

Reclamation and veneration in Fahamu Pecou's new exhibit "Do or Die"



September 15, 2016 Atlanta - Atlanta based artist Fahamu Pecou reacts as he listens to filmmaker, sculptor and provocateur Camille Billops (foreground) at Emory University Conference Center Hotel on Thursday, September 15, 2016. Both have made careers exploring black identity and representation in art. Pecou's work is in the permanent collection of the new Smithsonian African American museum, Billops' work is taught in colleges around the country.

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By [Rosalind Bentley](#), The Atlanta Journal-Constitution



The contractors were long gone, but [Fahamu Pecou](#) wanted to put the finishing touches on his new studio himself.

On a recent, frigid afternoon, he rolled polyurethane across the concrete floors of the sprawling space, a converted warehouse in Atlanta's West End neighborhood. With his wife, Jamila, he set up brushes, paints and pencils. He was proud of the building with its crisp white walls and pitch-black ceiling, the first studio he has owned in his 20-year career.

Back in September, [a massive fire gutted the studio he was renting in Inman Park](#). Flames claimed his art supplies, his memorabilia documenting his career. He also lost four works in progress, which were to have been late additions to his multimedia show, "Do or Die: Affect, Ritual, Resistance." Fortunately, the bulk of the show was out on national tour at the time of the fire, which is being investigated as arson. The exhibition is currently on view at the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University.

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"You know, I just try not to think about it, how it could have happened and just keep moving," Pecou said of the fire.

"Do or Die," a project he began in 2015 in the aftermath of several police-involved shootings of African Americans, asks questions Pecou has been forced to grapple with.

Among them: [How does one heal after tragedy?](#) And can one gather strength from the stories and spirits of those who've lost their lives?

For Pecou, the answers to those questions came through a spiritual practice in the West African Yoruba tradition called Ifa. It has been central to his life in recent years. This from a man who grew up going to a Baptist church in a tiny South Carolina town, who was in the pew every time the sanctuary's doors were opened. The Ifa tradition, practiced in various forms from Nigeria to South America to the Caribbean to the U.S., has complex ideology. But a central tenet is the belief that those who pass away can still be called upon for guidance and serve as bridges to a deeper spiritual plane.

Some of the massive canvases in Pecou's show encourage viewers to not fear death, but to imagine it as a state of being in which one's life lessons give comfort and guidance to those who've been left behind.



Artist Fahamu Pecou wearing the masquerade of the Ifa tradition outside Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C., in 2016 for the premiere of his exhibition, "Do or Die" commissioned by the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art in Charleston, S.C. (The Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

With this show, Pecou calls on the spirits of black men who were killed by police or were victims of racial profiling that led to their deaths: Amadou Diallo, Sean Bell, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Freddy Gray and Walter Scott, among others. Pecou also references black men who were part of the African-American freedom struggle but were felled by assassins' bullets: Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers, Jimmie Lee Jackson, Clementa Pinckney. What binds their narratives in this exhibit is Pecou. He depicts himself on mammoth canvases and in smaller more intimate drawings as the Ifa "egungun" or conduit through which those spirits are called.

In "The Way," an 8-foot by 5-foot canvas, Pecou is the supplicant, his entire skull covered in a mask of cowrie shells, his lower torso clad in white. He is kneeling before a female figure as if asking her blessing on a journey where he'll raise the spirits of those dead men. In another work, "Egun Dance 5," he is wrapped in a masquerade, an elaborate Ifa cloak, emblazoned with the men's names. He whirls and spins, urging their souls forward.

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"There is all this negative and debilitating language about our existence as black men," Pecou said. "And I used to internalize it. Like between the ages of 18 and 28 years old, I would mark each birthday with what hadn't happened to me. 'I'm 18, I haven't been shot.' 'I'm 22, I don't have a baby mama, yet.' 'I'm 23, I have not been to jail.' As a black man, it seemed like my life was pre-destined to be ruined by some tragedy. But when I turned 28, I woke up and saw, 'Well, that was a waste of time.' So, I wanted to re-language our experience as black people, reorienting our identities beyond what Western culture tells us we are."

From his beginnings as a graphic and performance artist in Atlanta's underground art scene to his rise to major shows at the High Museum of Art, Art Basel in Miami and galleries in Paris, Pecou has always used himself as the primary subject in his work. He interrogates what it means to be a young black man in America, whether examining the sagging pants trend as an expression of resistance or questioning the idea of respectability politics among a middle-class African Americans.

