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‘In Minor Keys’ Review: Its Best Moments Live in the Institutions Koyo Kouoh Built

In the Giardini, the late curator’s vision for new ways of engaging art is gestured towards, but even a commendable exhibition cannot resolve the Biennale’s problems



BY MARKO GLUHAICH IN CRITIC'S GUIDES | 07 MAY 26



If you arrive at the Giardini by way of the Grand Canal, you may unintentionally pass by the artwork that opens this year’s exhibition, ‘In Minor Keys’. The artist collective fierce pussy, in collaboration with artist and curator Jo-ey Tang, have installed cut-out fabric in red, black, green and white – a deconstructed Palestinian flag (*we are here*, 2026) – inside the disused ticket booth designed in 1952 by Carlo Scarpa. In fact, if you do miss it and enter the Giardini, you’ll have to exit the grounds to view its colours before you can re-enter to view the remainder of the show and national pavilions. The wall text describes it as ‘a site of welcome while also calling attention to the Biennale’s structure of national pavilions[,] which excludes many people’. Indeed. Inside the gates, you can visit the US and Russian pavilions; a kilometre away, Israel’s. Meanwhile, the wall text reminds us that ‘although Palestine has been recognized as a sovereign state by 157 United Nations member nations to date, it does not have an official pavilion at the Biennale.’



fierce pussy, *we are here*, 2026, installation view, 'In Minor Keys', located at the Biglietteria Scarpa outside the entrance to the Giardini, as part of *arms ache avid aeon*, Chapter Nine, organized by Jo-ey Tang in collaboration with the artist. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Matteo Losurdo

It's an austere gesture, almost too quiet to be effective. It embodies what the late curator and 2026 Biennale artistic director Koyo Kouoh wrote in her curatorial statement: 'In refusing the spectacle of horror, the time has come to listen to the minor keys, to tune in *sotto voce* to the whispers, to the lower frequencies; to find the oases, the islands, where the dignity of all living beings is safeguarded.' However, while drawing attention to the ironies of 'inclusivity' as the Biennale has officially sanctioned it, *we are here* also throws into relief the eerie reticence to speak aloud of any state violence within the Giardini walls. It's likewise hard to ignore how, just a week ago, the international jury selected by Kouoh herself resigned en masse over the Biennale organizers' rejection of their intention to exclude from prize consideration 'those countries whose leaders are currently charged with crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court'.

And yet, we are soon reminded of Kouoh's own efforts to establish counterpoints to pre-existing institutional structures that sanction such atrocities. In the Book Pavilion, a library project by RAW Material Company – the non-hierarchical and transdisciplinary learning centre established by Kouoh in Dakar – makes public the texts that inspired the exhibition's conceptual apparatus and serves as a space for reflecting analytically and socially on the show itself ('Ideal Seeds for Fertile Grounds'). As you enter the Central Pavilion, you are met with an untitled installation by Senegalese artist Issa Samb, whose presentation recreates the courtyard studio in which he worked, bringing together objects including baby dolls, masks, recycled appliance parts, clothes hanging from wires and a lip-shaped, red velvet pillow. Samb's own Laboratoire Agit'Art, the artist collective he co-founded in Dakar in the 1970s, served as a model for RAW and its aim of achieving, as Kouoh wrote in *Artforum* in 2016, a 'wider understanding and appreciation of art that is independent of state politics'.



The exterior of the Book Pavilion in the Giardini della Biennale, exhibiting 'Ideal Seeds for Fertile Grounds' by RAW Material Company, 2026.
Photograph: Marko Gluhaich

The curatorial team that Kouoh installed – Gabe Beckhurst Feijoo, Marie H el ene Pereira and Rasha Salti, along with Siddhartha Mitter and Rory Tsapayi – have ensured that her preselected motifs guided their decisions. Of these, among the most successfully realized is the section ‘School’, where large areas are given over to Denniston Hill, an interdisciplinary arts organization in upstate New York, and the non-profit space Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute. Both have curated spaces for visitors to meet, study or reflect, enacting how their work has impacted their communities and, as Denniston Hill describes in its statement of purpose, the importance of establishing ecologies of ‘creativity beyond the ontology of the marketplace’ and of ‘think[ing] critically about the ways art and architecture have been used to both enslave and liberate our senses’. Even if gesturing elsewhere, the organizations’ inclusion here is welcome in that it presents institutional modalities other than the one Biennale-goers find themselves in.



