

COLETTE GAITER

What Revolution Looks Like: The Work of Black Panther Artist Emory Douglas

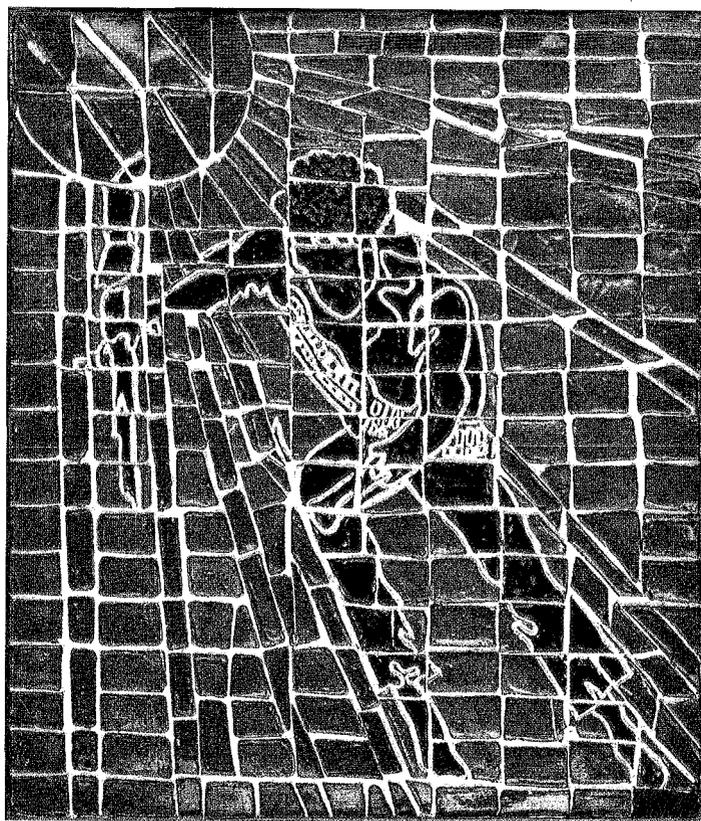
Artists are here to disturb the peace.

—James Baldwin

It was in 1971, when I was still in high school, that I saw my first *Black Panther* newspaper—one my sister brought home from Howard University. I had never seen anything like it. The drawings were bright and bold, and the text was outrageous compared to everything else I had ever read about politics and world events. I loved it so much I copied one of Emory Douglas's images from the paper for a mosaic in my ceramics class. The image is of a black revolutionary running with a gun (right).

At the time I did not recognize the generic icon of a guerrilla warrior—a barefoot figure wearing tattered pants and a headband tied around his Afro, with a bullet magazine draped across his body and a rifle held prominently in one hand. The image was like the protest and propaganda posters from Viet Nam, Africa, Cuba, and South America—places in the world where colonialism, imperialism, and by extension, capitalism were being overthrown.

The *Black Panther* newspapers, with their huge typographic headlines, use of color, and strikingly rendered drawings of black people were irresistible to me. Aside from their pure visual seductiveness,



ABOVE

Colette Gaiter, ceramic mosaic with handmade mounted tiles on wood, 1971.
12 x 9 inches (30.4 x 22.8 cm)

I was attracted to Douglas's images because they showed both anger and hope.

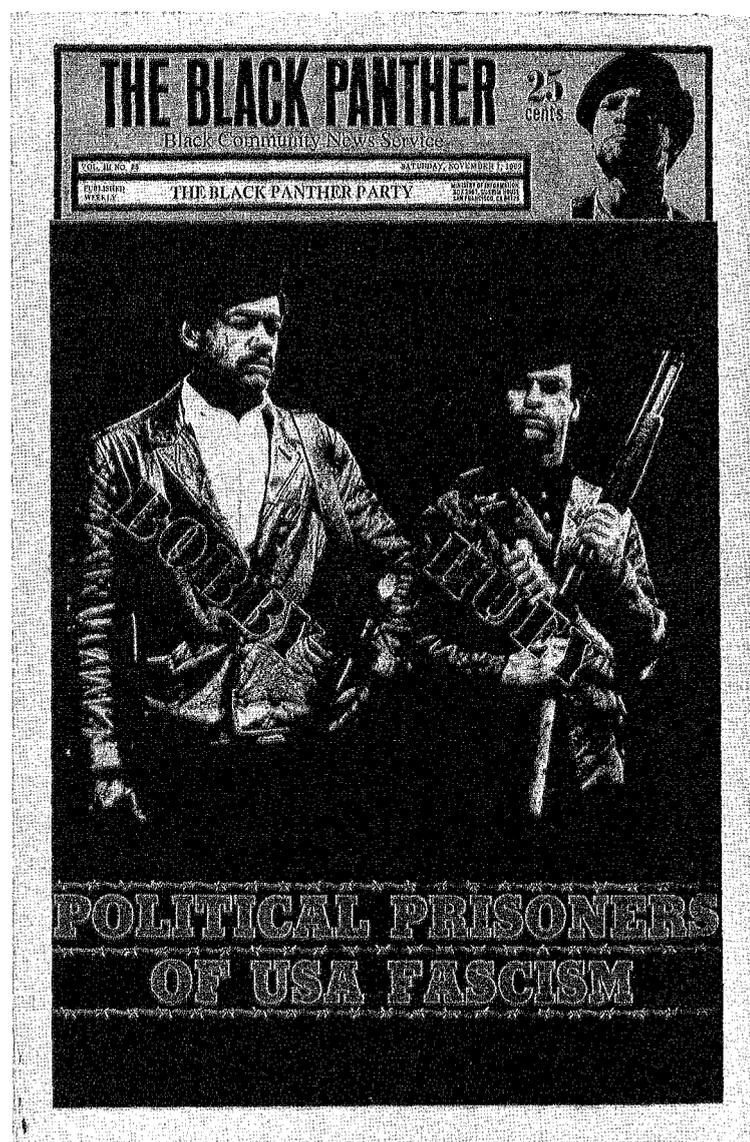
By 1970 most of the marches, riots, and turbulent expressions of anger and frustration about discrimination that characterized the mainstream Civil Rights Movement were over. Laws had changed, but conditions had not improved nearly enough. What came into my house with the *Black Panther* was a glimpse of a reality I suspected was out there somewhere, although I had never experienced it myself.

