

Where Revolution Abounds

Author(s): Emory Douglas and Jarrel Phillips

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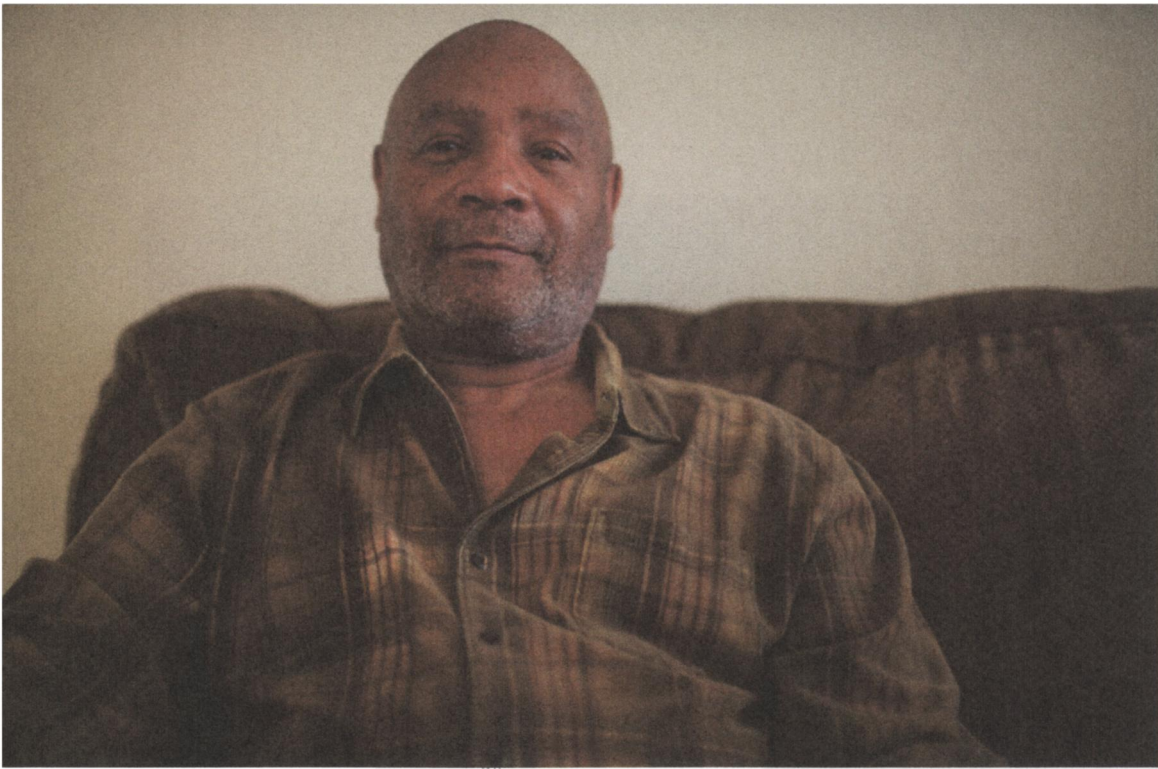
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Emory Douglas © 2016 Jarrel Phillips

Where Revolution Abounds

An Interview with Emory Douglas by Jarrel Phillips

Emory Douglas is the former minister of culture and revolutionary artist for the Black Panther Party, who continues to be a progressive artist dealing with social commentary in his artwork.

Jarrel Phillips: Can you tell me about your beginnings as a social movement artist?

Emory Douglas: I came out when the Black consciousness movement was starting; when you had Black power and Black people beginning to find themselves and who they were, as opposed to the mainstream society, and finding who you are as Negroes. Then we began to define ourselves as “Black,” “African,” “African American.”

I used to work in advertising—cutting and placing, doing display signs—close to Macy’s on Geary Street; also at community print shops. During that era you had high levels of frustration because of police abuse and it always being justified. Young people were looking for something to become involved in, such as now with the Black Lives Matter and Occupy and all the things that are taking place today. Some 50 years later, the same things that we were confronted with then, we are still confronted with today. Having transitioned into the Black Panther Party here in the Bay Area, I have been able to hone and develop my skills for today’s Black arts movement.

