

Koyo Kouoh's Venice Biennale Looks to Ancient Wisdom to Mend a Fractured Present

 observer.com/2026/05/review-koyo-kouoh-venice-biennale-2026-in-minor-keys

In it, artists from around the world revisit colonial histories, ecological trauma and spiritual traditions to imagine coexistence grounded in attunement rather than domination.



The Venice Biennale runs through November 22, 2026. Photo Andrea Avezú | Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

There is very little human figuration in the 2026 Venice Biennale, which signals a significant shift away from an anthropocentric vision of art and the world toward a more post-human universalism that reconsiders human presence and creation within a broader ecosystem of interrelations. At least in its main exhibition, the Biennale moves away from identity-based frameworks—national, racial and gendered—that dominated many past editions, shifting instead toward an exercise in healing and mending historical fractures, not only between humans, but between beings more broadly.

The late curator Koyo Kouoh had promised an exhibition concerned with “thresholds between lifeworlds and temporalities,” with “collective resistance and healing,” in the curatorial essay she wrote before passing away unexpectedly a year ahead of the

opening—an essay her international curatorial team, or “la squadra di Koyo Kouoh,” composed of Gabe Beckhurst Feijoo, Marie H  l  ne Pereira, Rasha Salti, Siddhartha Mitter and Rory Tsapayi, followed in mounting “In Minor Keys” according to her plans.

Despite the exhibition foregrounding listening as a tool of connection, and Kouoh having envisioned it to “refuse orchestral bombast and goose-step military marches and come alive in the quiet tones,” this edition was instead accompanied by louder political tensions, culminating in the withdrawal of the international jury, the Pussy Riot action in front of the Russian Pavilion on the morning of the second day and protests throughout the opening week. All of this probably only reflected the Biennale’s historical nation-based structure, which is becoming increasingly problematic, particularly within today’s fragmented geopolitical landscape—an unavoidable backdrop to this edition. Politics often came before content, despite the enormous amount here to see, absorb and reflect upon.

The Biennale’s 110 participating artists, collaborative duos, collectives and artist-centered organizations, manifest Kouoh’s relational geography of encounters with artists across her lifetime. The exhibition itself is vast and dense—despite having fewer participants than last year—creating a heterogeneous chorus of voices, or a polyphonic poem as Kouoh described it, loosely entangled by a common thread that relates more to methodology than content: an invitation “to shift to a slower gear and tune in to the frequencies of the minor keys.” These minor frequencies become an invitation to slow down, contemplate and meditate in silence through the encounter with art.

There are, in fact, very few paintings, with the exhibition dominated instead by sculpture and mixed-media installations that are often immersive and multisensory, engaging viewers simultaneously at conscious and subconscious levels. Most of the artists featured in this edition are alive and considerably younger than those included in the last two Biennales, so the practices one encounters unmistakably emerge from the crises of our own historical moment, even as many of them turn deeply toward the past in search of ways to imagine and reimagine possible futures.



Work by Otobong Nkanga. Photo Andrea Avezú | Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

While this Biennale lacks visible curatorial subcategories that might have helped navigate such a dense concentration of narratives, certain threads continuously reappear across both the Giardini and the Arsenale: postcolonial ruminations and critical fabulation used to fill historical gaps and heal fractures between individual and collective, and between human and nature; plant knowledge and geological time; reflections on making tied to tactility, ritual and inherited traditions; and the sea and the earth understood simultaneously as archives, repositories of memory and sources of human connection.

As Kouoh wrote, the Biennale “intends neither a litany of commentary on world events, nor an inattention or escape from compounding and continuous intersecting crises.” Instead, at the heart of many of these practices lies a shared reflection on the ongoing crisis of an entire ideological, epistemological and spiritual system that has shaped the modern Western capitalist worldview—a rupture now visibly transforming society while reopening pathways toward alternative cosmologies and forms of knowledge closer to traditional beliefs long denied, dismissed or erased.

