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Mary Lovelace O'Neal: *La Pieta*, 2021–23.  
Photo Michael Covián/Courtesy The Artist And Karen Jenkins-Johnson

## MARY LOVELACE O'NEAL ON PAINTING LAYERS OF BLACKNESS AND THE SPACES IN BETWEEN

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[Mary Lovelace O'Neal](#)'s exhibition of new work at [SFMOMA](#) draws from her continued experimentation with materials and color, as well as changing relations between abstraction and figuration over the past 60 years. Her signature use of lampblack pigment, a powdered soot created from burning oil, not only plays with surface depth but, since the 1960s, has expressed elements of the experience of Blackness itself. At 82, Lovelace O'Neal is still experimenting with these ideas in new works throughout her show, which is on view through October 20.

**Francesca Aton (FA):** You first came upon lampblack pigment at an artist residency at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. How was that experience?

**Mary Lovelace O'Neal (MLO):** I was there as an undergraduate and was very tired of not having any breakthroughs that summer. I was going crazy trying to get something that was my own—something that felt right. All we had to do that summer was paint and eat, but it was very intense. I was so depressed and was headed back to my dorm. On the way, I passed the sculpture barns, where they had a notice on the door. When I went in, I noticed this big pot bubbling, and it turned out to be black bubbling wax. It was beautiful. The artist who was making it gave a talk. I was really interested in the material. After everyone left, I lingered because I wanted to see how that had come to be. He said I could have it and he left bags of this black stuff. In a couple trips, I had taken his big pot and his beeswax. At some point, I decided to play with what I had seen. Those little black bags contained lampblack pigment that later became important in my work.

**FA:** How did you begin incorporating that new medium into your canvases?

**MLO:** I was doing a lot of drawing with charcoal and pastels, looking back and forth between what I was making and these blank white canvases that my now-ex-husband built and gessoed for me. At the time, I was thinking about

what was happening theoretically, with an argument about flatness in painting. One day, I got nerve enough to hit a big white canvas with some of this black stuff. I hit it with a chalkboard eraser and it didn't take so well. I thought, maybe if I push this stuff right in so that it encounters the fiber—there's no way anything could be flatter than that.

**FA:** It sounds like there was a lot of early experimentation for what has become a very prevalent material in your work.

**MLO:** It's just about space: a place you can go into. Once you decide you can get into that canvas, you may find butterflies, lines, or zippers. It was not only about solving the problem of flatness, however; the blackness was also a response to creating more narration and speaking to the needs of resistance.

**FA:** How do you see these figures and elements playing out within the space?

**MLO:** The lines establish space or a blockage. If I put a bunch together to make a grid, then you can't get through that. Lines and marks are containers. I love how they establish a space of their own even when you're not trying. If they get at a certain angle, they set up a space for you and additional space that you didn't know was there. Some of the works contain these kind of humanoid folks who are not your everyday people. In terms of the figurative, our seeing world is so full of color. Everything is defined that way. Maybe at some point during the night, just before dawn, there's this silence, this quietness, and this darkness. Before you know it, you find a way with your little beady eye to get into that darkness. And then it surrounds you and embraces you—it cradles you. I'm working on all those things. I'm working out of impulse. I'm working out doing whatever I want to do: scribbling on and making black spaces that I believe you can't penetrate.

**FA:** How did you think about assembling the works in your SFMOMA show?

**MLO:** I didn't. I'm at the stage working with whatever comes to me. I don't have to worry about students, I don't have to give lectures, and I don't have to understand a fucking thing I'm doing. I did this actually on a bribe from my husband who said that if I would stay in Merida, Mexico, he would build a studio for me. When I came into it—the light, the floors, the warmth of being there—was magical and frightening because I didn't know where to begin. All I needed to do was to get in there. Because of some of my disabilities now, I have to move differently. I have to try to get onto my ladders and chairs very differently because I don't have a ton of mobility like I had as a young woman. But my head is still there.