As a black teenager in an overwhelmingly white suburban high school in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., the *Black Panther* visualized ideas that I did not know how to express. I was coming into my political consciousness and awareness of the world. My high school was liberal, even progressive, and I was regularly exposed to thinking that challenged the status quo. But nothing I had ever seen or read so clearly and succinctly laid out the underlying problems in late twentieth-century American society that disproportionately affected the black and poor. Radical change starts with pointing out plainly and clearly what no one else will dare talk about or represent, and Douglas's work shouted the Panthers' mission through images. While Douglas is not as well known as other Panther leaders, his work was essential to the Black Panther organization and its message.

Douglas's work on the *Black Panther* newspaper and for the party was fearless in content and style. He was the party's Revolutionary Artist, graphic designer, illustrator, political cartoonist, and the master craftsman of its visual identity. His distinctive illustration styles, cartooning skills, and resourceful collage and image recycling made the paper as explosive visually as it was verbally. He showed as much versatility with different styles and techniques as a musician who can play several instruments as well as write music. Douglas also served as a mentor of sorts to the other artists and designers he supervised while working for the party.

Art directing the newspaper was only part of his job as the party's Minister of Culture. He created posters that illustrated the party's general goals and publicized concerts and events. In addition to organizing community-based cultural activities involving musical performances, theater, and dance, he helped produce fundraisers in the Bay Area that showcased national talent like the Grateful Dead.

One of Douglas's most significant contributions to the party was his "branding" of the Black Panthers' revolutionary vision before the concept of branding was widely used for marketing ideas and products. The Panthers were adept at creating recognizable signifiers and icons that identified their members and eventually represented their ideology. Some ubiquitous elements of the "brand," which constantly appeared in the paper, were black berets, leather jackets, military-style machine guns, and the Panther logo. "This is what revolution looks like" was the message. The revolution would not be televised, so Douglas visualized it with his art and work for the paper, communicating specific instructions through his images.¹ After the perceived failures of the peaceful, mainstream Civil Rights Movement, Douglas, along with Huey P. Newton



ABOVE
November 1, 1969: The Black Panthers, and Douglas in particular, were adept at "branding" their message through the consistent use of several elements in the images used in the *Black Panther* and in posters, such as black berets, leather jackets, and machine guns.

¹ This expression "the revolution will not be televised" comes from the 1972 Gil Scott-Heron song of the same name.

and Bobby Seale, wanted to represent an ideal revolution against racism and oppression in the United States, hoping to bring about the equality that civil rights legislation had not.

The Black Panther Party leaders conceived the job of “Revolutionary Artist” as a critical part of the liberation struggle. In his manifesto “Revolutionary Art/Black Liberation,” published in the *Black Panther* in 1968, Douglas wrote, “The Black Panther Party calls it revolutionary art—this kind of art enlightens the party to ... educate the masses of black people—we do this by showing them through pictures—‘The Correct Handling of the Revolution.’”² The party’s message was always translated into a visual medium because, as Douglas explained, “the masses of black people aren’t readers but activists.”³

Compared to the new millennium/post-9/11 climate of forced consensus in media messages and images, protest graphics of the 1960s and ’70s are shocking in their directness. In revisiting them it is important to remember the conditions that made protest necessary. Institutionalized discrimination and injustice motivated political activism in a range of marginalized constituencies. Blacks and other minorities, as well as students, women, the disabled, and gays and lesbians organized successful legal challenges and protests. These groups were responsible for massive shifts in how Americans thought about race, sexuality, and gender difference.

The fact that we now take these changes for granted is a paradox. Activists and revolutionaries like the Black Panthers worked to make ideas that were once believed to be extreme—like equal opportunity for all Americans—seem like the natural order of things. Representing those changes in images was a fundamental part of the strategy to make previously radical ideas seem normal and universal.

The lesson to be relearned from twentieth-century protest movements is that individuals working collectively do have the power to effect change. In the late 1960s, the Black Panthers understood that people were ready for change, and they tried to galvanize the anger and frustration of alienated communities into an international revolutionary movement.

At the same time that the Panthers founded their party, the American involvement in the Viet Nam War—which started with sending military advisers to South Viet Nam—was evolving into a seriously

divisive national crisis and eventually cost the lives of 55,000 troops. Over time, the war was less and less popular. Activists made people aware of deceptions that kept American troops in an untenable war. Americans who previously would have never dreamed of protesting their own government’s policies, found themselves attending large-scale demonstrations. After the American military lost the war of public opinion and will, combat defeat soon followed.

As the U.S. persists in another controversial war in Iraq, it seems an appropriate time to take another look at Douglas’s provocative work.