Denniston Hill, *Chimera*, 2026, installation view, ‘In Minor Keys’, La Biennale di Venezia. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Gaia Cambiaggi I Studio Campo

In her curatorial statement on the show's title, Kouoh writes of songs in minor keys as those that 'produc[e] beauty in spite of tragedy, the tunes of the fugitives recovering from the ruins, the harmonies of those repairing wounds and worlds'. Her words resonate in one of the exhibition's more moving sections, in a statement by the Indian artist Sohrab Hura. The title 'Things Felt But Not Quite Expressed' is scrawled on the wall above a salon-style hang of pastel paintings Hura began in 2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic. In these images of quotidian life, a cat looks at its reflection in a mirror (*It depends on how you look at it*, 2025) and a couple embrace (*Hug*, 2024) while three figures sit with the still, shrouded body of a recently deceased family member (*Grandmother*, 2023). The personal, the tragic and the tongue-in-cheek come together in these densely hung, diaristic works. On an adjacent wall, Palestinian artist Vera Tamari presents 'Olive Tree Women' (2009–19), delicate fabric collages with details in ink and watercolour crayon, overlaid with mesh and threadbare pressed wool. These understated works depicting the fragility of landscapes sit in conversation with her *Tale of a Tree* (2002) downstairs, where around 600 miniature clay olive trees in soft blues, yellows, oranges and white are displayed atop a Plexiglas base.



Sohrab Hura, *Hug*, 2024, soft pastel on paper, 37 × 31 × 3.5 cm.
Courtesy: the artist

The show itself is often bold in its colours, textures and materials, filled with painting, sculpture and, notably, very few new media works. The centrepiece of the first gallery is Big Chief Demond Melancon's *Amistad Takeover* (2026), a massive red ostrich-feather suit rooted in the Black Masking tradition of the artist's hometown of New Orleans. A ritual garment meant to be worn by Melancon on only a handful of occasions (such as during Mardi Gras) before being retired, it features vibrant, meticulously crafted beaded patches depicting the 1839 revolt by enslaved Mende people aboard the schooner *La Amistad*; the central patch pictures Sengbe Pieh (Joseph Cinqué) steering the vessel, now reclaimed from the group's Spanish captors. That Melancon's work is exhibited in the same room as Samb, who believed that physical use and touch were aspects of the works themselves – that they should be handled and, if destroyed, simply recreated – is a clever rejoinder to the institutional valorization of the artwork, especially when considered alongside the Marcel Duchamp works displayed in a small abutting gallery. Duchamp's inclusion at the exhibition's start does set the tone for the curatorial ethos, whereby, as the wall texts remind us, 'an artwork gains force not by fitting its frame but by disturbing the system that sustains it'.



Big Chief Demond Melancon, *Amistad Takeover*, 2026, glass beads and rhinestones on canvas with velvet and feathers, 318 × 358 × 76.2 cm, installation view, 'In Minor Keys', La Biennale di Venezia, 2026. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia; photograph: Andrea Avezzi

This framework barely holds up, which is not necessarily a curatorial failing but perhaps an inevitability within the Biennale context – and which anyway, if imposed, would do a disservice to some impactful works whose gestures are not explicitly anti-institutional. Alexa Kumiko Hatanaka’s monumental patchwork washi tapestries both line the walkway leading to the Central Pavilion and are displayed throughout the space itself. In works such as *Namazuru* (2023), repurposed indigo-dyed paper panels, unevenly sewn together, depict ocean scenes inspired by her grandfather and great-grandfather, both fishermen, and incorporate the Japanese practice of *gyotaku*, where ink is applied to a fish to create a print – a method used by fishers to record their catches before the advent of photography. Hatanaka is paired outside with Otobong Nkanga, whose floating gardens are installed around the pavilion’s staid neoclassical columns (*Soft Offerings to Silenced Voices and to All Who Have Turned to Dust*, 2026). Her vines are just beginning to grasp at the structure and will likely enclose them by the exhibition’s end.



Otobong Nkanga, *Soft Offerings to Silenced Voices and to All Who Have Turned to Dust*, 2026, installation view, 'In Minor Keys', La Biennale di Venezia. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia; photograph: Andrea Avezù

There is an unexpected echo of Nkanga's work in Zoe Leonard's black and white photographs of bundles of sticks and shrubs shoved into large, X-shaped steel barriers along the Rio Grande / Río Bravo, the waterway used to demarcate the US–Mexico border (*Barricade I*, 2022/26). The device is known as a 'Normandy barricade', so named because German troops installed them along the French coast during World War II to defend against landing craft and incoming tanks. Here, it calls attention to the US government's militarized policing of the border, the grotesque displays of power used to maintain geopolitical boundaries as well as the Biennale's historically nationalist project and the former naval shipyard now used to house it. The barricades in Leonard's photos, brimming at points with branches, could resemble beaver-made dams or large bird's nests, and yet, they're not. It's an unfortunate metaphor for the contradictions of such an exhibition. Although filled with many great works by important artists, an exhibition that 'disturbs' the Biennale may not be enough to counteract its embedded histories or its current president, appointed by Italy's far-right government.

Leaving the exhibition, passing once again by the Book Pavilion, you are reminded of how Kouoh's legacy endures in the work of RAW Material Company. Its inclusion here is testament to how she could do away with reified institutional terms and establish a genuinely new kind of space for the production of artworks and distribution of knowledge. Her curatorial team have honoured her vision with clear care, while signalling beyond the Giardini to her most considered response to the contradictions it embodies.

Main image: Sohrab Hura, 'Things Felt But Not Quite Expressed', 2022-ongoing, installation view, 'In Minor Keys', La Biennale di Venezia, 2026. Courtesy: the artist