

The Beauty of Resistance

Style Variation 34, Derrick Adams

Where do you find inspiration?

In 2014, Derrick Adams photographed window displays of wig shops, hair boutiques, and braiding salons in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, where he lived and continues to live, and in other cities he visited. To him, these spaces were “exhibitions, open for the street audience on their way to work or walking through the neighborhoods,” and became a source of inspiration. About five or six years after taking those photographs, he began creating a collection of artworks called *Style Variations*.

Style Variation 34 stands more than eight feet tall. Geometric shapes in acrylic paint and graphite cover a photograph of a mannequin head, creating an assortment of varied skin tones against a white background. Long plaits of rainbow color-blocked hair, which recall the LGBTQIA+ Pride flag, frame the face. Each work in the *Style Variations* series showcases a different hair style and makeup palette, pointing to the power these elements have in shaping one’s identity.

The history of Black hair in the United States is heavily shadowed in racism, erasure of identity, and forced assimilation, but African Americans have used hair and hair styling as acts of resistance to these forces as well. Derrick Adams’ *Style Variations* explore Black empowerment through acts of styling, camouflaging, and costuming. He chooses to celebrate Black joy through his artworks as opposed to rehashing trauma. “I feel more than ever that it is essential for artists to make work that celebrates Black culture. As a Black man, I am aware of my vulnerability and susceptibility to trauma and oppression on a daily basis. I personally don’t need to be reminded of it in art and choose to instead highlight Black normalcy. Those who participate in Black culture understand there are images that are less important for us to see than images of joy.”

Classroom Activities

Invite students to look at a selection of Derrick Adams’ *Style Variations*. Ask students to compare images, looking specifically at hairstyles. Print off a photograph of each student in class or ask them to draw a self-portrait. Invite students to paint, draw, or collage using geometric shapes cut from color paper a new hairstyle on themselves that creates a new identity through the colors, shapes, and accessories they choose.

For images of *Style Variations* and exhibition photographs, visit:

artbma.org/salon94_stylevariations

For more information about the history of Black hair, visit:

artbma.org/thewell_blackhairhistory

Additional Resource:

15 Children’s Books That Celebrate the Beauty of Black Hair

artbma.org/popsugar_15books



Derrick Adams. *Style Variation 34*. 2020. Acrylic and inkjet print on canvas. 96 x 59 ¾ in. (243.8 x 151.8 cm). The Baltimore Museum of Art: Purchase with exchange funds from the Pearlstone Family Fund and partial gift of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., BMA 2021.156 © Derrick Adams

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***Style Variation 34*, Derrick Adams**

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