Dossier | Bling-bling, Everytime I Come Around

Bling-bling, Everytime I Come Around
By Fabien Loszach

“Bling-bling, Everytime I come around, yo city, Bling-bling, Pinky ring worth about fifty.” (1) With those words, sung by rappers B.G. and Lil Wayne and broadcast on MTV, bling-bling entered the mainstream in the late 1990s. The expression, already in use for some time in the hip-hop subculture, referred to the conspicuous, expensive artifacts of gangsta fashion, borrowed from stereotypical images of the pimp, a style emphasizing large, flashy jewels (generally in gold or platinum and studded with diamonds).

Without a doubt, the first bling-bling artists or craftsmen in hip-hop show-business were the specialized jewellers, like Jacob Arabo and Jason Arasheben, who fashioned the extravagant jewelry. The former boasts of supplying American hip-hop stars and major league athletes. In recognition of his work, Jay-Z, G-Unit, and Kanye West mention Jacob the Jeweller in their lyrics. As for Arasheben, he’s known for having designed the heaviest pendant in the world—almost 2.5 kilos, a Guinness record—in gold and diamonds (over 3,700) for artist Lil Jon. Life is for the passionate, for the excessive, as French author Pierre Drieu La Rochelle liked to say.

Today, “bling-bling” denotes a much broader reality than that delimited by hip-hop culture: over time, it has left the ghetto to enter everyday language, and then the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary in 2002 as a synonym for “conspicuous consumption.” In this commonly accepted meaning, bling-bling has undeniably pejorative connotations: it refers to an aesthetic of the parvenu who flaunts his wealth in a vulgar display of big watches, massive jewels, the flagrant consumption of luxury brands, etc.

In the hip-hop scene, bling-bling is a way of showing one’s individuality; it functions as a symbol of social success for the marginalized and the poor, for whom success is an exception. The display of riches compensates for years of invisibility and frustration: for the

newly prosperous it is a question of adopting all the stereotypical codes of wealth (often derived from cinematic fiction) to prove to the whole world that he beat the odds.

The extreme gaudiness of bling-bling is inversely proportional to the misery in which the hip-hop stars lived prior to reaching stardom. Not surprising then that bling-bling prompts disapproval and is considered vulgar and extreme. Recall that in the traditionally Christian society of the West, the display of wealth was never really encouraged. On the contrary, the traditional bourgeois ethic prizes restraint in this respect; one's prosperity should rather manifest itself through small distinctive signs familiar to initiates.

Thus, when contemporary art adopts bling-bling, it can refer to two types of practice having quite different contents and realities: the first, emerging from the realm of hip-hop, proposes a pictorial rendition of bling-bling as a "lifestyle" in its original context, while the second makes no explicit reference to the term, but is deemed bling-bling after the fact by critics wanting to underline the ostentatiousness of the work, its lavishness and exorbitant sale price.

Kehinde Wiley, a young American artist from LA, is very close to the hip scene. His credo? To paint and sculpt young African-Americans in classical poses reminiscent of Titian, David, or Gainsborough. One of his most famous pieces was commissioned by rapper Ice T; Wiley depicted the iconic gangsta rapper in the manner of Ingres' Napoleon. The work was a resounding success and consecrated Wiley, both among hip-hop artists and on the contemporary art scene. During one of his previous exhibitions, titled "Recognize! Hip-Hop and Contemporary," at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington in 2008, some of his paintings were snatched up for over a 100,000 dollars.

Titian in the gangsta scene? Culture clashes on a backdrop of bling-bling? Maybe, but with Wiley bling-bling is only in the picture because it is part of the everyday lives of his subjects. The artist's goal is in fact to upend the classical representation of power that invariably portrays white man as hero and warrior in sumptuous clothing. Wiley's subjects are heroes of the everyday, Black youth attired in hip-hop style, with T-shirts, over-sized baggy jeans, and bling-bling accessories. "Painting is about the world that we live in," Wiley tells us, "Black men live in this world. My choice to include them is my way of saying yes to us." (2)

Wiley jumbles together the codes of power and wealth from two diametrically opposed cultures. This unlikely pairing generates a dual figure of excess: that of hip-hop culture itself, and the lavish representations of nobility and the ruling classes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The gold chains—like Lil Jon's pendant—replace the coats of arms, and the Hummers, SUVs and such are the new coaches.

Montreal artist Simon Bilodeau likes to characterize his work as bling-bling and admits to being heavily influenced by the hip-hop aesthetic. One especially thinks of Nasty Bling, shown at Galerie Verticale, in Laval in 2006. The work consists of a plaster painting

representing an empty landscape where fake diamonds adorn the sky and a dismembered woman lies on the ground. The artist's name is painted on the wall, like a trademark, and a headset propped next to the painting delivers a driving hip-hop specially composed for the piece. It goes without saying that the work exhibits all the stereotypes of gangsta rap: exaggerated wealth and valuable objects, personality cult of the artist, the indispensable prone female figure.

