

FRIEZE

Anthea Hamilton Reimagines Everyday Objects

In a 2024 interview for De Singel, British multidisciplinary artist Anthea Hamilton described her work as ‘an invitation to view things differently’. Her latest show, ‘Soft You’, at Fondazione Memmo in Rome, extends this proposition by creating a choreographed environment – featuring sculptural installations, pungent aromas and photographic works – that initiates a dialogue with the Eternal City itself. Taking its title from the closing monologue of William Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1603) – in which the titular character, a Black general living in predominantly white Venice, is destroyed by the prevailing racist ideologies that cast him as a lawless and monstrous outsider – the exhibition skilfully intertwines questions of race, gender, domesticity and collective memory.



Anthea Hamilton, *Calzedonia (Hot Legs)*, 2025, digitally printed bull denim, digitally printed plush velvet, digital print on vinyl, textiles, wood, pastels, spray paint, plexiglass, metal flowers site-specific installation, variable dimensions. Courtesy: the artist, © Daniele Molajoli and Fondazione Memmo, Roma

In his impassioned final speech, Othello asks the audience for a moment of reckoning: 'Soft you, a word or two before you go.' Both an interjection and a gentle plea, it presents the tragic protagonist (who was played by actors in blackface as recently as 1965) as troublingly conflicted, an unwitting product of cultural conditioning and oppression. In Hamilton's deft hands, the phrase becomes a rich meditation on how identity is constructed, performed and, ultimately, constrained. This ambiguity is reflected in her use of materials where soft, organic textiles coexist with industrial rigidity, as in the gorgeous, Panama-cotton butterfly *Transposed Lime Waves* (2025), whose mammoth colourful body is painstakingly covered with small stainless-steel squares, creating a mesmerising pixelated image. Or *Shibari Chefs* (undated), where black fibreglass mannequins stand or sit theatrically, resembling absurd sentinels bound by ropes used in *shibari* – a form of Japanese bondage.

A sharp, tangible scent of incense pervades the space. Conceived as a self-portrait, *Cold, Cold Heart Incense* (2022) was developed in collaboration with Ezra-Lloyd Jackson, who specializes in creating decolonized perfumes for Black skin. Perched on delicate hazel branches and strategically lit throughout the exhibition space, these overwhelming scents disassemble the presumed neutrality of perfume.



Anthea Hamilton, *Cold, Cold Heart Incense*, 2022, corylus contorta, incense, variable dimensions. Incense by Ezra Lloyd-Jackson (deya); *Shibari Chefs* fiber, undated, glass mannequins, jute rope. Courtesy: the artist, © Daniele Molajoli and Fondazione Memmo, Roma

‘Soft You’ is also an exploration of Hamilton’s ever-shifting, multi-layered practice, with some of her earlier themes reinterpreted, including her signature motif of the cut-out leg. An entire room is dedicated to these sensual limbs, originally modelled after the artist’s own in the early days of her practice. In *Calzedonia (Hot Legs)* (2025), for instance, three pairs of leg silhouettes line the wall like a decorative frieze, referencing Roman numerals. Clad in plush velvets or locally sourced denims, they are each topped by daisy-like metal flowers that appear to beckon the giant butterfly to their left. It’s a pithily playful nod to the eponymous Italian high street hosiery store around the corner, which sells tights, socks and impossible ideals of feminine beauty.

The legs also become sculptural, as in *Leg Chair (Rankaku)* (2025), positioned centre stage in the first room: a pair of wide-spread, transparent, plexiglass limbs poised on tiptoes to form an erotically suggestive chair. Further supporting the seat is a wooden pillar covered in a mosaic created by Alice Rivalta using the ancient Japanese technique of *rankaku*, which employs quail eggshells to decorate small and precious objects. In the exquisitely crafted *Shibari Desk* (2025), this technique is applied on a monumental scale. Designed in collaboration with artisan woodworker Pietroarco Franchetti, the black-lacquered writing desk has also been wrapped in shibari rope, the object’s original functionality subverted as it now resembles a lovingly bound body. These dadaesque assemblages softly push us to question our collective assumptions of everyday objects.



Anthea Hamilton, ‘Soft You’, 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist, © Daniele Molajoli and Fondazione Memmo, Roma

By playing with these material juxtapositions in her works – monumental and intimate, soft and hard, domestic and erotic – Hamilton has staged an exhibition that is open, inventive and ambiguous. ‘Soft You’ offers clues but doesn’t comfort you with neat solutions.