Douglas came to work on the paper in 1967, in an incredible moment of coincidence and synchronicity, when he met Black Panther leaders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale at a party meeting. Another party member introduced Douglas to them as an artist; he had studied commercial art at the City College of San Francisco and worked at a print shop. Newton and Seale were putting together the first issue of the *Black Panther* using a typewriter and copy machine. Together they discussed ways to improve the paper’s image. Douglas volunteered on the spot to go home, get some supplies, and help make the paper look more professional.⁴

Newton and Seale understood the changing and increasingly important media culture. They tried to visually represent the party’s community work while simultaneously preparing oppressed people for revolution, if necessary, in pursuit of psychological and economic liberation. They found the man to do this in the twenty-two-year-old Douglas. The night of that fortuitous meeting, Douglas committed himself to creating and maintaining the organization’s visual identity, and he assumed the position of Art Director of the *Black Panther* until it ceased publication in 1979.

The confluence of Newton and Seale’s carefully constructed ideology and Douglas’s vision and artistic talent made the *Black Panther* a visual tour de force in the lively world of ’60s and early ’70s leftist political activism. Continuing a long tradition of revolutionary art, which was being used at that time in the service of conflicts all over the world, Douglas was the most prolific and persistent graphic agitator in the American Black Power Movements.

2 Philip S. Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 16.

3 Ibid.

4 Interview with the author, July 2004.

He profoundly understood the power of images in communicating ideas. Douglas took advantage of the tabloid-size paper by creating a back-page poster every week, which was often reprinted separately, sometimes in color. These extraordinary works of art were not displayed on pristine gallery walls, but wheat pasted on abandoned buildings in ghettos, and the newspapers were sold on street corners and college campuses all across the United States. As evidence of the paper's popularity, it had an impressive weekly circulation. Estimates of the *Black Panther's* peak circulation range from 139,000 to 400,000; it had its highest circulation in 1970 and 1971.⁵

Inexpensive printing technologies like photostats (black-and-white photographic copies) and materials like press-down type and adhesive textures and patterns, made publishing a two-color, heavily illustrated weekly tabloid newspaper possible. Douglas's distinctive illustrations featured inventive combinations of textural effects and thick black outlines (which were used not only for the aesthetic effect but also to cover up any areas where two separately printed colors might not exactly line up). Douglas's facility with graphics and his printing expertise made the paper look like a more expensive publication.

Part of Douglas's genius was that he used the visually seductive methods of advertising and subverted them into weapons of the revolution. His images served two purposes: to illustrate conditions that made revolution a reasonable response and to construct a visual mythology of power for people who felt powerless and victimized.

The *Black Panther's* back-page posters, created by Douglas and other artists working on the paper, tell the party's story over twelve years. In the early years of the party, the paper concentrated on empowerment by visualizing oppressed people, often armed, taking control of their own lives. In the party's final years, the illustrations on the back-page posters turned to more specific and attainable concerns like supporting candidates for elected office and economic development.

Douglas's imagery was dramatically different from earlier Civil Rights Movement graphics, which included text-based protest signs with demands like "JOBS FOR ALL NOW!" Douglas's work was persuasive and directed to a different audience—not to the oppressors, but to the oppressed. His work con-

tained empowering messages—it was storytelling with an agenda.

The Civil Rights Movement was an essential and long overdue legal battle. The "first wave" of civil rights activity (the Black Power Movement was the second) was practical and legal in its focus, relying on photographic imagery as evidence to build its case in the public mind. Newspaper images of police dogs attacking black protesters and fire hoses turned on crowds of peaceful protesters built international support for the Civil Rights Movement by exposing institutionalized brutality through the trusted medium of photography. Reflecting the inherent difference between illustration and photographic documentation, the *Black Panther's* images and bold graphics showed an imagined reality—what the revolution would make possible.

Douglas, whose work was concurrent and ideologically aligned with the Black Arts Movement, understood the critical need for self-representation in the liberation process. The 1960s and '70s Black Arts Movement, which was part of the larger Black Power Movement, helped to define an independent, unassimilated identity for African Americans through the vehicle of culture. Fighting oppression's psychological effects, black artists of every type created a world that replaced negative media representations with images of black pride and solidarity. Instead of telling stories and showing images in mainstream (white) media, Black Power advocates set out to establish true creative freedom for African Americans. By forming black presses, artist collectives, theater groups, and other organizations, black people were controlling the content of cultural material and its distribution within their communities.⁶

As Laura Mulvey argues in her essay "Myth, Narrative, and Historical Experience," "moving from oppression and its mythologies to a stance of self-definition is a difficult process and requires people with social grievances to construct a long chain of countermyths and symbols."⁷ Visually connecting African Americans to the rest of the African diaspora was part of this process. Continuing the goals of the early twentieth-century Harlem Renaissance, the new political black power relied on creating an African American aesthetic that would serve black liberation's cause. Using the Black Power Movement's philosophy, Douglas's style of heavy black lines and patterns

5 The 139,000 estimate comes from a FBI headquarters memo to Chicago and seven other field offices, May 15, 1970, as cited by Ward Churchill, "To Disrupt, Discredit and Destroy: The FBI's Secret War against the Black Panther Party," in *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party*, eds. Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas (New York: Routledge, 2001), 86. Douglas estimates the high circulation to be 400,000, and there are others who give estimates somewhere in between this and the FBI estimate.

6 Two of the biggest black presses were Broadside Press in Detroit, founded by Dudley Randall, and Third World Press in Chicago, founded by Haki Madhubuti (formerly Don Lee).

7 Laura Mulvey, "Myth, Narrative, and Historical Experience," *History Workshop* (Spring 1984): 3.

alluded to traditional African art, which relied on abstract symbolism and stylized representation instead of photographic realism valued in traditional white European art.