Shotly later, at Art Mûr gallery in Montreal, Bilodeau made a big entrance by renting a Hummer (3) (thanks to student bursaries) on which, again, he inscribed his name. The gesture was a nod to the attitude of rap stars and mob bosses who think nothing of spending a fortune on massive, showy objects to demonstrate their rise in social status. Both his peers and his teachers were highly critical of Bilodeau's excessive and unproductive expenditures and the ostentatiousness of his performance. One had to consider the gesture as a glance past the hip-hop star, flaunting his money in a show of power, to the fragile position of the artist—leading an often precarious existence in Canada. Ostentation, for its part, is integral to gangsta culture, where young upstarts strive to symbolically assert themselves by displaying stereotypical signs of success.

For some time now, Bilodeau's bling-bling has taken a distance from hip-hop culture, retaining only the sense of superfluity, extravagance, opulence, and excess. Échec luxuriant, shown in August 2009 at the Maison de la culture Frontenac in Montreal, is illustrative. It is composed of hundreds of plaster diamonds, broken up and scattered over the floor. The work also recalls the fifteenth-century episode of the Bonfire of the Vanities, led by the Florentine Dominican priest, Girolamo Savonarola, in which were burned jewels, clothes, mirrors, books by Boccaccio, and some paintings of Botticelli's—who brought his canvases to the fire himself.

Bilodeau's universe, replete with lust and luxury, crystals and diamonds, recalls the vanities of the Baroque era (Georges de la Tour, Hans Holbein) and of our own (Damien Hirst, For the Love of God, 2007; Gabriel Orozco, Black Kites, 1997). Recall that the vanitas are highly allegorical works, where represented objects are symbolic and serve to highlight the transience of life. Skulls and hourglasses symbolize time inexorably running out, mirrors the ephemerality of beauty, and riches the precariousness of material pleasures.

Hirst's last works are also perfectly emblematic of the conspicuousness of bling-bling, if one accepts the term in the sense of the exhibition of wealth and excess. They are manifestations of outrageous opulence, and their selling prices also reach totally exorbitant heights. One should note that Hirst, the king of pop and of the art of business, has truly extravagant resources at his disposal; the riches in his work are no sham (unlike Bilodeau's plaster and glass, for example), he uses real precious stones.

In September 2008, Hirst took in 70 million pounds by selling 218 works at Sotheby's in London (the works were sold for a total of 111 million pounds). For the Love of God, a platinum copy of an Eighteenth-century human skull encrusted with 8,601 diamonds, was later sold for 50 million dollars… to a consortium of financiers (earning him the label of an artist for speculators). Yet the work is more than bling-bling, says the one most concerned; it is a reflection on the vanity of life.

For a presentation of the work at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, in November 2008, Hirst chose to place For the Love of God at the centre of a selection of canvases from the golden age of Flemish painting, such representations of memento mori and vanitas as Paulus Moreelse's A Girl with a Mirror. For art historian Rudi Fuchs, the connection between Hirst's work and that of his Flemish precursors was obvious; the vanitas reminded us how the fear of death has given artists thematic inspiration for centuries and how this fear impacts the work of Hirst. Death certainly plays a part in this British artist's œuvre, but what transpires from works like The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991) or Maggots isn't fear of one's end so much as a real necrophiliac passion, a veneration for postmortem conservation and decomposition.

For many critics, Hirst's production, particularly For the Love of God, is then a contemporary vanitas, bling-bling as denunciation of materialism, consumer society, and the transiency of wealth. It is hard to subscribe to this point of view, though, without confronting the fact that Hirst's and the Flemish painters' motivations are diametrically opposed. While, in the wake of the Reformation, the finiteness of life may well have preoccupied the painters of the seventeenth century, the everyday materiality of things seems a more pressing motivation for Hirst, who has no compunction in reproducing his skull on T-shirts and Levi's jeans sold at the ultra-hip Parisian boutique Colette— 80 gets you the basic 501 model, unless you want the Bling-Bling 501 Gold Edition, with 24-carat gold buttons, for 15,000. Hirst's street cred has taken a hit, especially with young artists who look down on his court action action against Cartrain, a teenage street artist who used a modified likeness of Hirst's skull in a collage he sold on the Net. Memento mori.

What can we learn from bling-bling? A critique of materialist society through exaggerated materialism? A replication of its codes that denounces its worthlessness and volatility? Caustic caricature of society or simple commentary? Answers are all the more difficult to come by as the artists often prefer to remain equivocal in commenting on their work. Another aspect of the term's usage to keep in mind is that, while one may use the expression bling-bling to characterize the art of Bilodeau and Hirst, one should nonetheless be careful in its application since it is itself a commentary and critique and cannot designate a movement as such. Artists, in fact, rarely describe their work as "bling-bling": the term is rather used as a qualifier by critics and curators to describe luxurious, ostentatious art that employs precious, "flashy" materials.

[Translated from the French by Ron Ross]

NOTES

1. Bling-bling, by B.G, with Baby Turk, Mannie Fresh, Juvenile, and Lil Wayne.
2. Quoted in Brian Keith Jackson, “Visualise,” Vibe (August 2003): 117.
3. For the openning of the Phénoménale exhibition on March 29, 2006.