While Adriano Pedrosa’s Biennale leaned more heavily toward the Global South and Indigenous frameworks, this edition offers a broader, more geographically layered polyphony, tracing how contemporary artists across cultures revisit human and ecological histories to rediscover myths, rituals and systems of belief that preceded today’s dominant paradigms. In doing so, the exhibition suggests how a greater human maturity—and with it a stronger willingness to serve a broader collective good

—can emerge through learning to recognize and value not only the existence of diverse communities but also entire worldviews, systems of knowledge and spiritual traditions that, despite their differences, continue to grapple with the same existential human questions.

A core concept of the exhibition is the creole garden, as theorized by Édouard Glissant, used here less as a political notion and more as a metaphorical tool and community platform that gathers diverse voices. A large part of the Giardini is indeed an expansive garden—not necessarily of Eden, but of work that seeks to recover that primordial, long-lost, empathic and mythic connection with the earth. Nature is presented not as scenery, backdrop or idyll, but as a vital force and protagonist in many of the works on view, with several already created in direct collaboration with it.



Works by Alexa Kumiko Hatanaka. Photo Andrea Avezú | Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

Floating along the path leading to the main pavilion at the Giardini are the standards of Japanese Canadian artist Alexa Hatanaka, works that already embody, both materially and conceptually, many of the exhibition's central concerns. Made using traditional washi hand papermaking techniques, these banners—as well as the artist's installations inside—retain the direct traces of nature in their very texture and fabric, crystallizing organic life through ancient collaborative processes that include natural dyes, linocut and gyotaku, as well as the printing of fish. The results are works that remind us how art, like any human act of creation, remains fundamentally dependent on the earth as living matter—not only as a source of inspiration, but also

as a source of materials, gestures and survival practices humans have developed over time in response to ecological cycles and environments.

Among the first encounters, directly at the entrance of the pristine neoclassical pavilion, is Otobong Nkanga's installation, which immediately foregrounds the vital interdependence between species. The artist wraps the building's four cylindrical columns in brick surfaces evocative of Venice's own architectural skin, suspending from them glass terraria, clay flower pots and wooden bee hotels. "Humans are only a small, minute part of the ecosystem," Nkanga said in relation to a previous installation at the Museum of Modern Art last year. Like many works throughout the exhibition, hers attempts to reconnect fragmented histories and forms of coexistence, urging a reconsideration of humanity's position within a far more entangled ecological reality.

The exhibition in the main pavilion opens with a return to the primordial forms of art-making linked to ritual and spirituality. This is visible in the clay sculptures of Seyni Awa Camara, whose totemic figures seem to emerge from an archaeological time despite being newly produced works. Similarly, Celia Vásquez Yui applies Shipibo tradition and mythology to revive in her contemporary zoomorphic sculptures one of the earliest functions of ceramics: not simply as objects, but as spiritual and symbolic vessels through which humans could communicate with nature. Both Camara's and Vásquez Yui's works connect directly to the notion of biophilic sculpture, an expression of the innate human urge to connect with other lifeforms through sculptural forms traceable back to the ancient rhyton—animal-shaped ritual vessels used for pouring liquids—as well as whistling vessels designed to mimic the sounds of animals and natural elements when air or water passed through them.



Works by Celia Vásquez Yui. Photo Andrea Avezú | Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

Nearby, María Magdalena Campos-Pons extends this same spiritual and botanical entanglement through *Anatomy of the Magnolia Tree for Koyo Kouoh and Toni Morrison* (2026), a monumental mural collage intertwining portraits of Kouoh and Toni Morrison with magnolia forms symbolic of the American South. Rooted in Black women's solidarity across generations, geographies and disciplines, the work celebrates the very meaning of Kouoh's notion of "minor keys": those quieter frequencies of memory, poetry and resistance woven into an immersive environment where human presence, nature and sound become part of an inseparable, fertile entanglement.

In a nearby room, the delicate cartographies by Wardha Shabbir extend this vegetal cosmology into imagined ecosystems shaped by memory, migration and feminine resilience. Drawing from miniature painting traditions, she transforms flowers, seeds and organic geometries into symbolic forms of becoming and survival, suggesting sacred savannahs and adaptive plant worlds capable of enduring precarity and environmental collapse.

More broadly, throughout the exhibition, the human figure often recedes almost entirely as nature itself emerges as the primary symbolic vocabulary through which artists articulate spirituality, healing and transformation. This is also evident in the paintings of Hala Schoukair, whose lyrical landscapes, rooted in the forests of Mount Lebanon, approach nature not as backdrop but as a living and intimate companion, a space where memory, motherhood and the contemplation of the sublime converge.

