

OBSERVER

Derrick Adams Debuts in Korea With Gagosian at Amorepacific's Headquarters

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Derrick Adams, *Who Can I Run To (Xscape)*, 2024; Acrylic and spray paint on wood panel in artist's frame, 72 x 95 inches (182.9 x 241.3 cm). © Derrick Adams Studio Courtesy the artist and Gagosian

Kicking off Seoul Art Week, American artist Derrick Adams opened a flashy show of his work at the headquarters of world-renowned Korean beauty company Amorepacific. Titled "The Strip," it marks the artist's debut in the city and Gagosian's first presentation in Seoul outside of the fairs. Inside the glass cube of the APMA Cabinet project space, beautifully designed by David Chipperfield, Adams is showing a series of new paintings inspired by the diverse display windows at beauty supply stores he has photographed near his Brooklyn studio and worldwide. During a walkthrough, he told Observer the show was the result of a future-focused exploration ten years in the making.

“Whenever I travel to a place, I want to see what the next generation is interested in, what they are wearing, their hairstyles and the music they listen to,” he explained. “Those things are always a unique inspiration to my work because I like to think that my work is more about what’s happening forward than what has happened.”



Derrick Adams in his New York studio in 2023 | Photo: Emil Horowitz Courtesy

The works presented feature groups of mannequin heads framed by molded reliefs of red bricks. As in real life, their exuberant, hyper-curated wigs and heavy makeup dominate those manufactured windows as hypnotic totemic presences, surrounded by urban markers—signs and graffiti that interrupt the regularity of the rigid compositions of geometric elements in which they’re encapsulated. The imagined architecture framing these subjects is conceived as purposely tridimensional, coming

out of the canvas with its texture and materiality, contrasting with the collage elements and the flatness of the paintings. Painted on panels, they create an intriguing double *trompe-l’œil* that transforms paintings into portals.

For “The Strip,” Adams leveraged the relationship between artworks and architecture—visitors can see the show from multiple angles as in a diorama, and the audience is encouraged to interact with the works in different ways, as both viewers and actors. There’s also the fact that the APMA Cabinet space is not a traditional arts venue. According to Adams, the local audience has been very curious and engaged, facilitating the type of interaction and social confrontation the artist is looking for as part of his sociological and cultural investigation practice. “What I find the most interesting is the people who see the work are not all art people, they are not people who may be going specifically to see the art,” he said. “It might just be a chance encounter as you’re going to work, or coming from work, or just walking through the building.”



An installation view of "Derrick Adams: The Strip" mounted by Gagosian at the headquarters of Amorepacific. © Derrick Adams Studio Photo: Chunho An Courtesy Gagosian

The Strip is an American term for a certain type of mall: an area where people can access the shops from the street that also serves as a stage for the public presentation of our personalities as we express ourselves with fashion, accessories and personal styling. The exhibition, unsurprisingly, deeply investigates the relationships between style, beauty, appearance, identity expression and desire.

The mannequins depicted by Adams in the new series of paintings present another level of complexity compared to some previous characters in the artist's universe. "In these paintings, the variations of skin tones are more elaborated, addressing the diversity of complexion and variety within Black American culture, also as part of a history and lineage of Black representation," he explained. At the same, there are also fantastical elaborations that allude to the new fluidity allowed by global multiculturalism in cross-culture costuming that freely mixes different notions of beauty. "The work complements the relationship beauty care industry and black culture, with the influence of contemporary Black culture in media and fashion while also alluding to the Korean ownership of many of those businesses."



An installation view of “Derrick Adams: The Strip” mounted by Gagolian at the headquarters of Amorepacific. © Derrick Adams Studio Photo: Chunho An Courtesy Gagolian

Adams’ work, here and elsewhere, combines sociological aspects with formal ones in “a combination of figurative figuration and abstraction kind of merged, kind of clashing together juxtaposed, or things like that, and inside things.” Eventually, this simultaneous attention to color, texture and composition allows viewers different levels of access to the work on their own terms. “I like the idea of merging two because the representation acknowledges the viewer in a certain,” he mused. “When painting people, you can mirror the presence of human existence, while abstraction is about the space itself. Thinking about those two together, I feel it is a more tangible way that we operate in the real world, both abstractly and figuratively throughout every day, without really realizing it as a balance of the two things being crucial to the way that we see ourselves and the way that we deal with the space.”

