. The butterfly effect is the concept that small actions can result in large consequences. We all have niche interests and life stories which can perfectly help us understand our path, which can help catalyze a series of divinely inspired events that perhaps miraculously save the world.



My understanding of my own path begins with my name, Ayeola Omolara. Ayeola means rainbow and Omolara means born at the right time. Both names are of Nigerian origin. My name is a great little summary of my identity and purpose. I exist within many different marginalized identities simultaneously and this contributes to the world that I navigate and the art that I create. I am black, with indigenous American ancestors from the Creek Nation and Nigerian ancestors from the Igbo nation. My ancestors have experienced being enslaved and colonized and this contributes to my desire for healing and justice. I grew up Jewish and started practicing Buddhism in high school. I am queer and

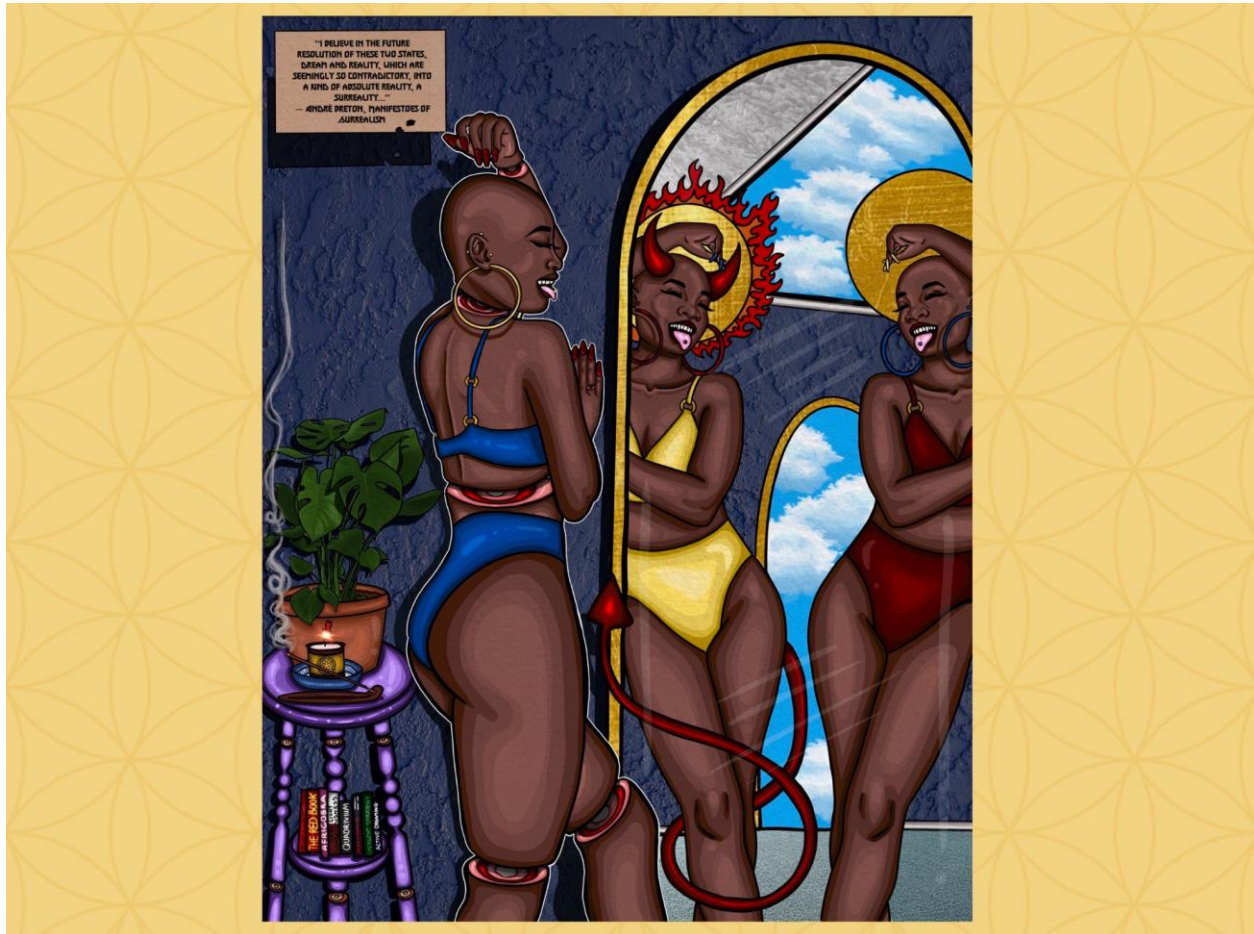
I exist on the spectrum of asexuality. I am also autistic, meaning my brain functions differently than the average regarding my social abilities, sensory awareness, and regulation of mood and behavior. Because my identity has so many facets, I heavily identify with the symbolism of the rainbow. I work hard to embrace all the different colors that make up myself in my art.