When human figures do emerge, they rarely appear as stable entities, but rather as metamorphic and fluid presences, continuously crossing the boundaries between human, spiritual, animal and symbolic worlds. BuBu de la Madeleine transforms the mermaid into a fluid allegory of bodily transformation, queer identity and liberation from conventional categories, while Alice Maher reactivates mythological and feminine archetypes in her articulated hybrid figures suspended between fertility, fragmentation and prophecy.

More hybrid spiritual creatures also populate the Corderie of the Arsenale, as in Rajni Perera and Marigold Santos's monumental installation, *Efflorescence/The Way We Wake*: local mythology and fantasy, folklore and diasporic spiritual imaginaries converge in these seductive humanoid, shamanic-like sculptural presences. Suspended in a liminal space between human, vegetal and mythological forms and surrounded by flourishing botanical archipelagos, the hybrid creatures are made from synthetic hair, polymer clay, pearls and metallic materials, becoming mutable embodiments of migration, transformation and feminine power. This mythical imagination, tied to nature and history, is the same, after all, as what animates Nick Cave's sculptures nearby in the Arsenale: hybrid, ceremonial beings suspended between sculpture, costume, ritual object and living entity.



Works by Wangechi Mutu. Photo Andrea Avezú | Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

In this context, Wangechi Mutu takes over an entire room at the Giardini with a cosmological installation reimagining the Garden of Eden through an eco-feminist and African diasporic lens. Hybridity between species, bodies and media unfolds

through the animated film *Mumbi*, centered on Mount Kenya as a mythical site of creation, while *Sweeper*, a monumental broom of branches and human hair, continuously rearranges red earth and coffee grounds into concentric formations. Mythological sculptural presences such as *MothersMound*—a monumental pregnant form inspired by Makonde masks—transform the space into a cosmic garden of ancestry, regeneration and reconnection with the earth.

In another room, Vietnamese and New York-based artist Tammy Nguyen constructs fantastical forests of meaning where fragments of natural and anthropological histories intertwine into dense, mosaic-like symbolic compositions. Nearby, Ebony G. Patterson's massive red assemblage—made of beads, lace, tassels, glitter, shells and artificial plants—evokes a tropical ecosystem governed by the logic of vital entropy. Constructed from the debris of consumer culture and postcolonial economies, the work transforms decorative excess into a meditation on mourning, survival and regeneration, where Caribbean histories and fragile forms of collective renewal remain entangled.

Myth, matter and counter-histories

Quoting a reflection by Toni Morrison from 1974, which Kouoh herself included in her curatorial text, feels helpful here to illuminate the underlying approach shared by many of the artists in the exhibition: “In our myths, in our songs, that’s where the seeds are. It is not possible to constantly hone in on the crisis. You have to have the love, and you have to have the magic, that’s also life.”

It is traditional knowledge that artists present as already containing many of the answers modernity has lost. Artists at both locations engage in a broader generative exercise of rebuilding and rethinking human creation and action, often through forms of attunement and collaboration with geological and natural time and cycles, which frequently unfold through the revisitation of ancestral technologies and systems of knowledge.

This is evident in Annalee Davis's multimedia installation *Let This Be My Cathedral* (2025-2026), where herbaria, embroidered textiles, palm drawings and the spectral presence of the extinct Eskimo curlew transform the space into a contemplative sanctuary rooted in Caribbean vernacular gardening traditions and post-plantation healing. Working from the former Barbados plantation where her family lived for generations, Davis has made her studio practice a ritual of healing that intertwines ecology, colonial history and spiritual awareness, proposing attentive coexistence with the land as a form of restoration and collective repair.



Work by Annalee Davis. Photo Luca Zambelli Bais | Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

Historical and societal traumas reappear throughout the exhibition, filtered through myth, spirituality, speculative cosmologies, and, at times, even humor—all employed as strategies through which artists appropriate, revisit and rewrite colonial histories via alternative symbolic orders. Escaping both utopian futurism and dystopian resignation, many of the artists engage instead in a creative reimagining of the past before even the future itself, constructing hypothetical “uchronias,” symbolic counter-histories and alternative narratives that reclaim historical wounds while destabilizing official structures of memory, time and power.

