

Kanye Dig It? — Nigel Cooke

As is now widely known, Kanye West has been integrated into the unmistakable painting language of George Condo for the cover of his new album, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. In the most surreal of a range of five covers, we see the rapper in flagrante – supine on the couch, beer in hand and straddled by a bat-eared, armless harpy with spotted tail, wings and hairy legs. West has joined characters such as Rodrigo, Big Red and Little Ricky in Condo's cast of antipodal subjects, all boxed into a world of shattered faces, screaming lust and teeth-gnashing existential crisis. The response to the album has been clear: it is banned from the shelves of Walmart (of which more later) and comically pixelated on iTunes to protect us from the cover's erotic allure.

I am no expert on hip-hop album covers, but my research confirms a suspicion: that the hip-hop community is not known for shying away from bizarre confrontational imagery of dubious taste. The experts among you will doubtless be able to cast your minds back to 1991, and the album art of Geto Boys's *We Can't Be Stopped*, featuring group member Bushwick Bill on a hospital gurney after being shot in the eye. Then there's Indo G with his cover for *Christmas N' Memphis*, from 2002, where 'G', dressed as Santa with a leaking sackful of cash, is being held up by a pair of colossal silver pistols. And who could forget the 2006 Top Dog compilation album *Slam Dunk'n Hoes*, featuring 'Mr Dog' – with straight face – dunking a scantily clad woman upside down through a basketball hoop.

All of these covers, delivered with either deadpan photography or amateur Photoshop trickery, are gleefully aggressive to the concept of taste. Needless to say, such albums would never appear either in Walmart or on iTunes, which says a lot about both the market West is going for, and the nature of the scandal' that formed around the 'banning' of the cover. The fact that Walmart doesn't stock any albums with parental advisory labels (regardless of lurid contemporary-painting content), and that West swiftly retracted the Condo cover, suggests a desire to have it both ways: bag the notoriety and attendant publicity, without sacrificing the most accessible platforms for hauling in the profits.

It's a tried-and-tested strategy, so why not? West's cover follows numerous examples of iconic but banned album art, sharing multiple similarities with David Bowie's *Diamond Dogs* (1974). Like West's, this album featured an original oil painting representing a chimerical image of the singer. Painted by the Belgian artist Guy Peellaert, famous at the time for portraits of musicians (*Frankie Goes to Hollywood* – also no strangers to the benefits of banning – in fact took its name from a background strapline text in Peellaert's portrait of Frank Sinatra), it featured Bowie in sphinxlike repose, his rear end the haunches of a dog, but complete with fully visible human genitalia. Although the detail was later airbrushed out, the small number of original uncensored copies that were circulated went on to become some of the most expensive record collectibles of all time (more on that next month).

West's ambition, as expressed to Condo during the project, was to have something crazy – something that could get banned. Although this may indicate that West was already thinking of the cover as a marketing coup, the ambition recognises the obvious point established by Bowie and other predecessors: that a ban provides a cultural

endorsement of an image's power. The public cannot process it, so the 'squares' need to step in to protect us from it. Yet is there more to it? Considering the photographic and Photoshopped album covers mentioned earlier – the gangsta Santas, the eye-socket trepannings, the sporting use of female escorts – a question arises: what was it that prompted West, with a ban in mind, to consider contemporary painting to achieve it? With the hollowness of the censorship ringing throughout the story, the allegiance feels to be much less with the wilfully nasty, sickening or politically outrageous tradition of banned hip-hop covers and more with a different, more Euro-cultural kind of censorship furore. In fact, the desired shock seems ancestral to painting, not hip-hop; from Manet's *Olympia* (1863) to Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), outrage towards painting seldom results in a ban – more a rethinking of the avant-garde, a jolt to the system that recalibrates the expectations of the cultural moment. West, in turning away from using ban-guaranteed imagery from the ultra offensive end of hip-hop iconography, has maybe introduced a secret ambition to the packaging of his work, a desire to align himself, perhaps, with the kind of recoiling that stirs up not merely cash and notoriety but also questions, criticism and even change.

This essay downloaded from nigelcooke.net is copyrighted and protected under international copyright laws. This material may not be reproduced in any form or manipulated without prior written permission from the artist and/or the copyright holder(s). Copyright © 2013 Nigel Cooke.