In the "second wave" of civil rights activity, the Black Power Movement activists shifted their focus from changing laws to changing minds. African American cultural creators tried to control production and distribution of mediated news (newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and nonfiction) and art (visual art, theater, dance, music, poetry, and fiction) as much as possible. Artists and writers like Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Sonia Sanchez (for whom Douglas illustrated the cover of *Home Coming*; see page 26), Elizabeth Catlett, Ed Bullins, Marvin X, and a multitude of others across the country worked in their own theaters, exhibited in black galleries, published their own magazines and pamphlets, and cultivated other young black artists. According to Larry Neal, one of the movement's most important poets, "The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community."⁸ Art, politics, and life were inseparable from each other.

Literature and fine art contributions of the Black Arts Movement are well documented and celebrated. Print media, in the form of newspapers, poetry broadsides, and magazines, is probably the least documented and studied part of black creative production during this period. The Nation of Islam's newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, was published weekly and featured illustrations and images that were formally different from the *Black Panther's*, but similarly served the organization's political agenda. Established black newspapers and magazines like *Ebony*, *Jet*, the *Amsterdam News*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, and *Chicago Defender*, had economic and political pressures that kept their content more conservative and mainstream and separated them from the more radical aspects of the Black Arts Movement.

Contrary to prevailing mythology, the Black Panthers were not black nationalists, which caused some conflict with others in the Black Arts Movement. The Panthers' goal was an end to global capitalism and imperialism. They believed that the worldwide problems of oppression could only be solved in alliance with countries outside of the Western world, coalitions not determined by race, but by ideology. The idea of armed revolution seemed possible,

at least as a galvanizing idea, considering what was happening in other parts of the world.

Douglas sought to take on capitalism and global media imperialism by visually and politically aligning the Panthers with the worldwide liberation movement. Images from Central America, Cuba, Asia, and Africa served as models for representing revolution. Comparing one Black Panther cover to a Cuban poster about the Viet Nam War shows their similarities in style and content (opposite).

The use of armed female warriors/revolutionaries also reflects the influence of international political imagery on Douglas. The smiling armed woman in one Vietnamese propaganda poster (below) exemplified the typical international war image of the 1960s and '70s. Douglas published similar images created by international artists often enough that readers learned to view images of armed men and women as commonplace.

OSPAAAL, the Organization of Solidarity of the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, which is



ABOVE

This Vietnamese propaganda poster showing a female warrior reiterated the Black Panther Party's position that women's participation was essential in international Third World revolutionary movements.

⁸ Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 257.



still in existence, was Douglas's main source of international liberation art. The U.N.-recognized, Cuban-based nongovernmental organization "was once the primary source of solidarity posters produced in Cuba and aimed at activists around the world."⁹ Douglas's own work was politically and formally allied to the OSPAAAL revolutionary artists. A 1968 poster from the organization, designed by Lazaro Abreu, featured one of Douglas's illustrations (opposite).

The twelve years the *Black Panther* was in print coincided with the period during which protest posters from the U.S. and around the world were at their most creative and dynamic. In the U.S., posters used in the Chicano struggle for self-determination in California were both visually powerful and politically effective, and it's clear that this work informed Douglas's.¹⁰ Influenced as well by the international protest style, Douglas's art fused everyday black life with revolutionary spirit. Each person was a representative character, telling a story in a single image. A good example of this is a poster that reads, "Hallelujah! The might and the power of the people is beginning to show" (see page 102). Wearing an

apron indicating the type of work she does, this triumphant woman sports a button with the faces of political prisoners Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins.

In the *Black Panther*, poor people represented a new political consciousness. While most popular media represents the middle to upper class as the norm, Douglas portrayed poor and oppressed black people as the norm, the same way Norman Rockwell concentrated on illustrating ordinary (although idealized) white people in small-town America. Departing from the WPA/Social Realist style of portraying poor people, which some have argued is voyeuristic and patronizing, Douglas's energetic drawings showed respect and affection. His work maintained his subject's dignity while illustrating the harsh reality of life for the disenfranchised in the ghetto.

The empathetic representation of the poor in the *Black Panther* is one of Douglas's greatest accomplishments. One poster reads: "Black Misery! Ain't we got a right to the tree of life?" (see page 103). The woman in this drawing, hand on her hip in defiance, shares her home with a large rat, its size exaggerated by Douglas for emphasis. Although the posters often illustrated substandard living conditions, there was no self-pity. Another densely illustrated image tells the story of a young child trapped in poverty, but she holds a picture of a boy in the Panther Free Breakfast Program and stands in front of a photograph hanging on the wall of 1968 presidential candidate Shirley Chisholm. The top of the poster reads, "A vote for Chisholm is a vote for survival" (see page 159).

Douglas represented every segment of the poor and working-class population—including children, the elderly, and women. Douglas said the women in his drawings represented his "mother, sisters, aunts—all the women in the community."¹¹ In the pages of the *Black Panther*, his renderings of women engaged in everyday tasks like cooking, cleaning, and grocery shopping coexisted with images of women carrying weapons and defending themselves and subverted the sexism of traditional roles. Carrying on in the face of overwhelming oppression was as heroic and essential to the revolution as armed combat. Women were not only subjects of the paper's revolutionary art, some of the paper's artists were women, like Tariqa (known as Matilaba) Lewis and Asali, reflecting the fact that women worked throughout the Panther organization.

ABOVE

Untitled poster, original illustration by Emory Douglas, poster design by Lazaro Abreu. Produced for OSPAAAL, Cuba, 1968. 20.5 x 13 inches (52 x 33 cm), screenprint.

9 Lincoln Cushing, *¡Revolución!: Cuban Poster Art* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2003), 10.

10 Chon A. Noriega, *Just Another Poster? Chicano Graphic Arts in California* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 8.