Regarding my middle name, Omolara, I was born at the right time because I was born after the 20th century black power movement, which produced heroes I can learn from like Malcom X, Martin Luther King, Angela Davis, and members of the Black Panther Party. Like my revolutionary ancestors, I believe that the oppression of the poor and people of color must come to an end and that our equity is worth fighting for. I think that all the previous generation's actions have aligned in a way that creates a situation where justice can finally be actualized. We have the capability to birth a new age where everyone can experience freedom and dignity. In the previous age we witnessed a rise in patriarchal systems, industrialization, colonization, and the demonization



of earth focused religious and spiritual practices. While the previous age involved the establishment of Capitalism and other systems that harmed humanity and the planet, I believe this new age will involve the dismantling of capitalism, a reemergence of communal living situations and a return to viewing humans as a part of the sacred earth.



Today we are experiencing and witnessing a renaissance that will shape our future. It is my intention to contribute to the revival of artistic, religious, and political practices that empowers people to take actions that benefit the evolution of humanity and the planet. Each of our actions must be informed by a desire for justice, equity, and joy for them to contribute to our liberation. By this I mean, if we are all working towards a different goal or solely for our own desires, our power is diminished, but if we can collectively envision a future where we are all free, we are more likely to create it. The difficulty lies in envisioning a blissful future when we are surrounded by so much hate and hopelessness. As an artist, I believe it is my duty to help paint a blissful future into reality. This is my unique path.



The spiritual and political aspects of my work meet under the umbrella of revolutionary surrealism, which is a synthesis of revolutionary art and surrealism. At this point I would like to do a short overview of these two movements and how I work to combine them with my gallery. Revolutionary art is a term and artistic movement developed by Emory Douglas of the Black Panther party and the members of the Afri-COBRA Art Collective. These two art movements created revolutionary art to illustrate black liberation and empower Black people to view themselves as strong, beautiful, and divine. Surrealism is, according to leader André Breton, an art movement that aims to unite the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality into an absolute reality, a super-reality", or surreality. Revolutionary surrealist art is currently how I like to describe my work. My dream of a joyful and liberated future is one that I believe can only be achieved through a revolution of our economy, culture, spirituality, and politics. Through surrealist art, I work to bring this revolutionary dream into reality.

