

Wallpaper*

For her first Rome retrospective, artist Anthea Hamilton reconsiders Othello

In 'Soft You,' now on view at Fondazione Memmo, sensuality and severity coexist.

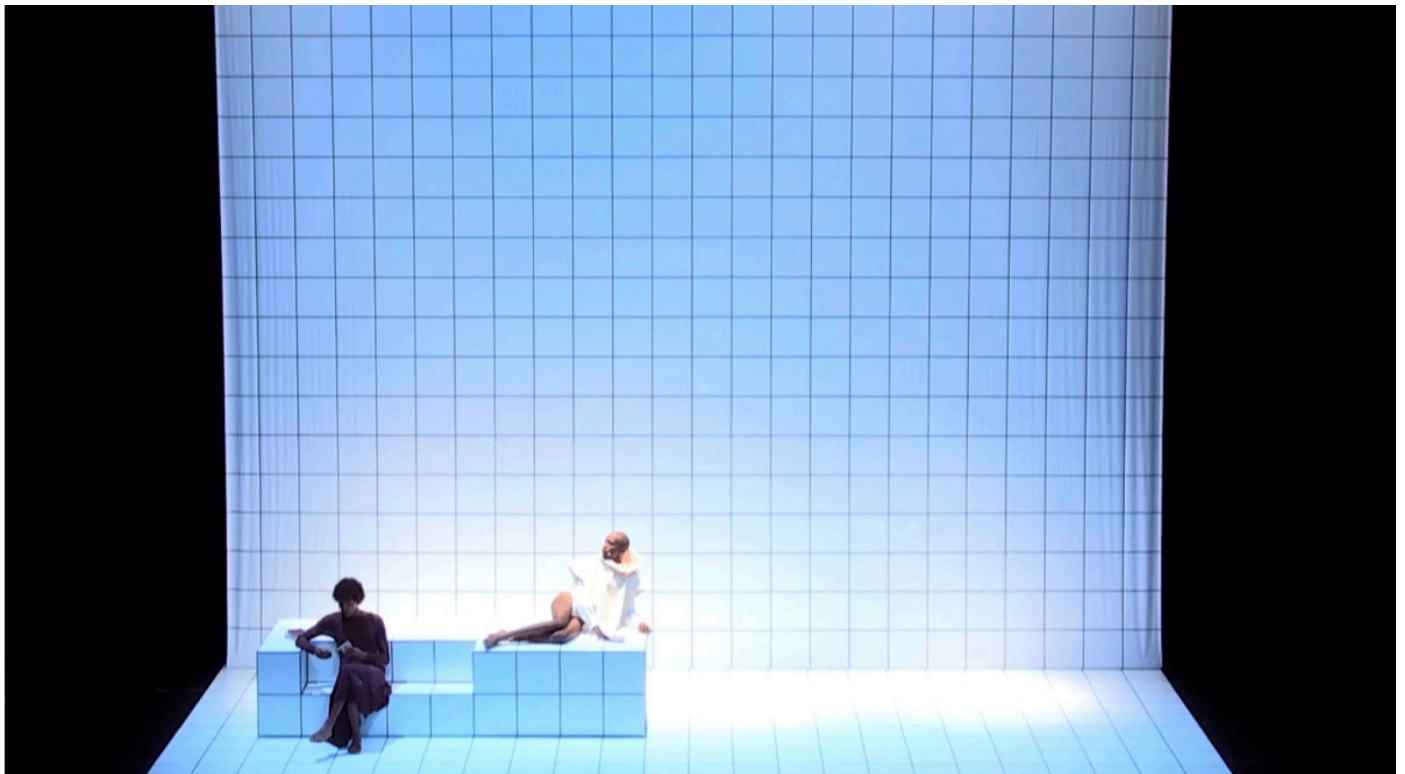


Anthea Hamilton, *Soft You 1 (I have done the state some service and they know't)*, 2025
(Image credit: Courtesy of the artist)

Shakespeare's Othello, a Black man in a predominantly white Venetian society, navigates love, power and alienation within a framework that exoticizes and ultimately destroys him. For British artist Anthea Hamilton, Othello embodies a projected 'other'—desired, feared and misinterpreted. Her latest exhibition 'Soft You' at Rome's Fondazione Memmo takes its title from the play's closing monologue. In this charged, blood-soaked moment, Othello addresses those present before his suicide, saying: 'Soft you; a word or two before you go.'