Jarrel Phillips: Why is it important for children to grow up around Black art?

Douglas: Youth can see themselves in the artwork and identify with issues and concerns about themselves. It reinforces maybe positive issues as they evolve and grow. They can begin to question what’s in the art that’s about themselves. When you see something that you can see yourself in, it can be an inspiration to you to maybe want someday to be

I AM SAN FRANCISCO: BLACK PAST & PRESENCE

This interview and the excerpts that follow (pp. 48-57) are portions of an on-going project called I Am San Francisco: Black Past & Presence (IAMSF). Created and curated by Jarrel Phillips, IAMSF was presented as an art exhibition at City College of San Francisco's Rosenberg Library last year. The purpose of IAMSF is to recognize the depth, beauty, complexity and abundance prevalent within 'Black Life' in San Francisco—culturally, communally and individually. For more information, visit avesidea.org.

creative in that respect yourself or to be creative in other ways. Art can help you to focus and be disciplined in relationship to carrying out a project and can help you to critique and be critical of what you do. Because you can evaluate it if you choose to, if you don't get caught up in the subjective aspects of what you've done and open yourself to evaluate your work, trying to improve it. You could always see something in it that you can improve or do better; or add on and enhance what you've already done that may be of a good standard and quality as well. So it can help you in that way: discipline, focus, creativity, imagination, visual. You might have to do research and other things that connect you to art to do certain artwork that you may need if you're talking about some social issue. Then there's research that comes in and all those things that play into it.

Phillips: Going into the Black Panther movement, can you talk about its beginnings in Oakland and in San Francisco? What was the connection?

Douglas: The Black Panther Party was called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense at first. It was local in Oakland and then evolved into San Francisco and then had chapters and branches around the country and developed over periods of time. But in San Francisco we used to work out of a studio apartment of Eldridge Cleaver's, who Huey Newton and Bobby Seale had been kind [enough] to contact [when] he got out of prison during that time in 1967. He was working for a magazine publication here in San Francisco. So they were able to get in touch with him when Huey and Bobby did the security for Malcolm X's widow when she came to the Bay Area.

They got him to work on the paper in [its] beginning stages. There was no chapter or branches at that time. It was just where we worked on the newspaper. It was out of his studio apartment. Huey and Bobby had an office in Oakland but it was not necessarily open to the public. They used to do the patrolling in the communities and observing the police misbehavior in the community and that was where they used to meet at, but it wasn't an open office to everybody. It was [later] that we began to have a chapter in San Francisco. We opened our headquarters, I believe, in Oakland, California. We finally had our distribution in the East Bay in different locations. Then we were able to get the location on Fillmore [in San Francisco] where the nightclub Yoshi's used to be. There's a plaque on the street that says "Black Panthers" and that's where the office used to be. That became our central distribution for our newspaper [from] where we would ship it all over the country and all over the world.

Phillips: How did you end up in the Black Panther Party?

Douglas: Like many other young people. There were a lot of murders of young Blacks going on then, as it is today. There's high levels of frustration of wanting to do something

to try to deal with that issue. When I went to the meeting where I was asked to do the poster that Malcolm X was coming to the Bay Area, they said some brothers was coming over to do security for that event and they were going to come over to the next meeting. When they came, there was Huey Newton and Bobby Seale and couple more Panthers. It was after that meeting that I asked them how I could join. This was in late January of 1967 about three and a half months after the inception of the organization itself.

Me [as] minister of culture came about when Huey and Bobby were working on their first edition of the newspaper, which was 8 1/2x14, legal sized sheet of paper. Bobby was laying it out with markers for a masthead and it was written on a typewriter, the text. There were a lot of cultural events [that] used to take place at a place we called the Black House in San Francisco. Eldridge Cleaver lived upstairs in [this] Victorian house [and] the cultural activities took place downstairs.

