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FRIEZE

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Kobby Adi: *Cloisters & Instruments*
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The Concealment and Revelation of Kobby Adi

The elusive artist's subtle works prompt viewers to question their ways of looking



*This piece appears in the columns section of frieze 243, **'Behind the Scenes'***

Over the past few decades, curatorial discourse has reached a crescendo, to the point where it can sometimes feel as though the contextualization of art is so extensive that it risks overwhelming the very work it is intended to substantiate. This tendency to compulsively explain the works on view can leave little space or time for audiences to come to their own understanding of what is put before them. Instead of according such importance to what we are told, what if we turned to the art's unknowns: the gaps, ambiguities and enigmas that interpretive tools are seldom calibrated to measure?



Kobby Adi, *Lesson*, 2023–24, film still. Courtesy: the artist and Cabinet, London

In early spring, Kobby Adi's exhibition, 'Music', at London's Cabinet Gallery included five near-identical works. Each 'Instrument' (2023–24) consists of a bimetal thermometer whose dial has been doctored to show, in addition to the ambient temperature, a black wedge indicating the average range of the internal temperature of a specific animal. The sculptures identify mammals – alpaca, goat, rabbit, pig and sheep – that run slightly hotter than healthy humans. Lined up on the wall amid these gauges hung 'Untitled' (2023–24), a row of seven tonewood fragments from a luthier's workshop – some rough-hewn, others finely turned and polished. On the left-most element, someone has drawn an arrow pointing to the internal angle of a roughly L-shaped piece of blonde wood and scribbled: *problème!*

This interjection, with its implied exhortation to solve, is a useful entry point to Adi's practice, which proffers a set of loosely interconnected sculptures, films, actions and text works that elude explanations and open up avenues for interested people to explore affinities, symbolism and patterns both inside the gallery and out. Across from the gallery, a pocket-sized city farm has penned in the animals whose body temperatures are

logged in the 'Instruments', announcing their origins in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Patagonia and the Altiplano of west-central South America, among other places, and pointing out their unusual bodily features. The crowded 'farm' – in truth more of a zoo – functions as a counterpoint to Adi's exhibition: its exploitation of identity to attract and intrigue, instrumentalization of aesthetics to retain attention and harsh division of space make it the antithesis of more desirable curatorial ethics.



Kobby Adi, *Instrument*, 2023–24, 'Music', 2024. Courtesy: the artist and Cabinet, London; photograph: Mark Blower

Gesturing to what is around (or across the street from) the art, so that we can make sense of it in absentia, is a delicate manoeuvre. In an earlier example of such a play of concealment and revelation, Adi's contribution to the 2022 Royal Academy Schools Show in London included *The removal of all visible and obscured plaster casts with the promise of being*

returned (2022). Taking away the casts brought to light layers of paint and dust: ghostly outlines that had formed around study aids accumulated over the Royal Academy's 250-year existence. Their temporary disappearance drew in fresh air to spaces usually occupied by dense representations, and interest was piqued just as much by what wasn't there as by what was.

In Adi's first institutional solo show in the US, 'Cloisters & Instruments', currently on view at the Swiss Institute in New York, the habitual space and time of exhibition-making are exceeded by 'All splashing and pouring' (2024), a series of wall labels bearing the work's title, installed throughout the building wherever water may pour, spill or leak. Calling to mind libation rituals, in which a drink is spilled out as an offering to the spirit world, the work draws attention to the building's functional and accidental flows, which continue regardless of exhibition schedules. This concern with modes of circulation is shared by *Cloisters* (2023–24), a six-minute silent film that pieces together footage of decaying apples on an orchard floor, as flies, moths and a slug visit to feed. Filming at different times of day and night, a tranquil camera watches mould bloom and captures the cavities and sinkholes of rotting flesh. These openings hint at hidden passages further within the body of the fruit, evoking the titular cloisters, those open-and-closed architectures of spiritual promenade.



Kobby Adi, *Cloisters*, 2023–24, film still. Courtesy: the artist and Cabinet, London

Cloisters is available in several physical formats: as a projection at Swiss Institute, on a medical-grade DVD that can be borrowed from the nearby Tompkins Square Library and, once the exhibition finishes, as film prints in the Reserve Film and Video Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. As a material entity that circulates through different spheres, though not online, the work is accessible, but it is offered with certain constraints, since to see it in all its formats requires the viewer to make a special effort: visit an exhibition or library; get hold of a DVD player; wait until the exhibition is over. For audiences conditioned to expect a one-stop experience of an artwork, such an unusual ask might come across as overly complicated, frustrating or time-consuming. Built in to this presentation of *Cloisters* is the likelihood that some available formats of the film will remain unseen by many audience members. Like much of Adi's work, it asks us to move around and beyond the space surrounding the art, to carry it with us and to recognise that our experiences of art are always partial because the problems, absences and holes in and around a work are essential constituents of its meaning.

This article first appeared in frieze issue 243 with the headline 'Hidden Passages'

*Kobby Adi's '**Cloisters & Instruments**' is on view at Swiss Institute, New York, until 25 August*

*Main image: Kobby Adi, Untitled, 2023–24, tonewood fragments from a luthier's workshop, dimensions variable, 'Music', 2024.
Courtesy: the artist and Cabinet, London; photograph: Mark Blower*