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BY DAVID BALZER September 10, 2008 15:09

Among the many political, historical and personal reasons people will want to see “All Power to the People,” the Toronto Free Gallery’s new exhibit on the art of the Black Panther party, lies a glaring, trickier one: the work still looks sensational. Openly influenced by Soviet constructivism as it had continued to manifest itself in the ’50s and ’60s – as part of the Cuban and Chinese Cultural Revolutions, for instance – the posters and related paper ephemera are bright, dynamic, expressionist and, yes, often remarkably chic.

This aestheticist aspect was, of course, always part of the plan – key elements of the Panthers’ official uniform were, after all, sunglasses and leather bomber jackets. According to erstwhile Minister of Culture Emory Douglas, whose work comprises over half of the exhibition, this was not at all out of step with the party’s official, and legendarily incendiary, line. “We were an organization trying to reach broad masses of people and get our ideals across,” he says, on the phone from his home in Oakland, California. I ask him about his 1972 statement at Nashville’s all-black Fisk University that “the capitalists have done what we should be doing.”

“We were showing people what was in their interests,” he responds, “and how they [i.e., the people] correlated to a political reality and became relevant, in that context. You could say it’s propaganda. You could say that all forms of art are in some way propaganda.”

Interestingly, Douglas characterizes the art of the Black Panthers as, above all, one of “survival” – a concept that, for many, is logically removed from concepts of direct action and, for that matter, of fashion. “Basically if you don’t survive you can’t make a revolution,” he says. “It was an art that exposed people to their own conditions, to the politicians who misrepresented them, to all of those things. If you don’t resist and challenge you may just perish.”

Accordingly, Douglas’ practice was defined by conditions that demanded the message be disseminated quickly and cheaply. His distinctive style was inspired by woodcuts, though temporal and financial limitations compelled him to imitate them with ink and markers. His posters and pull-outs for the Black Panther journal were often in one colour if at all, making colour a pivotal didactic highlighter in the work. Collage is dominant, including détourné coupon and stock pages.

All of these aspects make the work noticeably abstract, a feature, à la Leninist art, meant to appeal broadly and graphically, taking into account illiterate audiences. In this way the many stylized images of people carrying arms can seem almost wholly symbolic – not a gesture of retaliation or revenge but one of awareness and resistance. Was Douglas trying to portray things as they were, then, or as they should have been?

“The art was meant to be provocative,” he says. “It was meant to show people standing up and overcoming obstacles, to inspire them to challenge things that weren’t right and to deal with those things in the way they had to be dealt with, in a self-defence manner. [My style] didn’t come in isolation either; it came from having to go out and do political work in the community, on a grassroots level – from listening to what people’s concerns were. When I first did those images, people began to tell me things like, ‘This reminds me of my brother or sister or uncle.’ They had seen those images. I got a sense that I was truly into an art form that reflected them. So they became the heroes in the art. They became the ones onstage, seeing themselves in it. The style took on a life of its own.”

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