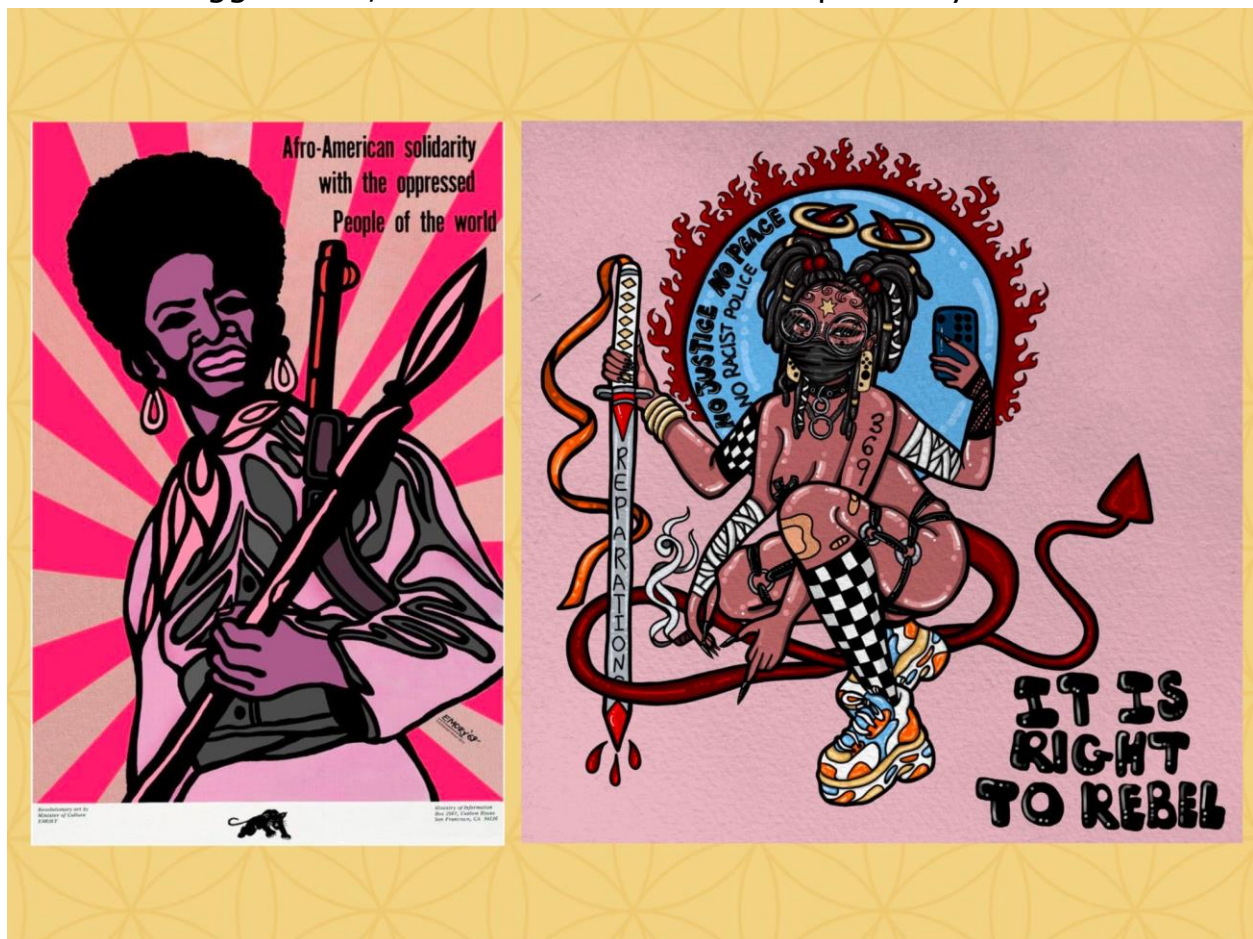


Lawrence Magid, Eldridge Cleaver, and Emory Douglas, Black Panther Party artist in 1968 at UC Berkeley. Digital First Media Group/Oakland Tribune via Getty Images.



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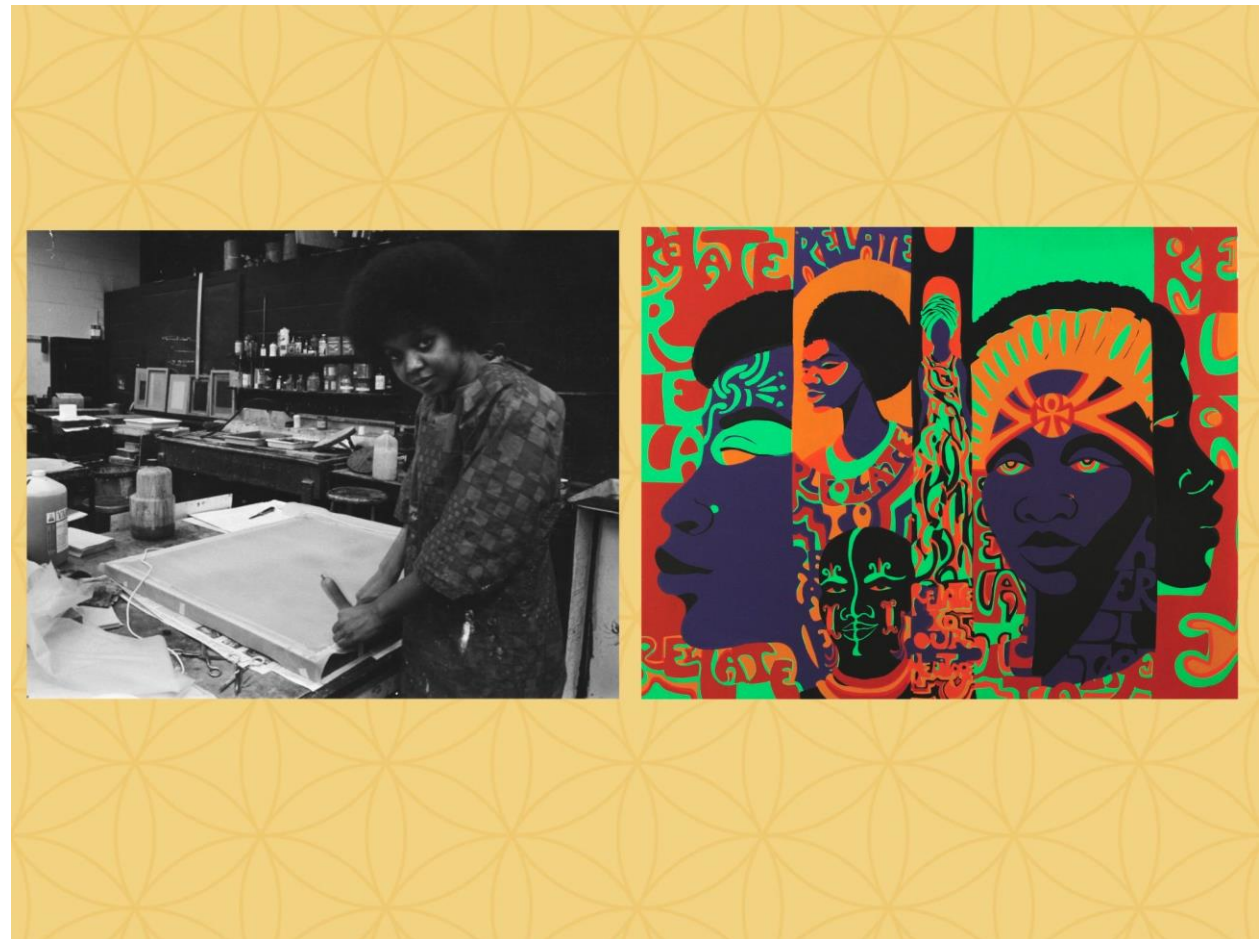
From my research, Emory Douglas was the first to begin creating art under the term, revolutionary art. Revolutionary art, according to Emory Douglas, is art that centers political education and counters misinformation in the state-controlled media. Revolutionary art encourages metaphorical and literal self-defense against racist violence and capitalist exploitation. Emory Douglas created artwork for the Black Panther party newspaper to help illustrate the ideas and demands highlighted in the parties ten-point program. This program demanded full employment, an end to the oppression of Black communities, decent housing, radical education, health care, an end to police brutality, an end to wars of aggression, and the end of the racist prison system.