While Adams acknowledges his references to Pop Art and artists like Tom Wesselmann (with whom we learn the artist will be paired in an upcoming show at Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris), he also points to Sol LeWitt as having a significant influence on his work—in particular his mural drawings and the formal and composition strategies the minimalist artist employed in making those works. “Hard-edge abstraction is also part of my practice. I’m examining how LeWitt communicates the grid, painting strokes and waves to linear lines. If you look at the hairstyles in my paintings, you can see some of the references.”



Derrick Adams, *Luv Bad B**ches (Brownstone)*, 2024; acrylic and spray paint on wood panel in frame, 60 x 60 inches (152.4 x 152.4 cm). © Derrick Adams Studio Courtesy the artist and Gagosian

At the same time, the fragmented structure of those faces exemplifies his original interest in African wood carving and traditional statues while positioning this aesthetic in confrontation and integration with the legacy of Cubism. This is particularly evident in Adams' use of collage, both on a physical level, by applying various elements on the canvas to complicate the composition, and symbolically, as a way to combine apparently paradoxical and juxtaposed elements in a space where they can assume new meanings dialectically.

During our walkthrough of the show, the artist talked about how this short period in Seoul has provided him with new inspiration. "I'm sure that this experience will somehow seep into my brain and get into the work when I return to the studio." Indeed, the sociological and anthropological research that informs the artist's work has found fertile ground in the

observation of a society like the one in Korea, where the tension between traditional values and contemporary culture is weighty—something one sees in the contrast between the social rules in terms of dress codes respected by the older generation and the free expression claimed by the youth with their more eccentric styles.

While popular culture informs Derrick Adams' work, music, in particular, has always been the central element. The pieces in "The Strip" are titled after popular tracks from the '90s, specifically by black women-fronted R&B groups like Brownstone, Destiny's Child, Total, Groove Theory, SWV and Xscape. "While in my studio, I listen to music all the time," he said. "It's part of my daily routine, and music that I listen to is very influential for how I work in my studio." Music provides the rhythm to the formal compositions that he will translate onto the canvas, and reflecting with Adams on Korean pop culture, and more specifically K-pop, provides some interesting phenomena to analyze, considering how it heavily drew from hip-hop at its origins and how it found unexpected translations and evolutions in different countries, as in the work of Peruvian Indigenous singer Lenin Tamayo.

As we discussed those cross-cultural exchanges that feed today's global identity, Adams shared a reflection that helps perfectly explain his art and approach to the world: "I think of the world as a collage. Everyone is pasting the pieces together to find a way to represent themselves. There's a search for authenticity, but then it's a big collage of influence and inspiration from all over the world."



Adams created a series of display windows at beauty supply stores based on photographs he took near his Brooklyn studio and around the world to explore themes of style and beauty. © Derrick Adams Studio Photo: Chunho An Courtesy Gagosian



Adams' mannequin heads adorned with colorful wigs are framed by molded reliefs of bricks—collaged, dimensional elements that contrast with the flatness of the paintings. © Derrick Adams Studio Photo: Chunho An Courtesy Gagosian

Although Gagosian, which opened a location in Hong Kong in 2011, hasn't joined the growing ranks of international galleries opening outposts in Seoul, "Derrick Adams: The Strip" suggests a commitment to establishing a presence in the South Korean capital. "For this inaugural exhibition, we wanted to offer South Korea something fresh and new and perhaps unexpected," Gagosian Asia director Nick Simunovic said at a press conference. "As always in Asia, what we have tried to do, whether we're programming in Hong Kong or whether it's our participation in an art fair, is to bring the very best of what the gallery does in other parts of the world. For that reason, we're very proud to present Derek's work here." He went on to acknowledge the maturity of the Korean art scene and of a collector base already well-versed in collecting Korean, Asian and Western art. "What we see here in Seoul, in addition to the local Korean community being very interested in what happens, is huge attendance from across Asia and even around the world," he added.

"Derrick Adams: The Strip" is on view at the APMA Cabinet in Amorepacific headquarters in Seoul through October 12.