

LAVERONICA
arte contemporanea

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Emory Douglas

Freedom Is A Constant Struggle

Opening Saturday, 19 August 2017, 19:00

12.08.17 – 15.12.17

To celebrate its tenth anniversary, **Laveronica Arte Contemporanea** is delighted to present the exhibition *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle* by **Emory Douglas**, an artist who has tied his name to the Black Panther Party, the revolutionary black nationalist party in the United States, and who made militancy for civil rights and the battle to free the oppressed its *raison d'être*. His works have inspired and influenced the iconic and symbolic imagination of many third-world liberation movements in Latin America, Asia and Africa. More recently, they have become a benchmark for the street-art culture.

To fully understand the essence of his art, we must reconsider the original context in which it took form. In the sixties, the metallic and dazzling gigantism of skyscrapers, steel bridges, enormous industrial complexes and immense highways, flaunted by the United States as symbols of freedom and well-being during the Cold War, concealed a society that was still closed to racial integration and equal rights for black people.

In the ghettos of American metropolises, where the black population was concentrated, there were growing protests among African Americans who demanded work, decent homes, access to education and health, and the same treatment in courts as whites.

In Oakland, California, in 1966 seething anger broke the chains of reform and non-violence preached by Martin Luther King and was funnelled into a revolutionary movement closer to the ideas of Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (later the Black Panther Party). It proposed a broad platform of demands to be implemented in the final analysis also with force, and it advocated the use of weapons as a deterrent against abuse by the police. It is no accident that the movement chose a noble and courageous animal – the black panther – as its symbol, as it represents strength and dignity. The biographies of the party founders are quite similar. They grew up in dingy, ramshackle buildings, houses made of wood or brick where steep metal fire escapes expressed a sense of transience and flight; they had known hunger and poverty, drugs and alcohol, and a hatred for white policemen and prisons. Behind bars, they learned to study and read the books of Marcuse and Mao Zedong, the classics of economics and philosophy, the codes of civil and criminal law. Once they got out of prison, they became aware of their ideological power and became organized politically.

Emory Douglas's case was the same: he grew up in poverty in the black slums of San Francisco, spent time in juvenile detention centres, and attended graphics courses at City College of San Francisco and San Francisco State, until he joined the Black Panther Party in 1967 at the age of twenty-four. He became the party's Minister of Culture and art director of *The Black Panther*, the party's official newspaper, a weekly with a circulation of thousands of copies between 1967 and 1976, and he gradually took on a leading role as repression and reactionary violence decimated the other leaders. He can be credited with translating the party's revolutionary ideals into cover illustrations and cartoons, summing up the articles of political analysis published in the weekly as direct and immediate graphic representations for a black community with a high illiteracy rate.

The illustrations hinged not only on specifically racial topics, but more generally on the concept of empowerment, the fight against poverty, discrimination, imperialism, immigration policy, freedom for political prisoners, better working conditions in industrial "prisons", the collective organization of free lunches, health care and schools for the lower classes.

The aim of images of policemen as pigs, politicians and judges as rats, black women with rifles slung over their shoulders and carrying babies, threatening-looking armed young people in the typical black leather uniform and berets of the Black Panthers, with machine guns and cartridge belts, and figures against the background of the socialist-communist rising sun was to debunk the power of the oppressor and instead build a mythology of the movement and its militants by openly challenging the establishment, with an attitude that spurred the black population to take pride, fight and pose resistance. The militants used his poster to plaster walls, fences, phone

booths, buses, service stations, laundromats, and the windows of grocery stores and shops in the ghettos, influencing thousands of other young blacks. Douglas's art endured even after the Black Panther Party disbanded in 1982, and today it represents a corpus of thousands of images, posters, comics, collages and photomontages, which in the contemporary collective imagination forms one of the most powerful visual interpretations of the struggle. His work lies outside the conventional art system, in which artists/producers of works created freely and specifically for this aim target intermediaries (galleries, art merchants, platforms), which are responsible for positioning them through the exhibition circuit of collectors and museums. Both explicitly and indirectly, each artist claims his or her individuality and creative originality, and strives to deliver these works to the eternity of cultural memory.

In Douglas's case, however, we are looking at works that originated with an ephemeral and circumscribed aim, powerfully conditioned by the short-lived timing of the weekly, limited technological means and poor financial resources, destined for mass circulation (newspapers, duplicated prints, flyers, semi-clandestine posters) in which the artistic function was wholly marginal. Time and again, the artist has emphasized that they are a collective work, the legacy of the black community, which was ultimately the source of inspiration. The original drawings have been lost, and it was unimportant to the artist to file and preserve them. He has kept only a few files, which he uses and reprocesses on his computer. Nevertheless, the power of his message, its adaptability to all geopolitical contexts in which protests emerge against the exploitation of man against man, and the great aesthetic quality of Douglas's works have allowed them to become part of what critics now consider art.

In the email correspondence that preceded the organization of the exhibition, we suggested that Douglas entitle it *Where Is Freedom?* We felt it was important to ask that question, especially because now many conquests of the past have been called into question again. His answer was immediate and revealing. "Freedom Is a Constant Struggle": this is the title he wanted for the exhibition. As is the case with collective art, Douglas asked us to bring together a community of local artists to contribute to the execution of some of his murals at the gallery. There will also be posters, videos and a series of original magazines of the Black Panther Party. The exhibition will also include a series of side events – the collective organization of free lunches in collaboration with the Maria SS. del Rosario Day Centre for Juveniles in Scicli, a conference and a closing celebration that will feature Emory Douglas, our special guest, to whom we feel strongly tied by a special sense of kinship and profound admiration.

Special thanks to Emory Douglas' crew: Rosa Agosta, Edoardo Augusto, Monia Berti, Sarah Lewiski, Angelica Lo Verso, Giacomo Lo Verso, Guglielmo Manenti, Maddalena Migliore, Luciano Romano, Giacomo Salemi, Andrea Scarfò, Nino Sicari e and the children of the Rosario's monastery community of Scicli.

Emory Douglas was born May 24th, 1943 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He has been a resident of the San Francisco California Bay Area since 1951. Douglas attended City College of San Francisco where he majored in commercial art. He was politically involved as Revolutionary Artist and then Minister of Culture for the Black Panther party, from February, 1967 until the Early 1980's. Douglas's art and design concepts were always seen on the front and back pages of the Black Panther Newspaper, reflecting the politics of the Black Panther Party and the concerns of the community.