

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS ST. PETE

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Contact:

Lashonda Curry
727-896-2667 ext. 236 (o)
813-447-1752 (c)
lcurry@mfastpete.org

Contemporary Artist Derrick Adams’s Major Solo Museum Exhibition Debuts in Southeast at the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg

Derrick Adams: Buoyant reveals the carefree, joyful leisure scenes of Black life that so often go unseen

ST. PETERSBURG, FL (August 3, 2020) — A Black man in a red, white, and blue swimsuit drifts on a sunny yellow pool float. He stares off into the calm, azure water that surrounds him. He’s on his stomach, one leg fully submerged in the water, the other half way in. The pool is his world in this moment. He’s content and at peace, relaxing.

Contemporary artist Derrick Adams has observed that in art and in reality, images of Black people at play, being joyful, and simply enjoying life are not the norm. To fill this void, Adams created a painting series titled *Floaters* between 2016–2019, where Black men, women and children lounged in or rested on novelty floaties in the pool. He wanted to share these images with the world, and for Blacks to see themselves through a lens of freedom, fun, and leisure. In the exhibition, ***Derrick Adams: Buoyant***, 12 of these mixed-media works come together in a dynamic, vibrant presentation at the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, **September 12–November 29, 2020**. In the gallery, the large-scale paintings are complemented by beach chairs and giant pool floats, along with one of the inspirations for the idea of the show: a 1967 *Ebony* magazine article and photo spread on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s vacation in Jamaica. Also included in the exhibition is a woodblock print the MFA purchased in 2019, based on one of the paintings in the exhibition, *Self-Portrait on Float (2019)*.

Derrick Adams: Buoyant at the MFA has been a year in the making. It was originally scheduled to open July 2020, but was rescheduled due to COVID-19. The show will be the artist’s first major solo museum exhibition in the Southeast.

The painting-and-collage works are grand in size, popping with bright colors and bold patterns on the surface, but they also brim with an undercurrent of contextual depth. In the midst of headlines and hashtags about the struggle for racial justice and equality for Black Americans, Adams uses his art to reclaim and celebrate joy, pleasure, and respite for the Black image and spirit. With Black pain, there is also space for Black joy. In a February 2020 *artnet News* interview, Adams said his work is “a testament of perseverance.”

“We have to represent a certain sense of normalcy in order to stabilize the culture so that young people who are coming after us can look at themselves as fully dimensional humans—not always pushing against something, but basically just existing in a way that’s unapologetic and natural,” Adams said in the article.

“That’s what I’m thinking about in my studio: What can I reveal that has not been shown?” Adams continued. “And it always goes back to the simplest of things, like normalcy. Black people — not entertaining, just being, living. Letting people deal with that as reality.”

Adams, a Baltimore native, received his MFA from Columbia University, BFA from Pratt Institute, and is a Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and Marie Walsh Sharpe alumnus. He is also the recipient of the 2018 American Family Fellowship from the Gordon Parks Foundation, a 2009 Louis Comfort Tiffany Award, and the 2014 S.J. Weiler Award. His artwork is in the permanent collections of public institutions including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY; Studio Museum, NY; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, NY.

Derrick Adams: Buoyant is organized by the Hudson River Museum in association with the MFA, St. Petersburg. It is curated by James E. Bartlett, founder of Open Art and former Executive Director of the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA), in Brooklyn, New York, and Laura Vookles, Chair of the Hudson River Museum’s Curatorial Department. A fully-illustrated catalogue accompanies the exhibition, with essays by Bartlett and art critic and writer Antwaun Sargent, as well as an interview between Adams and artist Mickalene Thomas.

Bartlett said the “Black normalcy” Adams presents in his work “constitutes a new and distinct body of work that challenges the art-historical canon” typically associated with Western art. “Relaxation and play can be revolutionary acts, when performed by those traditionally excluded from activities of leisure,” Bartlett said of the *Buoyant* paintings. “Until very recently, art history has been viewed almost exclusively through a White, heteronormative lens...Many viewers did not see themselves reflected in the works at all.”

Kristen A. Shepherd, the MFA's Executive Director and CEO, said with *Buoyant*, she is proud to continue the MFA's mission of bringing forward diverse voices, and celebrating subject matters and points of view that reflect the cultural landscape of the community.

"We are honored to present these powerful works of art by Derrick Adams, who has grown as a revered and critically-acclaimed artist in the contemporary art space in the past few years," she said. "The show is a true delight, and a real coup for the MFA and our community. We want our museum visitors to embrace these monumental paintings as the powerful, hopeful, and joyful images they are meant to be."

A full lineup of programs will accompany the exhibition. Check our website for updates. The MFA is scheduled to reopen to members only starting September 12, and to the public one week later, on September 19. Tickets must be reserved online for timed entry in accordance with the Museum's COVID-19 safety measures.

Derrick Adams: Buoyant is made possible by James G. Sweeny with additional support from Ann and William Edwards.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA

The MFA at 255 Beach Drive NE is St. Petersburg's first art museum, and houses the largest encyclopedic art collection in Florida. The collection includes works of art from ancient times to the present day and from around the world, including ancient Greek and Roman, Egyptian, Asian, African, pre-Columbian, Native American, European, American, and contemporary art. The photography collection is one of the largest and finest in the Southeast. Kristen A. Shepherd is the Executive Director and CEO. For more information, please visit mfastpete.org.

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