11 Interview with the author, July 2004.

Paradoxically, even though his work portrayed the horrendous injustices and indignities suffered by the black population, Douglas's messages were essentially hopeful. There was no patronizing. As often as he exposed people suffering in deplorable conditions, he also drew dark-skinned African-featured people beaming with pride. These posters were not meant for the larger public or for those inflicting the misery, but for the people enduring life in the ghettos, giving them assurance that the Panthers were working to help them improve their lives permanently.

Douglas illustrated the direct impact of Panther initiatives and programs, like the Free Breakfast Program for Children, free health clinics, schools,

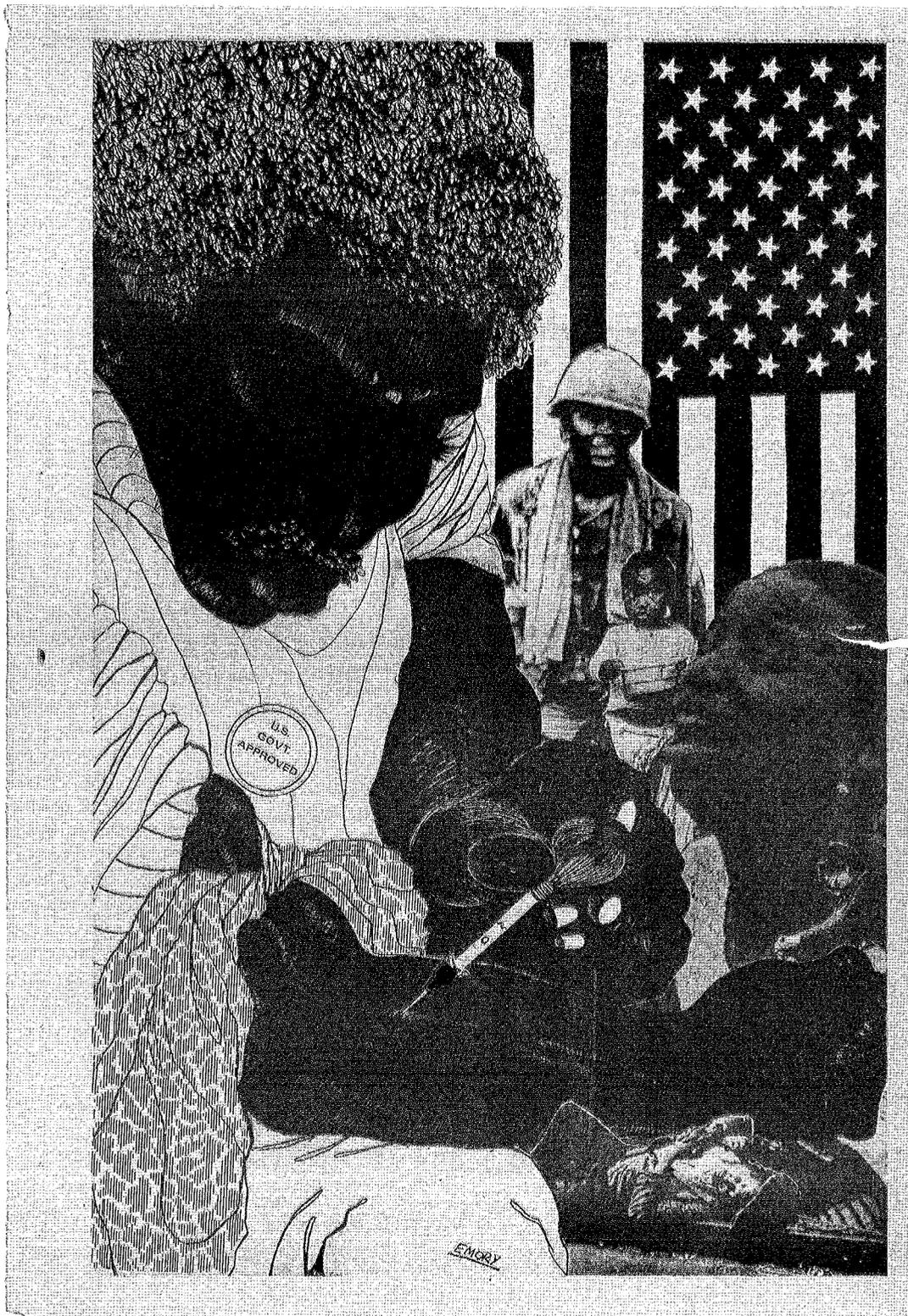
and art events, as well as being involved in administering the programs himself. (It's interesting to note that of all the important work he did for the party, Douglas is most proud of his community work.¹²) All Black Panther Party activities were based on their Ten-Point Platform and Program for self-determination. As the Ministers of Information and Culture, Cleaver and Douglas made sure all their messages reinforced the ten points, communicating tight coordination between the paper, the party, and the mission. Douglas believed that "Without the party, the paper wouldn't have had the same impact," emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between the party's and the paper's mission.¹³ The ten points were:

1.
We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black and oppressed communities.
2.
We want full employment for our people.
3.
We want an end to the robbery by the capitalist of our Black and oppressed communities.
4.
We want decent housing, fit for the shelter of human beings.
5.
We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.
6.
We want completely free health care for all Black and oppressed people.
7.
We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people, other people of color, all oppressed people inside the United States.
8.
We want an immediate end to all wars of aggression.
9.
We want freedom for all Black and oppressed people now held in U.S. federal, state, county, city, and military prisons and jails. We want trials by a jury of peers for all persons charged with so-called crimes under the laws of this country.
10.
We want land, bread, housing, education, and people's community control of modern technology.¹⁴

¹² Interview with the author, July 2004.

