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Derrick Adams to Install Monumental Portrait of Biennale Curator Koyo Kouoh in Venice



Derrick Adams, *Heavy is the head that wears the crown*, 2026, acrylic and fabric collage on paper, 35 1/2 × 25 inches (90.2 × 63.5 cm) © Derrick Adams Studio. Photo: John Berens

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VENICE, May 4, 2026—Gagosian is pleased to announce the public installation in Venice of *Heavy is the head that wears the crown* (2026), a monumental portrait by Derrick Adams of Koyo Kouoh (1967–2025), curator of the 61st International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia. In a project curated by Francesco Bonami, Adams’s new collage will be displayed as a banner installed close to the Arsenale, on the façade of Palazzetto dello sport Giobatta Gianquinto, facing the Rio della Tana. This tribute to Kouoh will be on view from May 4 through September 24, 2026.

Kouoh passed away unexpectedly in May 2025. The first African woman to curate the Biennale, she was a leading figure of the international art world who championed contemporary Pan-African art and diasporic culture. In the early 2000s, Bonami became aware of Kouoh, recalling, “At the time, Koyo was working on various curatorial projects across Africa, where she would later launch RAW Material Company in Dakar. She had a fresh, informed voice and eye. Trusting her vision, I invited her to

join the jury for the 50th Venice Biennale, *Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer*. It is gratifying to see that vision brought to fruition this year with *In Minor Keys*, and to honor her with this project.”

Adams explains: “The installation pays homage to Koyo Kouoh’s legacy, honoring the impact she had in championing Black voices and visions. Joyous depictions of Black experience have become synonymous with my practice and played a role within her curatorial philosophy: presenting jubilation as a site of resistance and beauty. This work commemorates Koyo by bestowing her with a radiant crown of ‘JOY’ that emits beams of gold signifying the brilliance and reach of her influence.”

“Heavy is the head that wears the crown” is a popular idiom that refers to the immense pressure faced by those in positions of high responsibility. While acknowledging that power comes with heavy burdens, Adams’s work emphasizes the feelings of accomplishment and celebration when things turn out even better than imagined.

This contemporary icon incorporates a frontal pose, flattened forms, and golden hues—all features that allude to Venice’s Byzantine cultural heritage. The work’s emphasis on the transformative power of happiness is especially appropriate to honor Kouoh. As a tribute from her colleagues at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town notes, “She radiated joy and momentum in equal measure. When she walked into a room, everything shifted.”

Derrick Adams was born in Baltimore in 1970, and lives and works in New York. His multidisciplinary practice encompasses paintings, sculptures, collages, performances, videos, and public projects that explore themes of leisure, normalcy, and perseverance. *Derrick Adams: View Master*, his first mid-career retrospective, is on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, through September 7, 2026. For Adams’s biographical information and exhibition history, [please visit gagosian.com](http://pleasevisitgagosian.com).

Francesco Bonami was born in Florence, Italy, in 1955. He has curated over a hundred exhibitions around the globe including directing the 50th Biennale di Venezia in 2003 and the Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in 2010. He lives and works in Milan and New York.

#DerrickAdams

DERRICK ADAMS

Heavy is the head that wears the crown

May 4–September 24, 2026

Palazzetto dello sport Giobatta Gianquinto, Castello, Venice

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