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A portrait of a revolutionary artist

Profile of Black Panther Emory Douglas

by Shinyung Oh

With loaded shotguns in the trunk, 23-year-old Emory Douglas drove to Sacramento on May 2, 1967. The City College student was not alone. Thirty other armed members of the Black Panther Party, divided up in six cars, formed a procession headed for the state Capitol.

The night before, militant author Eldridge Cleaver, who was on parole, invited Douglas to ride along. Douglas didn't know what he was getting into. When he showed up at 7 the next morning in Oakland, Panther co-founders Bobby Seale and Huey Newton laid out the agenda.

In Sacramento, the group planned to oppose an Assembly bill introduced by Don Mulford (R-Oakland) to ban civilians – specifically the Panthers – from openly carrying loaded firearms. Newton and Seale told Panther members to avoid pointing their weapons at anyone and to submit peacefully if they were arrested. Newton was delegated to deal with the press.

Seale led the Panthers across the Capitol grounds and onto the steps. A few hundred yards away, Gov. Ronald Reagan was speaking to a group of 200 white kids who were members of “Future Youth, Future Leaders.” As soon as they saw Seale and his entourage, the press turned their attention from the school children to the armed Panthers. The governor was whisked away.

On their way to the Capitol building, the press led them to the Assembly chamber. As Seale entered, legislators ducked under their desks. Realizing that he had mistakenly walked onto the floor of the Assembly, instead of the specta-

Opposite: Emory Douglas illustrates a mother's pride even in the midst of dire poverty.

Artwork courtesy of Emory Douglas.

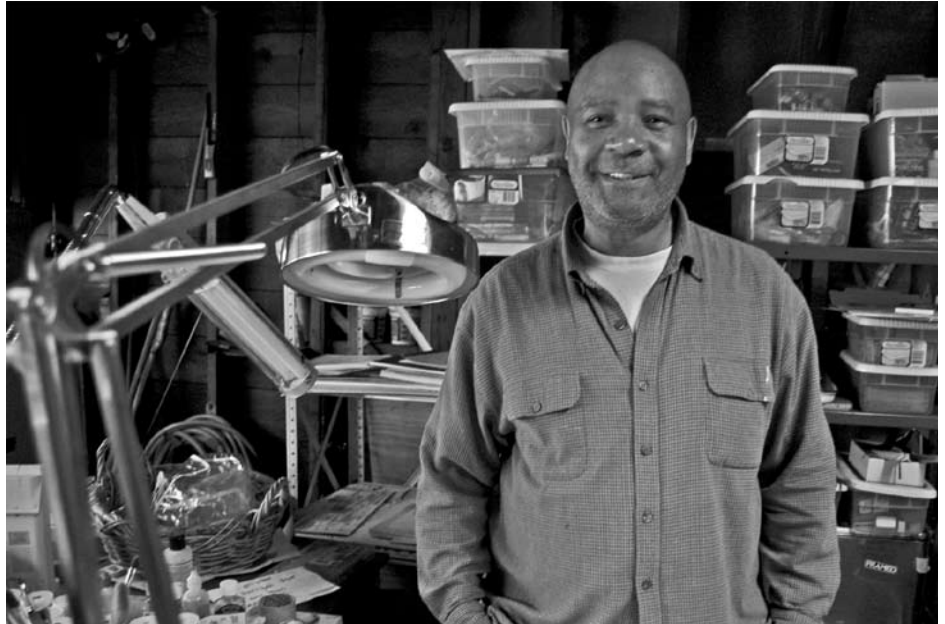


Photo by Max P. Mollring

Emory Douglas converted his drafty downstairs garage into an art studio, where jars of paintbrushes, pencils and tubs of art supplies surround his desk.

tor gallery, Seale retreated with his men.

“Hey, man,” he said, “I’m sorry. The damn press led us into the wrong place.”

Within hours, the police arrested Seale, Cleaver, Douglas and the other Panthers. The story made front-page news everywhere.