¹³ Marcy Rein, "The More Times Change...The Bay Area Alternative Press '68-'98," *Media Alliance* 17, no. 5 (1998), <http://www.media-alliance.org/mediatile/17-15/altpress.html>.

¹⁴ This is the second version of the Ten-Point Platform and Program, written in March 1972. The first was published in the *Black Panther* in October 1966 (see page 133).



To further the party's platform and goals, Douglas's work employed a variety of styles and techniques. Photographic collages were an efficient way to recycle images and through his bold juxtapositions, he created striking works that had an impact that photographs alone could not produce. Some of

Douglas's collages were purely photographic while others combined illustrations and photographs, resulting in some of his most compelling images. For example, in one back-page poster (above), combining an American flag, a black combat soldier, a young person screaming, and a drawing of a man injecting

ABOVE

September 11, 1971: One of Douglas's back-page posters from the *Black Panther* that addresses several issues that concerned the party: the Viet Nam War and drug abuse in the black community.

drugs, Douglas spanned a range of issues—among them the controversial war and the devastating toll of drug abuse—and condensed the anguish being experienced by American black communities into a single image.

Douglas often used contrasts of scale for dramatic effect. This technique was most evident in oversized portraits of party leaders, martyrs, and everyday people who dominated the front and back covers of the *Black Panther*. The figure who loomed largest, both in the party and the public imagination, was Minister of Defense Huey P. Newton. Attractive and photogenic, he was the natural choice to visually represent the party and its programs. In addition to Newton, images of Cleaver, Seale, and other leaders were featured prominently on the cover and in the editorial pages but their faces were not as ubiquitous and widely disseminated as images of Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, and Sandino in their respective countries. What the Black Panther images shared with similar pictures from around the world, was the nearly god-like way Douglas presented them. He alluded to familiar images from art history and popular culture, including religious iconography, and sanctification was a recurring visual device. Douglas used radiating lines emerging from the heads and bodies of people the party thought should be admired and exalted.

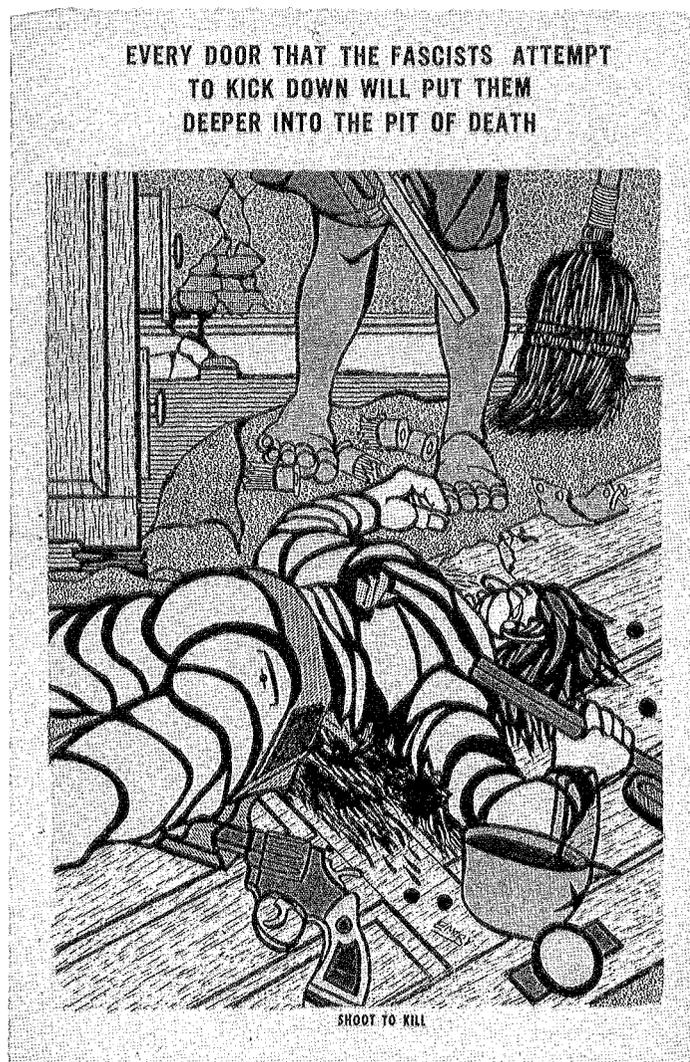
Another persistent graphic theme, jail bars, metaphorically reinforced the message that poor and oppressed people were imprisoned by their plight. The bars also literally referred to the disproportionate and often illegal incarceration of black men. Douglas even used the bars frequently as design elements in editorial layouts (see pages 121–25).

Moving between different drawing techniques and materials, Douglas's illustration style ranged from using simple flattened shapes with hard outlines to more complex contoured fine lines to figurative soft-charcoal-and-pencil renderings. Usually, but not always, the boldness of the lines reflected the boldness of the image's message, and this was certainly true of the pig cartoons, his most politically biting representations.

Cartoons of policemen and politicians as pigs were among Douglas's signature images. He was not the first to use pigs to represent the police, but he certainly helped make "pig" the preferred epithet for law enforcement officers in 1960s and

'70s counterculture.¹⁵ His cartoons extended the pig icon to represent the entire capitalist military/industrial complex.

