

**BRITISH
VOGUE**



Michaela Yearwood-Dan approaches her abstract canvases the way pop stars do songs, mixing confession, nostalgia and identity. Ahead of a must-see exhibition, Charlotte Jansen meets the London artist winning fans the world over. Photographs by Jack Davison. Styling by Ola Ebiti

LIFE DRAWING: HOW MICHAELA YEARWOOD-DAN IS SHAPING THE FUTURE OF ABSTRACT ART

BY CHARLOTTE JANSEN

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Last year, Michaela Yearwood-Dan stopped working. All projects were on pause as she prepared for a monumental occasion, a labour of love in the true sense: [her wedding day](#). In her east London studio – an immense, airy space that was previously a Burberry factory – vestiges of the happy day last August, when the British artist married her wife, Elle, in a custom-made silk taffeta two-piece, are everywhere. Huge, hand-cut and dyed foxgloves crafted from delicate Italian crepe paper stand in glorious, celebratory bunches in one corner; on the floor next to her desk, a pile of frothy fabric remnants that the 30-year-old is currently repurposing into decorations. “I basically made everything,” she says, smiling. That includes an enormous tinsel chandelier, table runners, ceramic candlesticks, paper corsages given to all of the 140 guests, even the wine labels.

The domestic and the personal seep into Yearwood-Dan’s studio the same way they are hinted at in her paintings – joyous, giant (sometimes stretching to eight metres) abstract compositions, unashamedly feminine and flourishing, with text excerpts cribbed from song lyrics or diary entries buried in the brushwork. She paints intuitively, according to her feelings or current life experiences, inspired by everything from queer communal spaces and carnival to Caribbean flora and fauna, to spiritual rituals and, very often, music (her studio playlist of late includes Olivia Dean, Kendrick Lamar, Billie Eilish and Bon Iver). Leaning against a wall, I spy a work in progress for her upcoming exhibition at Hauser & Wirth London in May – soft, sensual, languorous brushstrokes applied in thick impastoed layers to the canvas, in sometimes surprising, distinctive palettes. Few command colour the way she does, introducing obsidian swirls folded with drips of the most delicate pink; riots of blue and curls of taupe jiving with rose and cerulean hues.

Like a glittering sea, her paintings invite you to dive right into them. I also catch sight of striking ceramic pieces in progress – Yearwood-Dan began to make vessels and pots during the pandemic as a therapeutic outlet, and they're now an integral and symbiotic part of her practice, giving a new dimension and movement to her painting.



Jack Davison

"I don't work to the notion of one big, solidified idea," she says as she picks at a pomegranate, sitting at her desk. Today she's dressed in simple studio attire: grey sweatshirt, black trousers and paint-smattered white Crocs. "It feels more akin to how musicians make albums that are reflective of a time – my first body of work came after a break-up," she explains, "My Adele moment!"

That first body of work was created just five years ago. Personal milestones (marriage, entering her 30s, buying a house) aside, it has been a remarkable ride since then for Yearwood-Dan. She has achieved monumental prices for her work, created a handbag for [Dior](#) and joined two globally renowned galleries (Marianne Boesky, in 2021, and Hauser & Wirth, in 2024, where she is one of the youngest artists on their roster). It's hard to believe she only graduated from the University of Brighton in 2016 and had hardly stepped foot in a commercial art gallery until she started showing her work in them: "I wasn't born into the art world. I didn't go into commercial galleries as I felt very intimidated – I'd fall in love with artworks I'd seen in museums, online or in books. I'm still not a commercial gallery kinda girly. I know what it is to sit on the periphery."

Raised on an estate in Putney, southwest London, the youngest of three daughters in a Catholic family, Yearwood-Dan's father was a school teacher, while her mother worked in retail. Her father taught her how to be practical and prudent with money; from her mother she learnt resilience and determination. At her state primary school in Putney and Catholic convent secondary school in Isleworth, "People were way more affluent than I was," she says. "I was aware of money, class and wealth differences from a young age."



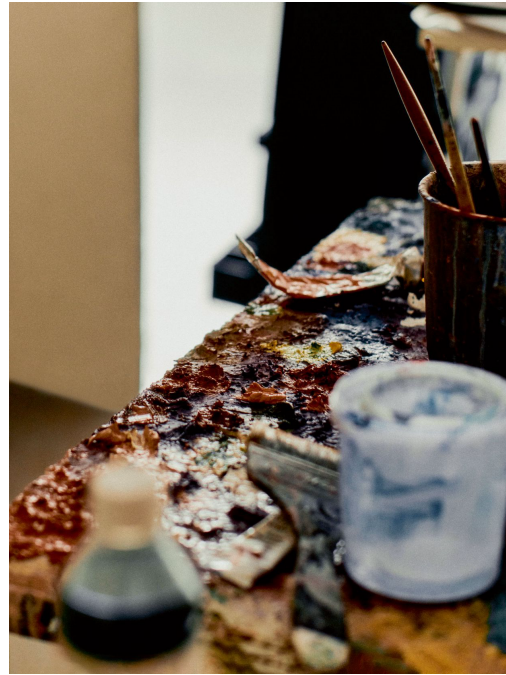
Jack Davison

She was a gifted child, who “did a lot of extracurricular activities. I played instruments, I went to Saturday music school, to drama class” and didn’t lack self-confidence (“My teachers would say I was smart but gobby”). That didn’t change as she got older. At university, where she went on to study fine art painting, she would “challenge everything. I questioned and criticised a lot – I told my tutors what they were teaching was vapid and boring.” She graduated top of her class.