Inspired by Emory, I see the power of art as a political tool. Emory's work is the art of self-defense. I draw upon his use of strong figures juxtaposed with language that clearly states the desires of the artist and the movements the art represents. Emory's work does not retraumatize its audience of Black people. Revolutionary art is work that believes we can acknowledge the past without drowning in misery. Like Emory, I work

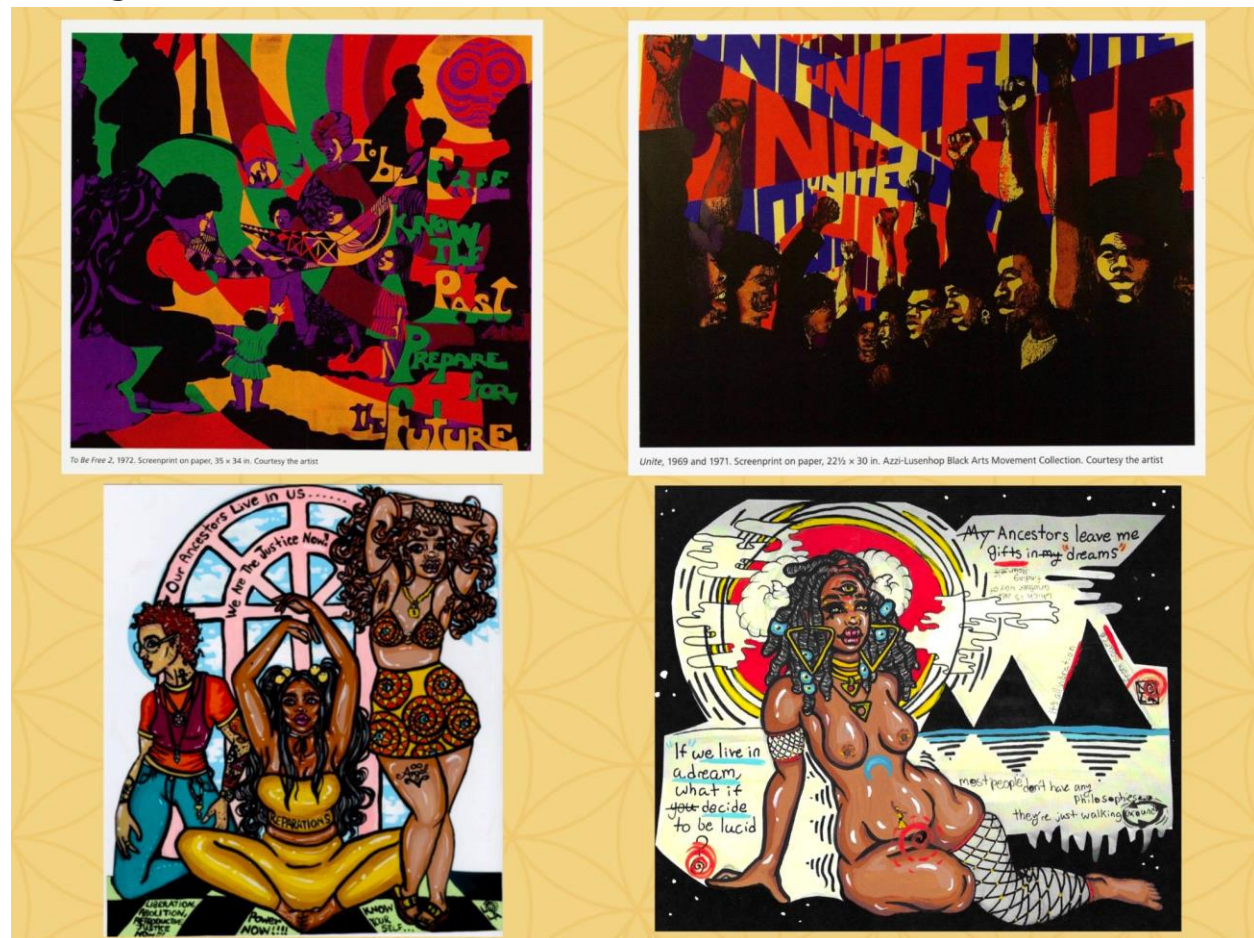


to illustrate figures in either joyful or empowered positions because I believe this is the best way to inspire the viewer to see themselves as revolutionaries.



Soon after Emory joined the Black Panther Party, the African Commune of Bad Relevant artists, also known as Afri-COBRA, was created. The artists of Afri-COBRA also created revolutionary art. This artist collective focused on creating striking images that depicted black figures in empowered and joyful unity. Afri-COBRA artists like Barbra Jones-Hogu also worked to create art that celebrated Black culture and encouraged the study of African religious practices, as seen in the painting here titled *Relate to Your Heritage*. Like the Afri-COBRA artists, I believe there is power in Black people learning about their African identity. In America, Black people are usually taught a history that begins with slavery and ends with the civil rights movement. Revolutionary art asserts that when we study the history and culture of African people, we can expand our world view and better understand the context of our situation. Like Barbra Jones-Hogu, I meld the political and spiritual in

many of my artworks, because I believe it is important to relate to our heritage.



Both Afri-COBRA artists and Emory Douglas's work for the Black Panther party focus on collective solidarity with oppressed people globally. They often created artworks that called for us to see how our struggles here in America parallel with our colonized ancestors and siblings overseas. Their artwork boldly expresses their political thoughts and works to shift our collective understanding of art. Art that is political can be beautiful and a necessary part of revolutionary action. In 1973, Art critic Paul Richard remarked in his review on Afri-COBRA's exhibition at Howard University Gallery that Afri-COBRA's political nature positively contributed to their body of artwork.

Richard stated that quote "Afri-Cobra artists are not merely painters. They are also propagandists and fervent politicians. They look upon their team as a cadre of the revolution and they have disciplined themselves to march within its ranks. Together [their art] contradicts something I have long believed: that art that is so blatantly political is



not art at all." end quote Afri-COBRA artists and Emory Douglas were working to create meaningful art that had the potential to shape the consciousness of the viewer and thus contribute to a positive change in our society. Like my revolutionary artist ancestors, I think politics, art, and spirituality can synthesize into a beautiful union. This is revolutionary surrealist art.



I would like to end this presentation by highlighting the zine I created to support my thesis exhibition. A zine is a small self-published magazine. The 32-page zine features images of my artwork captioned by song lyrics, interviews, and speeches by creators that I believe fall under the umbrella of revolutionary spiritual art. Each speaker or artist creates something deeply meaningful to me that has in some way inspired my body of artwork. The zine works to showcase how people from different backgrounds are all utilizing their unique perspectives to speak on aspects of their experience and society. Each of their creations contribute to the butterfly effect. It is my hope that by sharing their work with more people I can help amplify their voices and contextualize my art within the

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