

Do Or Die: Using Art To Resist Stereotypes Of Black Masculinity

By AMANDA MAGNIUS & FRANK STASIO - SEP 25, 2019



Photo of artist Fahamu Pecou's New World Egungun full body mask.

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Artist [Fahamu Pecou](#) has been wrestling with stereotypes of black masculinity for his entire life. No matter how many degrees he earned or what job he had, he had the sense that he was only seen as a black body.

He has always used art as a way to push back, but for a long time he did not touch one particularly charged topic: police-involved shootings of black men. That changed in 2015, after a police officer shot and killed Walter Scott, a black man in Charleston. Pecou started work on a series called "[Do or Die: Affect, Ritual, Resistance](#)." It debuted in 2016, and since then it has traveled around the country. Pecou incorporates the rituals of the West African Yoruba religion of Ifa into his work, like the ancestor honoring ceremony known as the egungun tradition.

Host Frank Stasio talks to Pecou about his inspiration, creative process and how audiences have reacted to the exhibition. "[DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance](#)" [is on display](#) at The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History at UNC-Chapel Hill until Nov. 21.

Host Frank Stasio talks to Pecou about his inspiration, creative process and how audiences have reacted to the exhibition. "DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance" [is on display](#) at The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History at UNC-Chapel Hill until Nov. 21.

Pecou on his goal with "DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance":

What I've attempted to do is to create a body of work that engages the [spectacle of black death]. But rather than feed into the spectacle and the trauma that it causes people to have, I wanted to do something that would instead usher in hope and provide a way for black people and others to see ourselves as something other than tragic victims — as something other than fragile bodies that can be broken or destroyed by white supremacy.

On using the Ifa tradition of Egungun masquerade, which uses a full-body mask to give a physical presence to the spirits and ancestors:

I felt that in creating this New World Egungun, I could begin to challenge this kind of spectacle of death by reanimating and reactivating the spirits of these violently departed souls and move them from the position of being seen as tragic victims to being honored ancestors.

On using traditions of Ifa in his artwork, out of context:

One of the things that's been really interesting in my studies and research about the practice [of Ifa] and about the system, is that a sort of pliability is actually woven into the practice. There are, of course, structures and organizations. There are rituals. There are rules. But all of those are within the understanding that things change; that people change; that people move; that people grow.

Any form of maintaining one's cultural identity, one's cultural voice, one's cultural memory, in the face of the kinds of traumas and oppressions that have been waged against us is a form of resistance. - Fahamu Pecou