The Black Panthers had captured the media’s attention. It was Douglas’ first national appearance with them.

Douglas served as the Panthers’ Minister of Culture from 1967 until 1980, when they disbanded. He was their “Revolutionary Artist.” During those 13 years, he created most of the Panthers’ art work. Mothers and children brandishing pistols. A policeman depicted as a weeping pig in tatters and bandages. A boy flashing a Black Panther newspaper with the headline, “All Power to the People.”

His work filled the pages of the Panthers’ weekly newspaper, which had

a peak circulation of 400,000. Plastered on storefronts, sides of buildings, apartments, and fences, his images told the story for those who could not read.

A Panther member from the founding days to the end, Douglas accompanied Eldridge Cleaver when he met with U.N. delegates to discuss the plight of African-Americans. He traveled to China to meet Red Party representatives. He visited Cleaver in exile in Algeria. He sat through Bobby Seale’s trial and got arrested for contempt.

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover said the Panthers were “the biggest threat to the internal security of the country.”

In a memo addressed to Hoover, the FBI called Douglas “one of the dominant members” of the Black Panther Party – a subversive, racist, fascist.

They described his artwork as violent and anti-establishment in nature. They claimed he engaged in revolutionary activities and advocated killing police

officers.

The FBI followed them, searched their luggage and tapped their phones.

The police arrested Douglas numerous times. During one of his arrests, the FBI attempted to interrogate him. He refused. Afterward, the FBI noted, “Douglas proudly walked back to the cell.”

The FBI was unrelenting in its efforts to disband this group of black militants who believed in “self-defense by any means necessary.”

The Panthers, whose average age was 18, embodied black anger against the white establishment in an era during the Civil Rights and the anti-war movements. Although they had more than 5,000 official members in more than two dozen major cities, their following was greater than that.

Their all-black uniform included berets, leather jackets and Afros. They routinely organized protests. And they carried loaded firearms – until the government made it illegal.

As a part of their Ten-Point Platform, they demanded an end to police brutality, freedom for all black prisoners and an exemption for black men from military service.

“We were definitely not a mainstream organization,” Douglas says.

Today, Douglas, 66, lives alone in the Portola District in the two-story house his mother purchased when he was a Panther. He is renovating it to make room for his children and grandchildren who visit often. Isandla, 9, and Anelisa, 5, love to spend weekends with “Poppy” because he lets them watch TV.

His refrigerator door is decorated with “Free Huey Newton” and the Panthers’ 40th Reunion magnets, along with family photos.

A black knit cap covers his bald head. His smile highlights mischievous eyes and round cheeks.

In a blue sweat shirt and black jeans, he laughs easily as he talks about how some Panthers “liberated” an imprisoned member and helped her flee to Cuba.

In a drafty downstairs garage, his art studio resembles a storage room. Jars of paintbrushes, pencils and tubs of art supplies surround an artist’s table. Stacks of prints sit in dust-



Photo courtesy the Sacramento Bee Collection

Douglas was arrested in 1967 during a Panther protest at the state Capitol in Sacramento.

covered boxes.

As he pulls old photographs of his revolutionary days out of an album, he studies each one carefully.

The album is filled with pictures of people singing, dancing, clapping and hugging. Panther children eating breakfast at the Free Breakfast Program. Panthers helping grandmas. Panthers visiting loved ones in prison. Families clutching brown bags from the Panthers’ Free Food Program. Members testing for sickle cell anemia and running voter registration drives.

The media and law enforcement portrayed the Panthers as domestic terrorists.

But the photos tell a different story.

Douglas was born in Grand Rapids, Mich., on May 24, 1943 during World War II. In the early 1950s, he and his divorced mother moved to San Francisco. She believed the milder weather would help his asthma.

For the next 15 years, they moved from one small apartment to another. Douglas

says they were very poor and struggled to survive. They once rented an apartment off of Linden Street, where Douglas made his bed on the kitchen floor – with the cockroaches.