In Shakespearean English, 'soft you' serves as an interjection, asking the listener to wait a moment as Othello seeks to speak his mind. This interjection—poetic to contemporary ears—underscores Othello's desire for a final moment of reflection before his tragic end. His words are full of regret, beauty and violence; Hamilton channels that emotional ambivalence through her material choices and spatial composition. Soft textile works of giants butterflies coexist with cold, reflective stainless steel. She also returns to visual elements that characterised her body of work, such as the sculptural renditions of legs, based on the outlines of the artist's own.

The exhibition continues on the artist's engagement with *Othello* from her 2024 piece *Othello, a Play*. Premiered at DE SINGEL in Antwerp, this stage performance was one of Hamilton's most ambitious explorations of her sculptural methods. She transformed all elements of the theatre—including stage, audience, scenography, light, sound and time—into sculptural materials enacted by the performers. Here in Rome, images from that play hang, in chrome frames, around the exhibition space. In the Eternal City, where many foundational elements of western society can be traced back to the dominance of the Roman Empire, Hamilton recognized the weight of inserting her intuitive aesthetic commentary.



Othello: A Play, De Singel, Antwerp, commissioned as part of *Come Closer: Encounters between Sculptures and Performance*, 27–28 September 2024. Courtesy Anthea Hamilton and Delphine Gaborit

Some of her interjections are weightless. Working with scent designer Ezra-Lloyd Jackson, who specializes in developing perfumes for dark skin, Hamilton created a scent named *Cold, Cold Heart*. 'It's a self-portrait,' she tells Wallpaper*. 'I had the feeling that my body was metallic, not organic, so there are a lot of elements in it that are sharp, like menthol and lavender. I don't even know if that feeling was good or bad.'

Lit incense sticks carry the scent into the exhibition. Attached to hazel branches that curl around the walls, the smoke rising from them echo the branches' swirling lines.

A large sculptural desk anchors the space, rendered in black lacquered wood. Produced especially for this exhibition, it is covered by a mosaic created by Alice Rivalta using the Rankaku technique—an ancient Japanese inlay method that employs quail eggs to decorate small and precious objects. Hamilton applies this technique to a monumental object, whose functionality as a desk is put into question as some of its elements are bound with a Shibari rope. Suspension and tension make the desk into 'a kind of dare,' as Hamilton puts it, asking 'could you do that again?'

‘The terms under which I want things to happen are very specific,’ she explains. ‘I need rigour. But I love to work collectively; the work is that I have to find the right vocabulary, visually or linguistically, which offers the script, or manual or tools for something to happen in the right way.’



Anthea Hamilton, *Leg Chair (Sushi Nori)*, 2012, perspex, brass, wax, plaster, rice cakes, 81 x 92 x 46 cm. Ph. Douglas Atfield. The Hepworth Wakefield Collection, Wakefield

(Image credit: Courtesy of the artist)



Anthea Hamilton, *Soft You*, Installation view, Fondazione Memmo, Roma © Daniele Mulaioli

(Image credit: Courtesy of the artist)

The exhibition becomes a stage where sensuality and severity coexist. It's a sharpening of her commitment to disassembling hierarchies of meaning through surreal juxtapositions and cultural layering. Which is to say that Hamilton doesn't attempt to 'solve' *Othello*, but rather to inhabit spatial, geographical and cultural hybridity—to stage the play's affective terrain as a space where race, gender and emotion become sculptural materials in their own right, no longer bound by character arcs, but refracted through the artist's idiosyncratic visual language.

Anthea Hamilton, 'Soft You' at Fondazione Memmo, Rome until 2 November, 2025