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A CONVERSATION WITH BIG CHIEF DEMOND MELANCON AT THE 61ST INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION OF LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

How did your relationship with Mariane Ibrahim develop, and what was your initial response when the conversation turned toward exhibiting at Venice — the world's oldest and most prestigious art stage?

"Marisol Rodriguez contacted me on Instagram. That's how that happened — that's how I got with Mariane Ibrahim. For me, it was truly exciting to meet Mariane and Marisol while I was working on major new work for the Biennale. And she supported me in a major way to get there — in a major, substantial way to get there."

Mariane Ibrahim has built her program around artists whose work carries deep cultural and political weight. How did you understand the alignment between her vision and yours going into this collaboration?

"In our first conversation with Mariane Ibrahim and her team, it became clear their gallery was the right fit for me as an artist, and we were guided to each other for a reason. From the beginning, they made me feel like family. And knowing how close they were with Koyo Kouoh, who made all this possible for me, made our collaboration even more meaningful."

The Biennale's thematic threads this year — tradition, legacy, and collective memory — are ideas you engaged with directly during your talk at Expo Chicago. When you're working within the Big Chief tradition, how do you hold the weight of that legacy while also asserting your own artistic voice?

"Being a Big Chief in the Black Masking Culture of New Orleans is completely different from my artistic voice in the contemporary art world. Being a Big Chief, you're holding onto tradition and culture, and it's completely different when we're masking in the streets of New Orleans — when we're masking with our tribe. So, while the weight of the legacy within the Black Masking Culture of New Orleans is different, I'm creating a legacy within the art world. But it's just different for me; the feeling is different when I'm creating the work versus when I'm creating my suit as a Big Chief. When I'm creating my suit, I'm in spirit. When I'm creating my artwork, I'm in spirit, too. But I'm trying to answer questions that I have within myself about my art practice while channeling that spirit."



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What does it mean — spiritually, politically, culturally — to bring New Orleans Black Masking Indian culture to a stage as prominent as Venice? Who are you carrying with you when you walk into those spaces?

"It means the world to me, and I'm carrying a Culture that's over 250 years old on my shoulders. All my elders who were here before me, that have passed on — they were with me when I stepped into Venice. When my suit is standing in Venice every day, it represents my people in New Orleans who aren't there. And it represents the next generation of our Culture."

What do you hope this moment opens — for you, for the tradition, for the next generation of Black Masking Indians who might one day see themselves on a stage like this?

"I hope it opens the minds and the doors that are already closed and were never open for people like me in Black Masking in the City of New Orleans. So I hope it opens the doors for the next generation, and that they can just walk through those doors without having to break them down like I did."

The 61st International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, In Minor Keys, runs through November 22, 2026, at the Giardini and Arsenale in Venice, Italy. Big Chief Demond *Melancon* is represented by Mariane Ibrahim Gallery.