At the Giardini, the sculptural busts and densely idiosyncratic canvases of Edouard Duval-Carrié revisit the Haitian diaspora and the afterlives of the transatlantic slave trade through vodou cosmologies populated by lwa and deities that become counter-historical presences resisting colonial erasure. Nearby, Bonnie Devine employs Indigenous cosmologies in relation to landscapes and waterways to erode colonial cartographies and surface the enduring traumas embedded within territories marked by war, extraction and displacement.

In his paintings, Johannes Phokela hacks into the visual language of European history painting to expose and overturn its colonial imaginaries. Drawing on Rubens, Bosch and Brueghel, while reworking the blue-and-white palette historically tied to Dutch colonial trade and porcelain, Phokela transforms Christian allegories and moral narratives into carnivalesque scenes of inversion, where Black figures and histories

no longer occupy the margins of representation but radically rewrite its symbolism from within.



Works by Edouard Duval Carrié. Photo Andrea Avezú | Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

In this context of historical reimagination, the Biennale's focus on schools and artist-led institutions also underscores the importance of cultural ecosystems built outside traditional market structures: spaces where local histories and transnational exchanges converge into collective platforms of knowledge-sharing, experimentation and long-term cultural cultivation. Places such as Denniston Hill, blaxTARLINES KUMASI, Guest Artists Space Foundation, lugar a dudas, Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute and RAW Material Company appear in the show as examples of living pedagogical environments sustained through community, transmission and relational forms of cultural production.

As an influential school-builder herself, Kouoh's legacy was further reinforced by the announcement, during the opening days, of the Koyo Kouoh Foundation, which will launch in Basel to extend the Swiss-Cameroonian curator's lifelong commitment to Pan-African cultural infrastructure.

Healing the fracture between land, body and history

The density of artists from different latitudes and historical contexts gathered throughout the Arsenale reinforces the impression that only through this choral exercise of sharing, listening and juxtaposing situations, traumas, victories and voices

can we truly begin to realize what we still hold in common. Opening this section is Refaat Alareer’s poem “If I Must Die,” written shortly before he was killed in Gaza in 2023. Its presence immediately makes clear that, in an era marked by escalating violence and fracture, the Biennale could not remain detached from political reality. Yet throughout the exhibition, a fertile contrapuntal tension between destruction and regeneration, mourning and healing persists, translating into a syncopated coexistence that reveals the layered nature of reality today.

One early example is Khaled Sabsabi’s immersive installation *khalil*: a contemplative diorama inspired by the artist’s experience of migration from Lebanon during the civil war, translating into a phantasmagorical environment of shadows, scent, sound and video rooted in Sufi notions of interconnectedness and human commonality.



Works by Guadalupe Meravilla. Photo Marco Zorzanello

This exercise in reconstruction and mending—physical and spiritual—reappears not far away in the assemblages of Daniel Lind-Ramos, who transforms found objects and hurricane debris into monumental totemic figures evoking histories of maroonage, ecological survival and Black resistance in Puerto Rico. Throughout the show, art becomes a dynamic vehicle of attunement, blending the spiritual and the ecological with science and technology—understood here not as instruments of extraction and domination but as tools for connection and expanded understanding.

Another example is Guadalupe Maravilla’s *Disease Throwers*: made from handmade and found materials collected while retracing his migration route through Central

America, these hybrid sculptural shrines function simultaneously as healing instruments and ceremonial objects. Accompanied by suspended hammocks inscribed with comforting songs, the works are activated through the artist's ongoing sound-healing rituals for refugee and cancer communities, transforming the installation into a space of collective care and restoration. Maravilla's practice feels especially timely within today's increasingly polarized climate of surveillance and violence, particularly after the artist himself experienced racial profiling by police while installing the work in Venice—a reminder that these dynamics, driven by fear and propaganda, extend far beyond the borders of the United States.



Work by Kennedy Yanko.

