



Danielle Mckinney, *Calvary*, 2022. © Danielle Mckinney Photo by Pierre Le Hors.
Courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, and Night Gallery, Los Angeles.

In Danielle Mckinney's Lyrical Paintings, Black Women Reclaim Domestic Space

By: Zoë Hopkins
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Danielle Mckinney's canvases don't simply ask to be looked upon. They ask viewers to breathe alongside them, inviting us to inhale and exhale in rhythm with their languid figures and supple layers of paint. Their brushstrokes seem to breathe, too: They are thick yet soft, applied with a looseness and freedom that elicits a meditative air of unburdening.

Set in placid interiors, Mckinney's paintings feature Black women stealing moments of quietude and interiority that solicit a similar stillness from viewers as we slip into the shadows of the canvas. The Atlanta-born, New York-based artist paints with the hopes of "creating a new tone for Black women to exist in places of beauty and rest," as she described in an interview with Artsy. Her latest meditation is in "Golden Hour," on view through November 12th at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York. The solo exhibition takes its title from the time of day right before dusk, a period Mckinney associates with introspection.



Left: Danielle Mckinney, *Sweet Spot*, 2022. © Danielle Mckinney Photo by Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, and Night Gallery, Los Angeles.



Right: Danielle Mckinney, *Utrecht*, 2022. © Danielle Mckinney Photo by Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, and Night Gallery, Los Angeles.

Known for her lyrical yet brooding style of figuration, Mckinney's cinematic close-ups and full-body portraits are awash with chiaroscuro and punctuated by saturated passages of bright color. Rather than priming with gesso or a clear base, Mckinney starts every composition with a black ground. Her figures come to life almost as if emerging out from shadows, the brown and orange accents of their bodies mingling with the inky surface underneath.

"It's almost like I'm building her out of a dark space, bringing her up," Mckinney said. "The black lets me go into this abyss, this void, and build something up from the dust." The result of this symbiosis between figure and ground is a sublimely elusive tonality that envelops Mckinney's figures in a protective dimness. The artist, too, finds comfort in this: "I feel safe in this black space to erase or create," she said.



Danielle Mckinney, *Without End*, 2022 (detail). © Danielle Mckinney Photo by Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, and Night Gallery, Los Angeles.

Though she is now celebrated predominantly for her paintings, Mckinney got her start in photography, earning a BFA from the Atlanta College of Art and later an MFA in the medium from Parsons School of Design. Though she painted on the side, it was only when Mckinney spent two years in Pont-Aven, France, before graduate school that she formally took up painting classes for the first time. Still, it wasn't until recently—during the COVID-19 pandemic—that she began painting every day in earnest and sharing her canvases with the public.

Mckinney's painting practice has always been deeply informed by her photographer's eye. When ideating a new painting, she parses through photos in magazines and on social media, searching for a model to paint and an interior to place her in. Typically, at least two photographs will inform Mckinney's composition: one from which the model is drawn, and another, or several others, for the setting.



Left: Danielle Mckinney, *Golden Hour*, 2022. © Danielle Mckinney Photo by Pierre Le Hors.
Courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, and Night Gallery, Los Angeles.



Right: Danielle Mckinney, *Dream Catcher*, 2021. © Danielle Mckinney Photo by Pierre Le Hors.
Courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, and Night Gallery, Los Angeles.

Photography is embedded not only in her process, but also in the empathic and affective vocabulary she brings to her canvases. “When I look back at my photographic practice, they’re very aligned with my paintings,” Mckinney said. “It was always about this observational, emotional moment.” It is this tender way of looking that makes her canvases so wonderful to look at. Mckinney may not personally know the people she paints, but the way that she renders them evidences a mode of observation that is led by care and grace.

Painting with a desire to build restorative and leisurely spaces for Black femininity, Mckinney intervenes on the historically fraught relationship between Black women and domestic space. The all-too-familiar image of Black women as domestic laborers is subverted and replaced with worlds in which they’re comfortable not only in their own environments, but also in their own bodies, with many of Mckinney’s figures appearing in the nude.

Though her paintings are not self-portraits, Mckinney locates her work as a site of reconciliation between her Black female identity and the possibility of rest and freedom that dominant visual culture has failed to represent. She recalls flipping through home décor magazines as a young girl and seeing pages full of white women looking happy and comfortable in their kitchens and living rooms, and feeling a sense of longing. She recalled, “I think I had this unconscious feeling, this question of, ‘Where am I?’” Perhaps, in her paintings, Mckinney has found herself.

While Black women populate Mckinney's paintings, not all of the models the artist draws from are Black. This transformation happens on the canvas. "I cannot wait to make her into a Black woman," she excitedly revealed. "But for me, the biggest thing is gesture. What moment does she hold? The signature of the whole piece is her gesture or her eye."



Danielle Mckinney, *Reading Room*, 2022. © Danielle Mckinney Photo by Pierre Le Hors.
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On the one hand, Mckinney's paintings are disarming in their astonishing intimacy: As viewers, it is hard not to question whether we are intruding upon private moments. Yet the scenes that she paints are affectionately familiar, and it's not just because the models are drawn from real life: These are paintings that invite us to imagine ourselves in our own spaces of rest and reprieve, lying on the couch or in the bathtub, cocooned in the safety of home.

As a deeply introverted person, Mckinney is acutely sensitive to the importance of these moments. And so she paints with the aim of activating this sense of identification between viewer and figure, where both are afforded the space to fall into the freest version of themselves: "My intention is that people feel like they can become the figures," she said, "or that maybe in looking at them, they can also see themselves."