I went there one evening to see if there was anything happening. I saw Bobby working on that first issue of that newspaper. Because I had been going to City College and had kept a lot of the materials that I had from doing graphic designing, I told them, well, I could help him improve the quality of what he was doing and I'd go home and get the materials and come back. He said, "Okay." I lived on Divisadero and 8th. Took me about 45 minutes to walk home and come back. When I got back he said, "Well, we're finished with this one but we're going to start the newspaper and we know your work as an artist. So we want you to be the revolutionary artist and eventually become the Minister of Culture." They had a whole vision about the newspaper, telling our story from our perspective, our point of view. It could criticize you on the one hand and praise you on the other, being like a double-edged sword. It was informative, enlightening, all those things.

In relationship to the vision of the paper, having a lot of photographs with captions and headlines [helped] so that those who weren't going to read those long, drawn-out articles could get the gist of what the stories were about by just seeing the images. That was the whole concept of the paper. And making headlines accessible to seniors by making text bigger—[for those] who couldn't read the whole article or see well enough to read all the fine text.

Phillips: Your images are very, very strong on the posters and in all your work. Can you talk about the significance of image in the face of how Black image is typically portrayed?

Douglas: The images I turned in were just common folk images in that sense and the beauty within the essence of that. People could see themselves in those images.

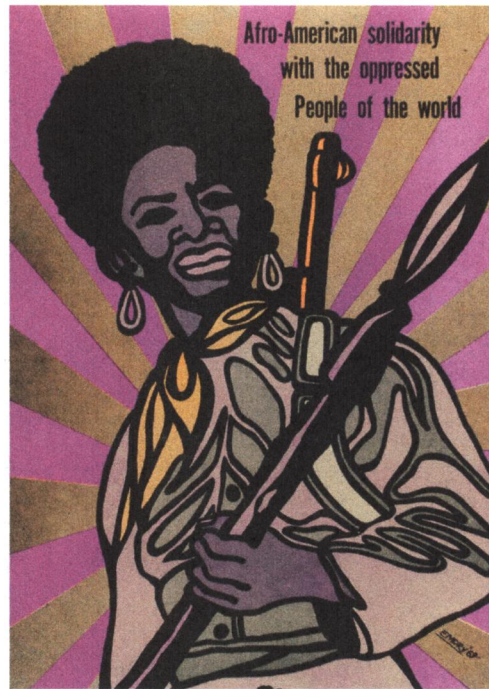
The culture and expression of Black folks: self-determination, the suffering, the pain and the love. If you can capture that in your artwork, you've made the connection with the community and the broader community as well. We were talking about revolutionary culture for transforming society. Our art was a reflection of what was going on in the world.

The 10-point platform of the Black Panther Party talked about decent housing, full employment, and quality of life... all those things were part of the education. Part of what the Black Panther Party was about. That's what the artwork is about too.

Phillips: A lot of images portray the police as pigs. Why is that?

Douglas: Yes, that came about when Huey Newton was working on the paper. Eldridge

1969: The Black Panthers promoted gender equality, and many women were members of the movement
© Emory Douglas/PR



and Huey and Bobby came out from organizing and came over to check on how things were going. At one point they began to define what a police was, and those kinds of words came into the statement. Huey brought over an idea and told me he wanted me to do this pig drawing, which I did on four hooves. We were going to put the badge number on the pig each week [of] a bad actor in the community, and it just so happens that the first badge was 206. It was the pig named Fry. The policeman who got killed when Huey Newton got shot. He was notoriously known to abuse his power in the community. That was the first badge number we put on the drawing. That was the early issues of the Black Panther Newspaper.

Phillips: It sounds like a lot of individuals in the Black Panther Party had dealt with the law a bit. Do you think that was significant or was that intentional in some way?

Douglas: The first group was young people like myself, 13 [to] 19 years old. Huey Newton and them understood that those who were organizing and recruiting the party were brothers and sisters out there in the hood who had firsthand experience with the police, as opposed to when they were arrested for whatever violation they did. They weren't just arrested, they were abused. They understood that. If they could get to them and organize them, then they would become a force to deal with that situation out there. That's why you had a lot of those youngsters who became that first cadre, because of their experience.