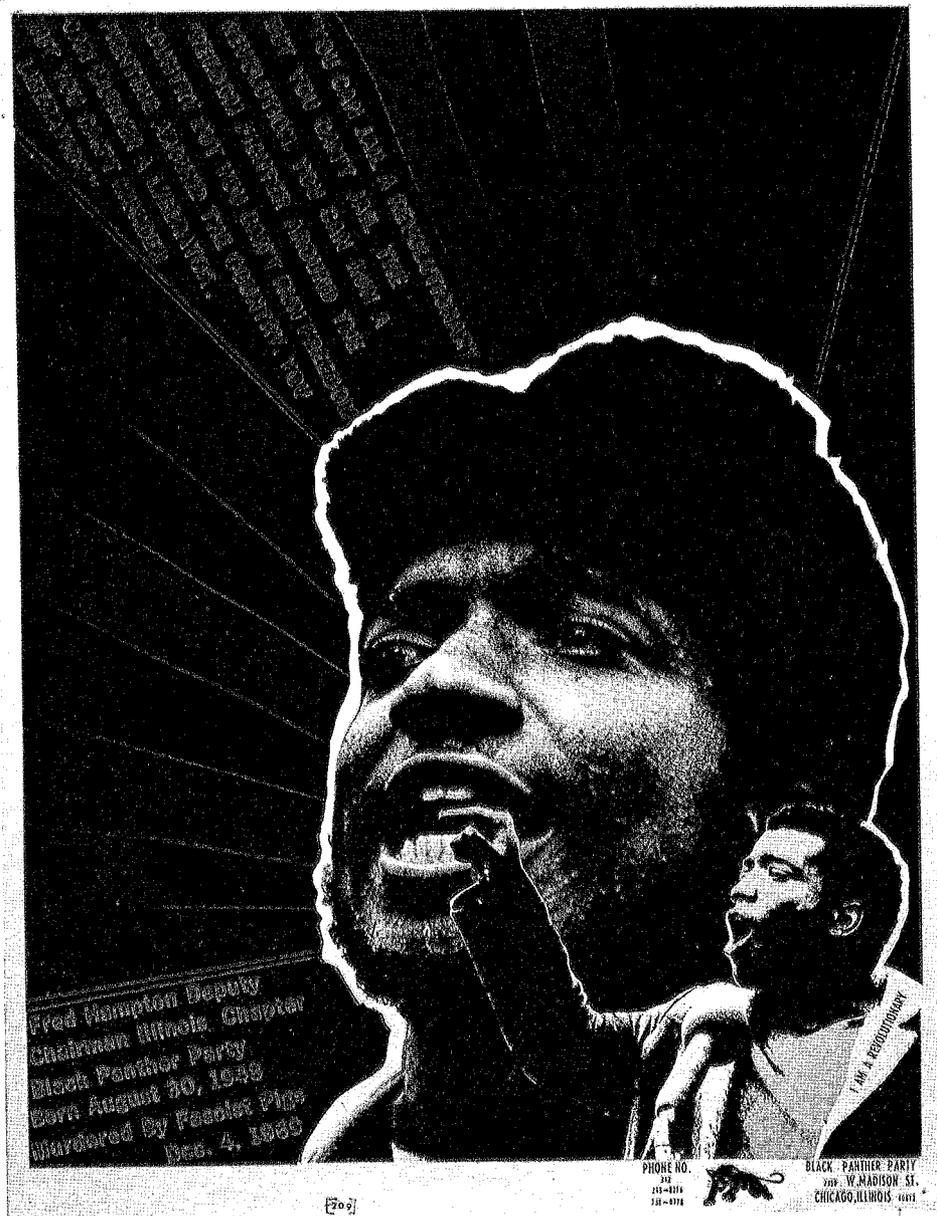
Other images addressing police and official misconduct often used a similar thick black line illustration style. One seminal back-page poster refers to the illegal raids and searches conducted by police on Panther members' houses and offices (below). The tag line at the top of the page reads, "Every door that the fascists attempt to kick down will put them deeper into the pit of death. Shoot to kill." A uniformed officer's body is rendered in the heaviest black lines and is at the feet of a woman standing in the doorway. Only her legs are visible, which draws the viewer's attention directly to the fallen person. Douglas often filled every inch of available newsprint with details, elaborating further on the story. In this image, Douglas sets the scene against the background of a run-down apartment,



ABOVE

December 14, 1970: A back-page poster that addressed the frequent and illegal raids on the homes and offices of Black Panther members.

15 Erika Doss, "Revolutionary Art is a Tool for Liberation," in *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party*, 183.



with plaster falling from the cracked walls and a well-used broom leaning against the wall.

Douglas's major artistic innovation was his combination of drawing and graphic design techniques. Even though his illustrations with thick lines are formally similar to Chicano poster art, the addition of texture and collage set his work apart from other protest art. Douglas remained true to a black aesthetic by reaching to the past and borrowing African abstraction techniques while incorporating twentieth-century graphic art innovations like rub-down textures and patterns and showing everyday black life.

During the heyday of the paper, Douglas was well known to his fellow party members and to the paper's readership. Though his name is not currently well known, the style he developed and art he created working for the *Black Panther* has been appropriated and absorbed into mainstream visual culture over the years. Popular culture generally favors the sensational, and the images of Douglas's that persist in our collective memory are the most controversial and subject to misinterpretation. Few people are aware of the hundreds of drawings of ordinary black people that Douglas published. Many more people are familiar with the angry revolutionary icon, which continues to evolve in our visual vocabulary.

ABOVE

1969-70: This poster was made after the police killed Chicago party leader Fred Hampton as he lay sleeping in his bed. Later Douglas made a similar image that included a picture of Mark Clark who was also killed by police in the predawn raid.