Pecou was shaped by Atlanta's burgeoning hip hop scene as a student at Atlanta College of Art (now part of SCAD) and Spelman College, where he took classes as well. For a time, dabbled in pursuing a rap career. But as he grew in Ifa, his focus shifted. There is still a hip-hop sensibility to the work, but spiritual exploration grips "Do or Die."



"Rising" is a new work by Atlanta artist Fahamu Pecou. It's part of his exhibition "Do or Die" now on view at the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University. (The Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

His early work intrigued Mark Sloan, artistic director of the Halsey Institute of Art at the College of Charleston in South Carolina. Over the years, they kept in touch, with Sloan visiting Pecou's studio and Pecou visiting the Halsey. The Halsey's focus is on promoting early-to mid-career artists or those who have been overlooked. Pecou's career was gathering steam. His paintings were featured on television shows such as "Empire" and "black-ish." Sloan wanted a chance to collaborate with Pecou but wanted the right moment.

"I think he was wary of me, this white man in Charleston," Sloan said. "I said, 'I want you to do something you've never done before or seen, but let's do it together.'"

On April 4, 2015, 47 years after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Walter Scott, an unarmed black man, was shot to death by a North Charleston, S.C., police officer as Scott was running away from a traffic stop. Sloan sent Pecou a copy of The Post and Courier, the Charleston newspaper, with the Scott story on the front page. To it, Sloan attached a Post-it note that read, "It's time."

The two spoke about how Pecou might respond to the moment.



Atlanta-based artist Fahamu Pecou's work "Untitled 3" appears at the Michael C. Carlos Museum. CONTRIBUTED BY FAHAMU PECOU (For the AJC)

At first, the artist thought about creating a memorial. He rejected the idea for its morbidity and sense of finality. Rather than remembering the dead as victims, he wanted them to be venerated as honored ancestors. Ifa presented a path forward.

“He wanted to come up with a new way of processing this unconscionable horror and turn it and create a space for discussion and going deeper in spiritual ways,” Sloan said.

While on fellowship at the Hambidge Center for the Creative Arts and Sciences in Rabun County, Pecou began his work. He’d take breaks and drive around small towns in the area, stopping in fabric shops looking for cloth to make the masquerade he’d use in the project. He often photographs himself and uses those images as inspiration, so he needed to have an actual ritual robe and mask made. Store clerks gave him bags of fabric swatches for free. His only requirement was that they be white, an Ifa symbol of healing, enlightenment and restoration.

To construct the actual masquerade, he turned to his longtime collaborator, Grace Kisa, a mixed media sculptor and print maker. Pecou gave her the fabric, strips of cloth silk screened with the names of the killed black men, brass bells and a bag full of hundreds of cowrie shells. The only thing he was insistent on was that the cloak have a hoodie honoring Trayvon Martin.

“He trusted me to do what I did,” Kisa said. “I could make it as fabulous as I could and that it stood in line with his vision.”



Artist Fahamu Pecou unites contemporary commentary on endemic violence against black men with African spiritual traditions in his solo show “DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance,” which includes the work “The Return.” CONTRIBUTED BY LYONS WEIR GALLERY, NEW YORK (For the AJC)

Much of Kisa's work was done by hand over several months. The cowrie shell skull mask and hoodie took six weeks alone to construct, she said.

In August 2016, Sloan and Kisa saw the pieces come together. For the Charleston opening gala, Pecou began at Gadsden's Wharf, the place where thousands of enslaved Africans disembarked from ships. The city was one of the nation's major ports for the slave trade. The wharf is the future site of the International Slavery Museum slated to open in 2020. Dressed in the masquerade and surrounded by Ifa priests, drummers, dancers and supporters dressed in white, Pecou led the procession through the streets toward the museum. Sloan said at least 400 passersby joined in as the ensemble advanced. When they got to Emanuel AME Church, the group paid homage to the nine African American worshippers murdered there by white supremacist Dylann Roof. Drum beats vibrated. The masquerade's bells chimed.

"Watching him approach, my breath caught in my chest," Kisa said. "To see it activated and in full flower, it was breath taking."

Pecou doesn't remember much of the procession. He said the moment was too charged, his mind not focused on what was going on around him but on what he was trying to conjure.

For the opening last month at the Carlos Museum, Pecou and his wife and family wore white, but there was no such ceremony. Just a reception hall full of guests who made their way through the gallery, dark and womb-like, a contrast to the bold white canvases. The masquerade was draped over a life size mannequin, its face covered by the mask. Across from it, the four paintings lost in the fire had been repainted by Pecou in time for opening night.



Fahamu Pecou discovers the healing power of art after a childhood of loss and tragedy. (Video by Jason Getz, Edit by Ryon Horne/ AJC)