

## Dada Khanyisa *this is for you*

26 February – 12 April 2025  
1 Davies Street London W1

Opening Wednesday 26 February, 6-8pm



In their first exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ, Dada Khanyisa presents a group of ‘sculptural paintings’ that look to their immediate community in Cape Town, popular culture, and Khanyisa’s extensive research into the social and political histories of South Africa, producing lively figurative assemblages that convey the vibrancy and diversity of contemporary life. Throughout their labour-intensive practice – incorporating hand carved wood, meticulously compiled sculptural elements and found objects, and painted backdrops borrowed from candid or historic photographic sources – Khanyisa expresses interpersonal dynamics through the lens of their social observations and lived experience.

*this is for you* foregrounds nostalgia and shared histories – documented and fictional – as a device to evaluate the present, using the formal aspects and personal associations of photography to communicate social performativity and perception. Works are composed like photographs or scrapbooks, with figures choreographed into archetypal poses and gestures collaged against other three-dimensional aspects – both representational and abstract. Characters and references are pulled from a range of sources, rejecting hierarchy by looking to friends and family, art history, social documentation, and media cultures in equal measure; a painted panel partially concealed behind vertical blinds in *70 years ago* (2025) appropriates a scene from Lionel Rogosin’s 1959 film *Come Back, Africa*, which sits comfortably alongside *Ria* (2020-25), a portrait of a sultry antagonist from the early 2000s South African teen drama *Yizo Yizo*.

Khanyisa builds scope for experimentation into their process, employing an extensive repertoire of materials, textures and finishes in their constructions. Having studied Traditional and Digital Animation, intuitive modernist shapes expertly intersect with the artist’s distinctive figuration, with skilful painted panels adding an unexpected realism to the compositions. Humour is innate to Khanyisa’s practice, used to grapple with consequential subjects whilst retaining a sense of levity – (*indistinct chatter*) (2025) speaks to generational disillusionment, featuring a lone female figure weeping in the bathroom of a nightclub after one too many margaritas, having lost a false eyelash, mascara running down her face... Intertwined lovers embody the complexities of youth in *Sammy and Boipelo* (2025), the young couple lifted from the pages of Phaswane Mpe’s 2001 novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, in which they both meet untimely deaths in an inner-city, post-apartheid Johannesburg neighbourhood.

Found objects act as signifiers for time and place, evoking recent histories and contemporary consumerism: a 1990s Nokia mobile phone, a coupe cocktail glass, an ostrich leather handbag, a vintage rotary phone... Khanyisa states:

*“I try to include local items in my work...I think it’s important as far as grounding the work in a location. I wouldn’t say the people are particular or specific, but these are the people I’m around, and I’m interested in presenting a wider image of the people I have around.”*

‘The Dadaism of Dada Khanyisa’, *Juxtapoz Magazine*, Spring 2024

# Sadie Coles HQ

Dada Khanyisa (b. 1991, Umzimkhulu, South Africa) studied at BAFA Michaelis School of Fine Arts, University of Cape Town, and lives and works in Cape Town. Khanyisa has exhibited internationally with recent solo shows including *Cape Town*, Johannesburg Art Gallery (2023). Group exhibitions include *Growing Out? Growing Up? Contemporary Art Collecting in the Baltics the at Zuzeum Art Centre*, Riga (2022); *Mixed Company*, Norval Foundation, Cape Town (2021); and *Heroes: Principles of African Greatness*, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington (2019). In 2017 Khanyisa produced *Afropolitan Tea Party*, a mural at Constitution Hill, Johannesburg, commissioned to give the historic site contemporary appeal. Khanyisa has received numerous awards including the 2022 FNB Art Prize, the Simon Gerson Prize at UCT in 2016 and as a merit winner at the SA Taxi Art Awards in 2015, their work featured on 10 taxis traversing the main roads of South Africa. They completed a residency at the Nirox Foundation, Johannesburg in 2024; Cité internationale des arts in Paris in 2022; and the Fountainhead Residency in Miami in 2018.