As a kid, he hung out in the Fillmore District. He remembers wearing a curfew tag that the government required of under-aged kids in black neighborhoods. He often ran away from home.

“I was just bad – a wannabe gang banger,” he said.

Life wasn’t fair. One day, after he boarded the bus at Haight and Stanyan streets, a passenger threw something at the driver. The driver said Douglas did it. Even though the other riders defended him, an officer dragged him to the police station and said, “You need to take your little black ass back to Africa.”

Adding to his humiliation, they dragged him past his mother, who ran a concession stand at the Youth Guidance Center. Everyone there knew her – and her trouble-making son – and they sometimes sent him to help her even though he was supposed to be under arrest.

During his teenage years, Douglas was in and out of the Youth Guidance Center and La Honda’s Log Cabin Ranch,

where he learned to make his bed military-style, cleaned pigpens and worked in a woodshop.

During his 18 months at the Youth Authority, he worked in a print shop. For the first time, he applied his artistic skills in a structured environment. The counselor there encouraged him to study art at City College.

A few months after his release, Douglas enrolled. When a college counselor suggested that he try commercial art, Douglas didn't know what it was. It would be the foundation for his role with the Panthers.

Coming from Youth Authority, Douglas found the predominantly white Arts Department "a culture shock." But he found a mentor who critiqued his work against professional standards. In one assignment dealing with race relations, his instructor encouraged him to be "more provocative." Douglas took his advice.

Another teacher discouraged him from focusing on black people as subjects because there was no market for that kind of art. Douglas proved him wrong. The Panthers provided an audience.

Douglas had never heard of the Black Panthers before he

met Huey Newton and Bobby Seale at an event honoring Malcolm X's widow, Betty Shabazz, in February of 1967.

Newton and Seale ignited Douglas' imagination.

"There were a lot of young people like myself who just didn't want to turn the other cheek," Douglas said. "[Seale and Newton] were years ahead of me. They already had a focus, a vision of what they wanted, how they wanted it done. The whole bit."

Douglas hung out with Newton and Seale. From his mother's house on Divisadero and Haight streets, he rode the bus over to Newton's house, and then to Seale's place in Oakland. They patrolled the neighborhoods to keep an eye on police officers.

"We patrolled with law books, tape recorders and guns – legal guns," Seale said. The Panthers observed officers making arrests, reminded suspects of their rights and provided bail when necessary. Newton, who was a law student, knew the penal code and often recited it to officers.

They often met at a place called the Black House, where Cleaver lived. When Douglas saw Seale typing out a newspaper on legal-sized paper and writing out headlines with a black marker, he offered to help. He went home and grabbed his



May 29, 1971: Douglas' work shows resilience and hope in the face of oppression.



November 7, 1970: Douglas portrays an impaled policeman in "All Power to the People, Death to the Pigs."

art supplies. An hour later, he impressed Seale and Newton with his drawings.

He was put in charge of the publication's artwork.

Kathleen Cleaver, Eldridge Cleaver's ex-wife and Communications Secretary for the Party, has a piece of Douglas' artwork hanging in her living room.

"At Panther meetings, he would sit, quietly drawing," she said. "We'd be discussing how the country is changing, police killing in Berkeley, police brutality. We were talking about things that were happening. He would be very quiet. He was absorbing what people were saying, but he was expressing the ideas we were discussing in pictures."

Douglas worked most nights at the Panthers' headquarters in Oakland where he helped prepare the newspaper.

He lived in collective housing, where members participated in party meet-

ings, performed security duties, attended classes on politics and current events, and received training on handling weapons.

Sometimes, members' mothers banged on doors to try to take their teenage sons and daughters home. Douglas' own mother reportedly was "scared to death" about his involvement.

Sometimes, infidelity among married couples caused trouble.

"These married women see all these fine men and the men see all these fine women," Douglas said, "and they don't want to be married no more. So that was kind of causing problems in the Party."

