The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/29/arts/design/derrick-adams-frieze-seoul.html

# Derrick Adams Is Joyous, Political and In Conversation With the World

Ahead of two shows in Seoul, the artist, famed for his colorful figurative work, reflects on urban aesthetics, Black joy and turning the quotidian into the sublime.

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By Ted Loos

Aug. 29, 2024



Being social is not necessarily a top requirement when it comes to achieving success as an artist; plenty of makers have secluded themselves in their studios and produced powerful work.

But Derrick Adams has distinguished himself as an artist who not only depicts the human figure — frequently in paintings that use Cubist-inspired puzzle pieces and a Pop Art-worthy rainbow of color — but one who genuinely likes human interaction, and thrives off it.

“Sometimes you have to just step outside of the studio,” said Adams, 54, on a recent summer morning. “If you’re an artist, you’re making art all the time. Everything is an inspiration.”

Adams’s most frequently used word is “conversation,” which he uses to describe both to talking to people — “I’m constantly in conversation with neighbors when I walk outside” — and also the way his works create a dialogue with the viewer.

Standing in his spacious, white-walled Brooklyn studio, he described how the space is broken up: a loungy front area with couches and a kitchen where visitors and his studio staff can hang out, representing his social side, and then a back area where the work gets made.

“This is my brain,” said Adams, standing in the back by some works in progress. “In the front, that’s my body.”

Adams was preparing for an exhibition in Seoul in a project space at the headquarters of the Korean beauty company Amorepacific. Featuring seven paintings, “Derrick Adams: The Strip” opens Tuesday and was organized by Gagosian gallery.

Adams's "Whatever (En Vogue)," 2024 acrylic and spray paint on wood panel, will be on view at the Gagosian Gallery at Frieze Seoul Sept. 5-7. Derrick Adams Studio, via the artist and Gagosian

The gallery will also show three of his works at the art fair Frieze Seoul, which opens Sept. 5, including "Untitled (Musician)" (2024), depicting a bearded man. The Amorepacific presentation is both Adams's and Gagosian's first show in South Korea.

Amorepacific's business makes it an apt venue for Adams. For years, he has been taking pictures of beauty supply stores and wig shops anywhere he finds himself, from Brooklyn to Paris, part of his longstanding interest in what he called "highlighting certain aesthetic principles that are practiced within urban spaces." In the show's title, "strip" refers to stretches of beauty supply outlets.

On a table in his studio, there were more than a dozen mannequin heads, of the type seen in beauty shops. The heads were in a variety of skin tones, but all with small, delicate facial features. Adams had planned to turn them into totem-pole-like sculptures for the show, but decided later that they needed more consideration before they were ready.

The paintings for the show were nearby and depicted similar heads topped by wigs, done in his signature manner of interlocking blocks of color, a geometry partly inspired by African masks. Adams combined the painted heads with large areas of molded reliefs designed to look like brick walls, adorned with heart-shaped graffiti; in some spots he had rendered a glint, as if the viewer were looking at the scene through a shop window.

What to some might be quotidian is to Adams worthy of noticing and turning into art.

"Derrick is a powerful storyteller," said Thelma Golden, the director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem. "His works are evident of the breadth and complexity of the stories that

define Black life, past and present."

Adams said that for the Amorepacific show, he had been thinking about "this ritualistic practice of adornment being a very exposed thing, and very participatory."

He added, "It's a conversation about the history of Black culture as it relates to being a consumer — and being consumed."

The ongoing series has two major creative inspirations: the work of Romare Bearden — whose 1971 work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art "The Block" shows brick buildings amid a sprawling neighborhood scene — and the creations of the fashion designer Patrick Kelly, for his pioneering exploration of "Black femininity," Adams said.

The artist Mickalene Thomas, a close friend of Adams for some 30 years, said that the construction of his paintings was a key part of their appeal.

"He has a great way of juxtaposing geometries, shapes and color to create a depth of field," Thomas said. "He has you enter into the work and then you feel like you're part of the narrative."

Among contemporary Black artists, Adams occupies a distinct area in terms of subject matter and tone. He has carefully defined the terms of his work and he does not use his platform for decrying society's ills.

“You go into a museum, most Black artists are making work that talks about the repressive culture of colonialism and what Black people have to experience,” Adams said. “I don’t think that Black people need to go into a museum to see something they experience outside of the museum.”

In the past, critics and curators have associated him with the idea of “Black joy,” but he said that the phrase itself was complicated.

“My work is joyful, I’m having fun doing it, but that flattens it out,” Adams said of the phrase, which for him does not mean a happy-talk optimism that ignores problems.

“The idea of being Black and joyful is political — to assert it, to demand it,” he said. “It’s something that you have to take and not something that is given.”

Adams (right) at the Gordon Park Foundation Annual Awards Dinner and Auction at Cipriani 42 in New York City in May. Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

In his mind, that is not at odds with his frequent inclusion of humorous elements in his work. In his studio, there was an in-progress painting of a grinning Black man who appeared to be baked into a pie — literally, with his head sticking out of one end

and his feet the other — which was set on a Fourth of July-themed picnic tablecloth. It was a slightly surreal but also strangely wholesome scene.

“He brings a sense of humor and absurdity,” Thomas said. “You think, ‘He didn’t just do that did he?’ Oh yeah he did.”

Adams was born and raised in Baltimore, and later created a Baltimore-focused nonprofit, Charm City Cultural Cultivation, that includes an artist’s residency.

He moved to New York in 1993, eventually receiving his B.F.A. from Pratt Institute and M.F.A. from Columbia. “I knew my purpose in coming to New York was to be an artist,” he said.

For 13 years Adams had a day job at the nonprofit space Rush Arts, which highlighted Black and African diaspora artists. He started as gallery manager and became curatorial director, helping other artists develop their careers, writing grants and mounting shows — not something on the résumé of every top contemporary artist.

“My whole foundational structure is working at an organization that didn’t sell art,” Adams said of the way it framed his career, putting commercial concerns second.

He said he was never much of a careerist: “Everything I’ve been able to obtain as an artist has not been through any type of strategic planning.”

Golden recalled that she got to know Adams when he was working at Rush Arts, but also making his own work on nights and weekends and showing it at alternative spaces. She was already an influential curator, then at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

“He often would speak to me about other artists he thought I should see,” Golden said. “But I don’t remember him ever during that time speaking about his own work.”

As a successful midcareer artist today, Adams is sought after by museums to do special projects, but he often does more than just ship out a work.

The artist's "Our Time Together" (detail), 2021, an Inkjet print on vinyl commissioned by the Milwaukee Art Museum. Milwaukee Art Museum

For a monumental wall mural at the Milwaukee Art Museum called "Our Time Together" (2021), Adams traveled several times to Milwaukee to create the work — which is part painting and part photomontage — meeting with people and delving into local history.

The work incorporated local images from the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as other scenes of Black life in the area. "I looked for the most empowering imagery," Adams said.

Marcelle Polednik, the Milwaukee museum's director, said that "Our Time Together" was a "catalytic work" for the institution because of "how intimately it is tied to a sense of place."

She added, "It's not unusual for people to come in and recognize a family member in the mural. It provided a different way of engaging in community history beyond our walls."

For Adams, face-to-face engagement — both in making the art, and then showing it — is core to who he is.

"When I have a show in a city, I try to learn the city," he said. "An important part of my work is bringing in Black audiences and diversifying who sees art."

A version of this article appears in print on , Section S, Page 3 in The New York Times International Edition