In the 1960s, images of the attractive and charismatic Cuban Communist Che Guevara, Newton, and Seale in black berets came to represent revolutionary ideology. Alberto Korda's famous stylized black-and-white photograph from 1960 of Che, shot from a low angle making his face seem even larger, is still a popular icon. Building on the Che icon and invoking the beret's military associations, Douglas created a similar image of Newton, which appeared several times at full-size on the *Black Panther's* cover and eventually became part of the paper's masthead. The image that persists even thirty years after the dissolution of the party is this one—the mythological armed, beret-wearing hero fearlessly fighting for justice in the black community and defying law enforcement authorities. To many people, both black and white, Newton was Superman, the “chief god in the pantheon of Panthers,” and Douglas helped cultivate his persona through images.¹⁶

As Douglas was influenced by other artists before him, his important work has influenced and been

appropriated by contemporary artists, designers, and advertisers who have incorporated some of Douglas's visual language into their work and products. Some of these works are created with the same intention as Douglas's—to effect social change through art. One reading of these images interprets them as respectful homage to Douglas's work and his visual legacy of creating lasting cultural icons. Alternate readings suggest that decontextualizing and presenting these icons to a generation with no real-time memory of the historical situation to which Douglas's work responded results in confusion between the myth of the Black Panthers and their true history.

Regardless of how this contemporary work is read, it is true that the black revolutionary's carefully cultivated image, which was initially terrifying to white Americans and perceived as counterproductive to most middle-class African Americans, lost its power over time. As the original Black Panthers slowly died, went to jail, into exile, or disappeared from public life and their perceived threat waned, the iconic black revolutionary image re-emerged as a benign and romantic signifier of defiance.

Media representations of American racial conflict have shifted over time “to include a desire to elevate ... radicals to celebrity status.”¹⁷ References to these idealized heroes became part of 1980s and '90s hip-hop culture and were subsequently appropriated by advertising. Clothing companies marketed their products to followers of the urban hip-hop scene using ads featuring stern black men in a military stance or with arms defiantly crossed (the “radical pose”). These images clearly referenced Douglas's art from the *Black Panther*.

One example of Douglas's influence on contemporary graphic work that continues the spirit of his activism is a recent poster for the Denver Pan African Arts Society, which metaphorically turns film into a revolutionary weapon. It recalls both Douglas's bold use of line and color and the OSPAAAL aesthetic. The warrior is a woman, cheerfully marching into battle, which is typical of 1960s revolutionary imagery.

The contemporary Portuguese-born artist Rigo 23 carries on the tradition of activist art that Douglas described in his 1968 manifesto “On Revolutionary Art.” In addition to creating numerous politically charged public art projects, Rigo 23 continues to work on raising consciousness about black political



ABOVE

Logo for the Pan African Arts Society, designed by artist Joshua Mays, conceptualized and owned by Ashara Ekundayo, BluBlak Media, LLC. This logo shows a black woman armed with a film canister and a gun and is similar in style and intent to Douglas's images of armed black women.

16 Don A. Schanche, *The Panther Paradox: A Liberal's Dilemma* (New York: David McKay Company, 1970), 98.

17 Jane Rhodes, "Fanning the Flames of Racial Discord: The National Press and the Black Panther Party," *Harvard International Journal of Press Politics* 4, no. 4 (1999): 95.



prisoners, particularly the Angola 3, who organized the Angola prison chapter of the Black Panther Party in 1971. In 2002 Rigo 23 and other activists persuaded San Francisco's mayor to declare April 22 "Robert King Day" in honor of Robert King Wilkerson, one of the Angola 3, who was released in 2001. Wilkerson was incarcerated for robbery and subsequently convicted of a prison murder for which he spent twenty-nine years in solitary confinement. He was exonerated after it was revealed that prison officials coerced the testimony used to convict him, presumably because of his affiliation with the Black Panther Party.

To commemorate the San Francisco event, Rigo 23 created a mural on a building facing City Hall that simply read "TRUTH." An image of over two hundred bags of groceries arranged on the grounds at San Francisco's United Nations Plaza, part of the Robert King Day celebration, could represent a conceptual installation homage to the Black Panther Party's grocery giveaways and the Panther logo's lasting signifying power. But, like Douglas, who has been a mentor to the younger artist, Rigo 23's art is an extension of his activism. The bags of groceries were given away to the many homeless people who use the grounds of the plaza daily.

It is works like these and other examples of contemporary art that reference Douglas's art in style or spirit that are keeping his work from the 1960s and '70s in our current visual lexicon. Without them, Douglas's prolific body of work from that time could have easily remained known only to dedicated radi-

cals or the relatively small number of people who have seen the originals. The inevitable disintegration of newsprint and an unwillingness to look at the harsh realities of race and inequality could have easily conspired to keep much of Douglas's work in relative obscurity.

Emory Douglas's art today often depicts happy children, reflecting the party's successes and his personal hopes for the future. His recent drawings show how Douglas's work has always responded to the society he sees around him. When it was necessary, he imagined self-defense and revolution through his work. Because of his role in raising consciousness about brutal and inhumane conditions, Douglas can now imagine what a compassionate and just society might look like.

His images came into my life when I was a teenager in the early 1970s and permanently changed my political and artistic worldview. I am sure the work presented here will have a resonating effect on those who are viewing it for the first time, the same way the images continue to inspire me. The work's power is in its integrity of purpose; to make life better for all disenfranchised people in the world, in particular for African Americans. In representing the quantity, quality, and range of Douglas's work in this book, perhaps there will be a broader understanding of his true legacy as a courageous and brilliant designer and artist "for the people." ●

ABOVE

TRUTH dedication event by Rigo 23,
at the United Nations Plaza in San Francisco, April 22, 2002.