

# Obituary

## Khadija Saye

A series of self-portraits by Khadija Saye (1992-2017) are now on show in the Diaspora Pavilion, a collateral event in this year's Venice Biennale, the opening of which the artist attended in May. Saye and her Gambian-born mother, Mary Mendy, died in the Grenfell Tower fire in west London on 14 June. As a memorial to the artist and all the victims of the disaster, which claimed at least 79 lives, Tate Britain displayed a print from Saye's final series, *Dwelling: in this space we breathe* (2017). The artist **Nicola Green**, the gallery director **Ingrid Swenson** and her husband, **Andrew Wilson**, who is a Tate curator, share their memories of the young artist.

**K**hadija Saye completed her photography degree in 2013 and, as an aspiring artist, did a variety of paid work, which fed into her growing knowledge of art and broadened her networks. As part of this she joined up to Creative Access, a London-based charity that promotes diversity within the creative industries by providing work experience for young people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds through a range of paid internship programme partnerships. Both the Tate and PEER, a small arts charity on Hoxton Street, east London, are part of this programme. At her interview, Khadija was the outstanding candidate for the exhibition assistant role at PEER, and she started work in July 2015.

Joining a staff of just two, Khadija played a key role in a range of the charity's activities. It had recently embarked on a project to improve the gallery and the public space outside, and she was involved with raising support from local and arts communities to attract funding from the Mayor of London's High Street Fund.

She was also very engaged with the planning and planting of a community garden outside PEER which, along with other landscaping work, began in September 2015. The charity and the local tenant management organisation are organising a memorial and naming ceremony in July to call this Khadija's Garden. She continued to work on plans for the second phase of capital works to the gallery, including a fundraising auction with Sotheby's, as well as the reopening exhibition and events.

Over the past two years Khadija has become a dear friend to us both. Her upbringing and her part-time work as a carer (like her mother) are a reflection of her relationship to the world. Quiet, calm and calming, generous, sympathetic, warm, giving, gentle – she was comfortable talking to anyone and would always put people at their ease.

In a way she cared for us all; the idea of community meant a lot to her. Early on we heard how she suffered racist abuse and on one occasion gently turned the tables so that such hate was shown to be irrational. Most importantly, in her

photography she had a caring eye that was fitting for her chosen subject of portraiture. After her internship she was employed to interview and photograph visitors to PEER's reopening exhibition by Angela de la Cruz. The resulting pictures, produced as a poster, are evidence of her sensitive and compassionate eye, and as she said later, "breaking down barriers – which is something I strive to pursue within my career".

### BLOSSOMING OF AN ARTIST

It was only with the approach of the Venice Biennale that we saw her latest work. A few weeks beforehand she came and laid out a large group of these photographs in our kitchen at home for us to look at and talk with her about. We were both excited and overwhelmed by what we saw. We were witnessing the further blossoming of an artist.

With this group of tintype photographs Khadija had found a material, a subject and a way of working through artistic traditions and cultural languages that was unique to her and lay realised in this group of photographs, to which she gave the title *Dwelling: in this space we breathe*.

There was something utterly instinctive in these photographs, which were in part a working through of a trauma that she had recently suffered. In doing so she was making a new and enriching space for herself and her work. To then see her work in the Diaspora Pavilion in Venice, to meet her there with her mentor, the artist Dave Lewis, and witness her experiencing the positive reaction to her work at the opening was a really special moment.

She wrote that "the blessings are abundant" and we were excited for her future. She had gone from being a mostly unknown artist to someone who had made work people were talking about. We discussed with her about perhaps doing an MA and how this could be made to happen. We are left with images and memories of her work, the powerful force of her being, and Khadija's Garden.