In 1969, Douglas married another member of the Panther Party. At the church wedding in West Oakland, a Panther minister presided. Seale was Douglas' best man. Dressed in dark sunglasses and a black leather jacket with a Huey Newton button pinned to his

lapel, Douglas held his bride's hands and smiled through his goatee.

When his wife decided to leave the Party nine months later, Douglas had their marriage annulled.

Douglas had a son and a daughter through two other Panther relationships. "Sisters liked Emory," Seale said, "and Emory loved sisters."

Everyone loved Emory, except the police, Kathleen Cleaver said.

The Panthers disbanded almost 30 years ago, but Douglas speaks as though the revolution lives on.

He still attends protests – most recently over Israel's invasion of Palestine and the killing of Oscar Grant, a young black man who was fatally shot by BART Police.

"Just wanted to show solidarity," he said.

He sits on the board of the Freedom Archives and EastSide Arts Alliance. He travels to museums around the world, where his work is exhibited.

His collection, "Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas," was published in 2007.

"Douglas' substantial body of work exists as a powerful graphic record of the Black Panthers' legacy," according to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, which recently exhibited his work.

Whenever Sia Gabriel mentions that Douglas is her father, people stop to say, "Wow, your father is a bad artist."

At a recent event in Oakland to commemorate Huey Newton's birthday for Black History Month, Douglas shows up in his black jeans, maroon knit top, dark fall jacket and a brown beret. He locks hands with Bobby Seale and waves hello to Billy X. Jennings, the Panthers' historian, who is arranging the display of Douglas' prints on the tables.

Taking the stage, Douglas flips through his retrospective slideshow. Words like "capitalist pig" and "revolution" flow easily from his lips, as hip-hop music plays in the background.

"There's still a lot of work to do," he says as he pumps his fist in the air.

At an event to commemorate Huey Newton's birthday for Black History Month, Douglas showed up in his black jeans, maroon knit top, dark fall jacket, and a brown beret. Words like 'capitalist pig' and 'revolution' still flow easily from his lips.

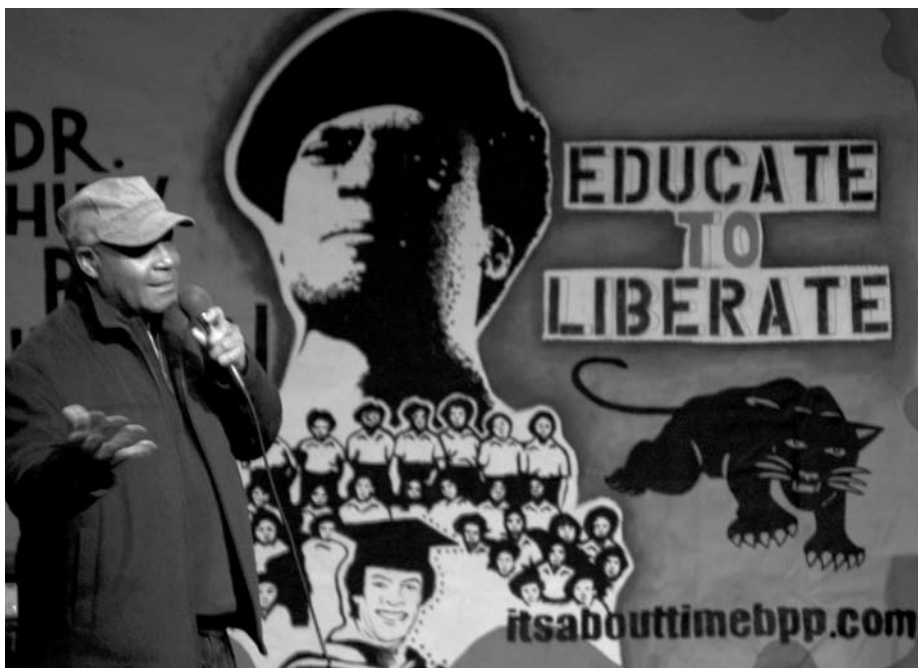


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