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modern luxury.



*Style Variation 16, (2019),
by artist Derrick Adams*



party politics

New York artist Derrick Adams is asserting the joyousness of black creation and representation in art—one exuberant canvas at a time.

By MICHAEL WILSON
Portrait by CHRISTOPHER GARCIA VALLE

Artist Derrick Adams in his Crown Heights studio. On the walls hang pieces from the forthcoming *We Came to Party and Plan* installation.



DERRICK ADAMS'S STREET-LEVEL STUDIO IN THE CROWN HEIGHTS NEIGHBORHOOD OF BROOKLYN IS SURROUNDED BY AUTO-REPAIR SHOPS AND TAXI GARAGES, AND EVERY FEW MINUTES A TRAIN THUNDERS PAST ON THE ELEVATED TRACK THAT FACES IT.

I arrived for our morning interview, in November 2019, before the artist did, but activity already buzzed throughout the long white room as his assistants began their day's work. The space is a new one for Adams—he'd moved here in summer 2019, following a stint at the Rauschenberg Residency on Florida's Captiva Island—but it's close to his previous studio, and his home.

Baltimore-raised Adams and I had met once before, in 2010, when he was an early Fountainhead Resident in Miami. He's been back to the Florida city often since then, and when we spoke last fall, he was planning yet another visit, this one for December's Art Basel Miami Beach jamboree. "I'll be DJing inside Mickalene Thomas's *Better Nights* installation at the Bass museum," he explained. "I like to have fun and be a part of other people's things. It feels good not to be the main person sometimes—it feels *great*, actually!"

Being the center of attention is something that Adams has had to get used to in recent years. Over the past decade, he's racked up an impressive list of exhibitions and projects, and he has yet another packed year in sight. "I teach at Brooklyn College now in addition to making work," he says, "so I'm pretty busy." He's now on the roster at New York gallery Salon 94, which corepresents him with Luxembourg & Dayan in New York, and he's been with Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago since 2014. This March, he presents *Buoyant*, a solo exhibition at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, which includes works from his multiyear series *Floaters* alongside a new installation, *We Came to Party and Plan*, in a second gallery in the museum. He's also undertaking a curatorial intervention, conferring with HRM curator Laura Vookles on which pieces from the museum's permanent collection will be exhibited in other areas

of the museum during the show.

Adams, whose *Floaters* depicts African Americans happily adrift in the blue expanses of swimming pools, takes a strikingly optimistic approach in his work, refusing to diagnose or underscore current or historical sociopolitical issues; instead, his aim is to expand what's expected from a black artist and black subjects: not tragedy but delight. Adams aims to present the black figure in a relaxed context, one that most viewers aren't used to seeing, and to eschew references to historical painting traditions.

"I wanted to do something reflective of how people feel and exist now," he stressed. "Most of the things I make are based on observing things, figuring out what's missing, and seeing what I can contribute." The men and women in *Floaters*, a series he began in 2015, are clad in colorful swimsuits and lounge in cool azure spaces that represent both water and freedom from boundaries.

A key aspect of the series, and of Adams's work more broadly, is a concern with setting. He's immersed himself in what he calls "urban suburbia," a milieu common in Baltimore, a town dotted with "neighborhoods that can feel like they're not in the city but are still part of its structure." Thinking about the roles that public and private pools play in this setting, and aiming to empower viewers by depicting the black figure as self-possessed and playful, Adams remains aware of an underlying dissonance: "There are still obstacles for communities of color."

Although viewers might perceive didactic messages in his work, Adams doesn't disregard the intelligence of his audiences, either. "I'm always thinking about the nonartist, the person who is not necessarily invested in the same ideals that I am," he »



DERRICK ADAMS
BLACK WHITE AND BROWN



BLACK WHITE AND BROWN, a 2017 installation by
Derrick Adams at PRIMARY arts collective in Miami.



Head 12 (2012) by Derrick Adams.
OPPOSITE: *Figure in the Urban Landscape 25*
(2018) by Derrick Adams.







ABOVE: Inside Derrick Adams's studio. The three works on the left, *Style Variation*, are from Adams's *Beauty World* series. OPPOSITE: Derrick Adams's *Woman in Charcoal Gray* (2016).

says. "As artists, we're reared to be critical of what we're observing, but work can be more of an offering than a critique—another perspective on culture that broadens the conversation about purpose and belonging and perseverance."

The idea of community resonates on several levels for Adams. "When I'm with a group of friends," he says, "I feel privileged to be in a space with radical thinkers and makers." This feeling led him to create *We Came to Party and Plan*, the new installation, which situates his portraits in an imagined poolside party room. "It came from thinking about my peer group. We party and plan in the same space, just as the black American church became a place of social engagement as well as radical activity."

What about the curatorial aspect of the upcoming project? I mean to ask how it feels to intervene in the museum's permanent collection, but another word slips out: *interfere*. "To interfere! Right!" Adams exclaims with a laugh, responding that he's still gathering material for his contribution. "I want it to point the viewer in the direction of my other work, to give it context, and I've been thinking about key figures who participated in radical social change," including activists Martin Luther King Jr. and Bayard Rustin and artists Romare Bearden, Faith Ringgold, Adrian Piper, and David Hammons. He notes that the works he's selecting from the HRM permanent collection are "in the sensibility of representations of leisure and life around water."

Another of Adams's consistent interests is architecture; I'm struck by his mention of "the relationship between man and monument." "Figures in urban space have an influence over the architecture around them," he explains, observing that cities are forced to adapt to the needs of their growing populations. "If the governing society doesn't support the growth of a community, the community will build for themselves, like the creation of community gardens and farmers' markets. The way we see each other is a product of the spaces we create and inhabit for ourselves, physically or mentally."

A responsibility that comes with his increased visibility is participation in art fairs: on this winter's agenda is showing

with Salon 94 at Frieze Los Angeles in February. I ask how he feels about the art-fair context, one that's often reviled by artists and visitors for whom the commercial ambiance threatens to overwhelm the viewing experience. "Fairs are about items rather than experiences," he concedes, "but they can still work if a gallery allows you to present your ideas in a way that's not so focused on commerce. For Frieze, I'm doing a segment of the Hudson River party room installation, showing works in an interior whose wallpaper graphic features furniture and decorations. Sometimes you have to create a context for your work within the work itself. You have to give a little more."

Warming to his conjoined subjects of optimism and the communal, Adams discusses the black experience in art more broadly. "We're never going to run out of works that represent oppressive structures, political unrest, or the plight of black America," he notes. "What we lack is images relating to gains." As a student of Kara Walker and Coco Fusco at Columbia University in the early 2000s, Adams opted to focus on topics other than colonialism and its brutalities. "I was making work based on my personal lived experiences instead of oppressive histories that I didn't experience first-hand. I tried to focus on form but was unable to, as my conversation was always steered toward colonialism and the European influence on the black body. I thought there was room for artists who weren't just responding to hot-button topics."

As we're winding down the interview, a photographer shouts from across the studio: "So, are we ready to party?"

There's only one possible response. ✨

Frieze Los Angeles runs February 14 to 16, 2020, at Paramount Pictures Studios, Los Angeles.

Derrick Adams: *Buoyant is on view March 7 to June 14, 2020, at the Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York. Co-curated by James E. Bartlett and Laura Vookles.*