**Ingrid Swenson and Andrew Wilson**  
• Ingrid Swenson is the director of PEER; Andrew Wilson is the senior curator, *Modern and Contemporary British Art and Archives*, at Tate Britain



Top: Khadija Saye's *Peitaw* (2017) is part of a series on show at the Venice Biennale

### APPEALS LAUNCHED

Two complementary memorial appeals have been launched to remember Khadija Saye. The appeal target for a Creative Access internship for young people from the Black, Asian or other minority community, is around £10,000. The general memorial fund aims to raise around £50,000 to support young artists like Saye to realise their potential.

• To support paid internship in Khadija Saye's name, see <https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/khadijasayeinternshipfund>

• To support the Khadija Saye Memorial Fund, see <https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/khadija-saye-memorial-fund>

**D**uring this time of tragedy, anger, disquiet and fear, Khadija Saye remains a source of light. Her warmth has been widely written about and, like so many others, I found her unusual in her gracious, kind and determined beauty, which is reflected so powerfully in her work.

I met Khadija in 2014 when she had just finished her photography BA at the University for the Creative Arts in Farnham. I was a judge on a panel of the Discerning Eye exhibition and selected her series, *Crowned*. She came to the opening night so excited – it was her first exhibition after her degree show.

She stood with her mother Mary next to her art work brimming with enthusiasm. This genuine joy at any one of her successes was a trait that continued. Exploring the identity and power of black women through images of the hair of women close to her, Khadija's "Crowned" series left a lasting impression and moved me deeply. She said recently that she made this series "with zero money, just some black velvet

with beautiful friends and family".

As I got to know Khadija more in the following years her interest in identity, activism, heritage and faith steadily grew and informed her practice in deeper ways. During her time assisting me she was working on her series "Eid". Khadija spoke often about her multi-faith heritage, which was a source of constant inspiration in both her work and her search for self-understanding.

Khadija travelled to Gambia and made a series of portrait and landscape photographs entitled "Home. Coming" – a powerfully personal and generous window into her discovery and understanding of the heritage that meant so much to her.

### SPIRITUAL GROUNDING

Her work, made with the help of the artist Almudena Romero, exhibited in the Diaspora Pavilion in Venice, is titled *Dwelling: in this space we breathe*. In the photographs she took that she used as source images for *Dwelling*, she combined relics from her heritage with

elements of pop culture including Beyoncé and RuPaul. The final work is a series of wet-plate collodion tintype self-portraits. Khadija always focused intently on channelling her experiences into her art. I think the inherent strength that is seen in this series mirrors that of Khadija herself.

She wrote herself about this work that "this series was created from a personal need for spiritual grounding after experiencing trauma. The search for what gives meaning to our lives and what we hold on to in times of despair and life changing challenges. We exist in the marriage of physical and spiritual remembrance. It's in these spaces that we identify with our physical and imagined bodies. Using myself as the subject, I felt it necessary to physically explore how trauma is embodied in the black experience."

While exploring the notions of spirituality and rituals, the process of image making became a ritual in itself. The journey of making wet-plate collodion tints is unique in the sense that no image can be replicated and the final outcome is out of the creator's control. Within this process, you surrender yourself to the unknown,

similar to what is required by all spiritual higher powers: surrender and sacrifice.

In 2015 Khadija was part of a group of artists and curators who went to Venice as part of the Diaspora Platform. At the opening week Khadija tweeted a photo of herself in front of Lorna Simpson's work. Two years later in Venice during the opening week Simpson saw and admired Khadija's series "Dwelling" so much that she invited Khadija to come and spend time at her studio in New York. When I called Khadija recently to tell her this, she made a squeaking sound and said, "I'm so sorry, I actually don't know what that sound is." She paused, and before laughing with uncontrollable joy, said, "I can only respond with noises from my soul."

Like so many others touched by Khadija, I had the privilege of watching her rise from a shining light of emerging talent, who was struggling to get her work into the world, to a star at the crest of a wave of international success.

It is impossible to believe that such a positive force of energy and power is gone from this world.

**Nicola Green**  
• Nicola Green is an artist