Then it also had others who came in as well who were students, intellectuals, all those became part of the organization. But that first group of people who they organized were the youngsters off the block because they were confronted every day with the issues of profiling and abuse and harassment.



Courtesy of Emory Douglas/Art Resource, NY

They started the Black Panther Party for self-defense in the beginning then [it] turned into the Black Panther Party. They started off with patrolling the communities against police abuse, which was point number seven of the Black Panther Party's 10-point platform. We wanted an immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people. It started off because of the urgency of the situation at the time.

Phillips: Can you talk about any connection or insight you see in relation to that and Black Lives Matter and what's going on in San Francisco specifically?

Douglas: You still have the police murders. That's at the core of the Black Lives Matter. Even before it was called Black Lives Matter, Black lives was mattering. That's why people were standing up. That's why people were resisting and that's why all of a sudden that name came to be—Black Lives Matter—because of the abuse [at] the hands of the system itself; starting with the police abuse and murders always being justified, always demonizing those that are killed to make them look as though they should have been killed.

Phillips: How did you define safety and self defense?

Douglas: Safety was part of defending the community and educating them about their basic rights when they were stopped. But also, yes, there were things that... when the Black Panthers came on the scene there was less community gang banging and stuff going on during that time. It existed but there was less of it because of the respect the Panthers had and could intervene in certain situations. Not only that, the P. Stone Nation, one of the most notorious gangs in the United States out of Chicago, where we had a chapter, had great respect for the Panthers. We were the only ones who could come into their territories and do these social programs, have doctors and stuff come into the projects and check on seniors and those who were ill; or set up free breakfast, all those kinds of things.

Phillips: Can you talk about the significance of having individuals who are protecting you? You talk about quality of life, but can you talk about quality protection by those that are here to serve and protect?

Douglas: We say quality protection is when police come into this community and respect community, like they do in the white community. They come in there and talk respectful. They go and walk the kids across the street and help them cross the street. They don't come in like an occupying army as they do in our community. So that's the difference.

Phillips: My generation, what is our responsibility? How do we pick up?

Douglas: Well, you pick up in being just what is. The fact is that these institutions exist. You're going to be a part of these institutions at some point in time until they negate it or transform. Don't get into it and do what other generations have done before [as] they become compromised. In the context of standing strong and tall in relationship to what needs to be done, being able to make that commitment and not get in there and get caught up in the compromise, come together with others on how you can get alternative institutions and fund them.

Out of the situation in this country that's created the situation where you have more people coming together, yes, generation over generation, between the young and old and what have you—lessons to learn from everyone. You got a lot of insight from a lot of folks who've been through a lot of the challenges in life that can be inspiring in order not to duplicate some of the limitations that have taken place now and in the past. You're bombarded by mainstream success which has nothing to do with community success or community. It has to do with exploitation and selling yourself. Community success requires self-determination. You can define for yourself who you are. You create community and institutions in [the] community that you run.

Phillips: What does the Black leadership look like in San Francisco?

Douglas: It's compromised just like most when they get into the city. You got those who are outspoken and maybe mean well. But when they take the oath they can only say so much. They can't do what they said they were going to do because [of] the system. It's the system that's racist. It's the system that compromises them as well. When I talk about the artwork that I do, I'm talking about it in the context of the system, not the individuals. It may be used as the symbol of the individual but it's about the system itself. It's the system that has to be transformed, changed, negated or purged. That's an ongoing process that's going to exist for a while, so you have to stay diligent in relationship to exposing and enlightening and informing people, the community, about what that system is about—from the vision that you see in relationship to what you understand through your observation, the research and validation of things that have shown how corrupt it is. When you get in that comfort zone, that's when you compromise. When you assimilate you negate your own self, your own identity. ■

Jarrel Phillips is a curator, youth worker, capoeira instructor and storyteller who uses performance, writing and photography and film as his mediums. He is also a Reimagine! RP&E correspondent. Learn more about his work at avesidea.org.