

Still Nigga

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2018

Mixed Media: Boxing gloves, Japanese & Czech seed beads, nails, mirrors, brass chain, leather, lost wax brass bells, herbs and oils.

Still Nigga is inspired by Jay-Z's track, *The Story of O.J.*, from his 4:44 album. One of Jay-Z's lines is "...faux nigga, real nigga... still nigga." The track tackles what it means to be a Black man in America and the legacy of racism that refuses to fade into the past, no matter how far we may think we have progressed. By placing the words "Faux Nigga" and "Real Nigga" on boxing gloves, I hope to bring the viewer's attention to the historical and contemporary context of not only the N-word, but the idea of what constitutes a real nigga versus a fake one.

The N-word is one of the most contested and derogatory words in the English language, particularly within the context of the United States. It has connotations associated with the violence of slavery, racism, and segregation, but it is also ubiquitous within hip hop culture, where it can sometimes mean 'friend'. The term 'real nigga' appears as the title of dozens of hip-hop songs and the meaning is both contradictory and widely understood within the hip-hop and African American community at large. A real nigga is sometimes the archetypal ghetto caricature of the violent thug, drug dealer, and someone who always 'keeps it real'. Other times a *real nigga* is a Black man that takes care of his responsibilities and is committed to his people. *Real nigga* also carries the weight of hypermasculinity – a legacy forced upon Black men since legalized slavery in the United States and still present to this day. Nowhere is this hypermasculinity, which dictates that Black men must not be sensitive or in touch with their feelings, more prevalent than within hip hop culture.

Continuing with my exploration of the connections between West African royal regalia, hip hop, and boxing, *Still Nigga* takes a pair of black Everlast boxing gloves as the foundation of the sculpture. The black boxing gloves serve as a stand-in for the Black male body. Hand embroidered with black and 24K gold Japanese seed beads and red Czech seed beads, each piece is immediately in conflict with the terms written on them. Within the context of the United States and hip-hop culture, 'real nigga' written in graffiti script is immediately seen as a contradiction to the delicately embroidered beads the piece is made from. While bead craft is associated with female crafts in the United States, it was traditionally male artists who created the beaded royal regalia in Nigeria and Kongo.

Each glove is pierced with hundreds of gold-toned nails, bringing each glove to about 11 pounds in total weight. The nails are inspired by nkisi nkondi sculptures from the Kongo kingdom. Nkisi nkondi are vessels for sacred medicine and divine protection central to the belief of the Kongo people of Central Africa – one of the ancestral origins for a large number of enslaved Africans brought to the United States via the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Nkisi nkondi can act as an oath-taker used to resolve disputes, act as an avenger, or protect community members against sorcery and evil-doers. Each nkisi nkondi is filled with herbs and other spiritually significant substances, which is then sealed with a mirror. The mirror serves as a portal for the ancestors and allows them to see and act against oath breakers and evil doers. The mirrors also reflect you, the viewer, thus reminding you of any oaths you have broken.