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Major display of works from African artists is a bright spot amid political discord



[Megan Williams](#) · CBC News · Posted: May 08, 2026 4:00 AM EDT | Last Updated: May 8

African artists highlighted

Among the lesser-known artists Kouoh championed is Kenyan painter Kaloki Nyamai, who creates towering canvases in a Nairobi warehouse with 10-metre-high walls.

Nyamai's background in documentary film shows in the fragmentary time lapses of his figures. He treats paint as sculpture, layering acrylic with sisal rope, photo transfers and yarn pulled from burnt rubber tires. The stitching, he said, is a kind of suturing — a way of tying back together what colonial history dismembered and what family history lost along the way.

On being part of a Biennale that puts African art at the centre, Nyamai said: "This is like the keys being found to a small door that is being opened. It's a glimpse into how much great work there is in Africa, and there is so much, even just in Kenya."

Nyamai said African artists are increasingly creating their own spaces through museums, residencies and artist-run institutions. Collectors, he notes, still come mostly from Nigeria, with its wealth and long collecting tradition, but even collecting is spreading throughout the continent.

Where Nyamai works on a monumental scale, others in Kouoh's roster work intimately.

South African textile artist Billie Zangewa, who was born in Malawi but is based in Johannesburg, hand-stitches small, luscious silk collages of everyday moments: a mother and son gardening, a young woman sitting by a pool, a brother peeping out of his door for a morning greeting.

She sees her works as fitting Kouoh's "minor keys" theme, a gentle chord in the music of the larger body of African work.

"We're often hustling, focused on all the negative things in the world that make us stressed about our future," Zangewa said. "So it's great for people to view my work and think, 'Oh, I don't have to think about all those hard things right now.'"

Nigerian visual artist Marcia Kure, also in Kouoh's lineup, has installed a series of *Hair Jackets*, shamanistic, high-fashion figures that look as if they could take flight.

The jackets are carved wood covered with hundreds of synthetic hair braids, an expression of her interest in how natural and industrial materials "co-produce" one another.

Kure, who was part of a show Kouoh curated in 2024, called this Biennale poignant and emotional.

"This is so important for us," she said. "Being with other African artists on this platform, the Venice Biennale, is a remarkable feat."

Kure said her hope is that Kouoh's vision and care will give new generations the courage and permission to make art when resistance feels overwhelming.