Conceived simultaneously as tools and ritual vehicles, the totemic sculptures of Ayron Heráclito fuse West African cosmologies, Afro-Brazilian spirituality and contemporary imagination. Rooted in the Candomblé Nagô-Ketu tradition in which the artist was initiated, Heráclito's *Juntó*—a group of stainless steel sculptures, talismanic yet shaped as agricultural instruments—pays tribute to Mestre Didi while reactivating the symbolic universe of the Orixás. The entire installation is structured around a set of energetic diagrams that suspend these contemporary sculptures between rituals and long-suppressed spiritual traditions.

The tension between body and machine, nature and industry, is poetically resolved in Kennedy Yanko's monumental compressed-metal sculptures, which evoke the friction between technological matter and spiritual transformation. In *The Bond Between Matter and Heaven* (2025), discarded shipping containers and flowing "paint skins" are transformed into sensual, almost celestial bodily presences, merging gesture, meditation and material force into sculptural forms suspended between collapse and cathartic metamorphosis—from decay into regeneration.

Another striking example is the work of Michael Joo: like tectonic plates floating in space, the fossilized slabs of crinoids in *That Which Evaporates All Around Us* embody geological time within their very materiality, transforming deep sedimentary histories into sculptural devices of attunement. Activated by vibrations tuned to the stone's own frequencies, the installation invites viewers to physically enter into relation with temporal and planetary scales vastly exceeding human perception. Nearby, his *Noospheres: Expanded* suspends LED screens, weathered Venetian materials and blockchain-generated crystal forms used in coral resilience research to further intertwine ecological, scientific and historical narratives.



Works by Heraclito Ayron. Photo Marco Zorzanello | Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

Throughout the exhibition, artists also activate smell alongside sound as both sensory experiences and invisible yet affective modes of emotional connection. Originally trained as a scientist, Carsten Höller continues his long investigation into altered perception through giant hybrid mushroom sculptures and olfactory installations that subtly permeate the exhibition space. In the Corderie, *Smell of My Father* and *Smell of My Mother* diffuse synthesized scents extracted from his parents' personal belongings through the air like spores, transforming memory, intimacy and the subconscious into atmospheric presences capable of silently altering perception itself. Outside, his iconic *Giant Triple Mushroom* (2025) stands almost as a monument to fungal intelligence.

Combining many of these attitudes within a single practice is Biennale veteran Nolan Oswald Dennis, whose work draws equally from African cosmologies, geopoetics, seismic technologies and geopolitics. His installation at the Arsenale invites viewers to descend into the depths of the earth while opening onto invisible planetary dimensions. The sound environments in *Black Earth Calendar* and *Black Water Station (Mbarara)* come from recordings generated using seismic sensing arrays across the African continent, technologies capable of detecting tectonic shifts, volcanic eruptions and military activity alike. Yet, like many scientific apparatuses, these systems remain entangled with extractivist and militarized logics that seek to know the earth primarily to dominate it. The resulting sonic landscapes move across seemingly incommensurate scales, harmonizing contemporary violence in Sudan, Palestine and South Africa with the immense recesses of geological time, while

revealing the earth itself as the ultimate repository of these histories of extraction, trauma and power.



Work by Dennis Oswald Noland. Photo Luca Zambelli Bais | Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

While it is impossible to account for every work in the exhibition, these examples illuminate what Kouoh envisioned through her “minor keys”: a quieter yet deeply resonant mode of listening attuned simultaneously to the body (individual and collective), the earth, memory and the cosmos. A mode of approaching the world that many ancient cultures across geographies once understood before modern systems of extraction and separation severed those connections. Refusing the spectacle of horror surrounding us today, many of the artists in this Biennale avoid both nihilism and apocalyptic posthumanism, embarking instead on processes of healing and reconstruction that return to the past and evolve into contemporary exercises in worldmaking and mythmaking.

What emerges is neither a utopian nor a dystopian speculation on the fate of today’s technological progress, but rather a collective exercise grounded in the belief that humanity still possesses, within both ancestral memory and technological imagination, the tools necessary to reconnect realities and reimagine forms of coexistence. Again and again, the works return to what is ancient, universal and enduring: symbols, cosmologies and archetypes that precede cultural, national and even linguistic divisions. In this way, the Biennale considers moments of crisis, while also alluding to the possibility of reorientation, creating a critical threshold through which new collective destinies can emerge.