By 2018, Yearwood-Dan had sold her first paintings and had enough cash to make a bold move: she quit her part-time jobs as a nanny and an after-school art teacher and gave herself six months to make something happen with her art. By the end of those six months, Tiwani Contemporary, a London-based gallery, which now also has a space in Lagos, had approached her to join their roster. Her first solo exhibition at the gallery followed in November 2019.

As a working-class, Black, queer young woman, when she graduated in 2016 – the year of Brexit – the system was stacked against her. She was bolstered by unshakeable self-belief. “My work is centred around the personal space. It’s rooted in self, in love, in the intersectionalities that form me as a Black queer woman – the materiality, the physicality, the aesthetics of the work.” She’s “never been a floaty person”, she says, crediting some of her success to her “headstrong” and “practical” Taurean nature. “My friends would joke, ‘Michaela is business first.’” At Brighton, she determined her own references, not through the European and Russian modernism she was offered in lectures, but through artists she discovered through Tumblr, [such as the late American painter Noah Davis](#). Although she dabbled in figuration early on – more due to expectation than interest – she was always drawn towards abstract forms of expression. She now sits as one of the leading abstract painters of her generation, shaping the future of abstract art alongside a new wave of young British women artists, such as Rachel Jones, [Jadé Fadojutimi](#) and Enam Gbewonyo. Although abstract painting has been historically dominated by straight white men, Yearwood-Dan and her peers have reinvigorated the movement with a contemporary twist.

“They’re bringing their own sensibility and individual perspective to bear in creating new work,” says curator [Ekow Eshun](#) of this generation of painters. “That is to say, they’re not standing in the shadow of the past, rather they’re illuminating new possibilities in the nature of painting. That’s what’s so exhilarating about them. They work with sensitivity and depth, with an acute relationship to colour and form. Looking at Michaela’s work, you’re left with a sense of boundless possibility.”



Jack Davison

Yearwood-Dan's new exhibition sees her looking inwards and, in particular, back to a "crazy train experience" she had aged 18, when she woke up to find a stranger had left her a handwritten letter. (She takes it out to show me. It begins: "I see sadness in your eyes. Please keep smiling... and let your soul shine on everyone around you like it does on me.") There will, naturally, be paintings – some "very large", others "small, like bonus tracks" – as well as new sculptural ceramic vessels. The paintings' soaring, lyrical quality will be amplified by a new sound piece made in collaboration with composer Alex Gruz.

Yearwood-Dan has collaborated with Gruz previously: their last work was a trio of hymns, using the voices of close friends and family, blending classical choral music – harking back to her Catholic school days – with synthy club sounds inspired by James Blake and Disclosure, the music that introduced Yearwood-Dan to the club scene. Nowadays, though, she is more likely to be found hosting friends at the east London home she shares with her wife and their cat, Pinto, or having dinner out at neighbourhood restaurants. "I'm in my cosy era," she says. Jordan Boshier, associate director of communications at Michael Werner gallery, who became a fast friend after visiting Yearwood-Dan's studio in 2018, says, "What I feel is important to Michaela is a sense of community. She cares deeply about the people she surrounds herself with – a chosen family, so to say – and the people she can reach with what she makes. She brings people together. She is a connector and an enricher – it's a real superpower of hers."

Yearwood-Dan's Hauser & Wirth show will mark a return to her home city – her last major solo show was in New York in 2023. In the US, Yearwood-Dan has found a particularly receptive audience for her work, which can already be found in some of America's most prominent public collections, from the Institute of Contemporary Art in Miami to the Dallas Museum of Art. Much of this is thanks to influential American gallery owner Marianne Boesky, who has worked with Yearwood-Dan since 2020 when she "slid into my DMs" unexpectedly at the height of the pandemic. The two have discovered a loyal and trusting relationship. When Yearwood-Dan's prices skyrocketed at Christie's London in February 2023, with one painting, "Love me nots", selling for £730,800, more than 14 times its mid-estimate, Boesky helped navigate her client through the maelstrom. "There is such a strong history of postwar abstract expressionist painting in the United States, which Americans tend to naturally relate to," Boesky says of Yearwood-Dan. "Michaela's work is a contemporary stitch in the fabric of abstract expressionism. Using personal and political signifiers in a remarkably nondidactic way, she weaves queer thought and identity throughout her work, allowing her own unique voice to emerge."



Jack Davison

It is art-fame folly that high auction prices can have a devastating impact on an artist's career, as collectors rush to sell works, flooding the secondary market. Artists receive a tiny portion of those sales. It can eventually collapse an artist's market, by pushing prices exorbitantly up – not to mention placing immense pressure on a young artist in the early stages of their career to keep producing. Although her work was selling for six figures, it was far from a “pinch me” moment: at the time, Yearwood-Dan mostly recalls dealing with a mouse infestation at her former studio. “I was pushing myself to the limit and I was feeling really unwell. I was really burnt out,” she reflects.

Many young artists could have been derailed by the pressure, by the upheavals and responsibilities of early attention and unbound success. Yet resilience and resistance are enmeshed in her visual language – threat leavened by joy, “like sitting alone in a dark Catholic church with light coming in the stained-glass windows”. By drawing on the emotionally charged spaces she's spent a lot of time in – from the churches she went to as a child to the nightclubs she has danced in – Yearwood-Dan is always hoping to paint an inviting, inclusive place into existence. “I'm asking you as the viewer to spend time with the work, not to look at it, to spend time with it,” she says, smiling, “the same way I'd invite someone into my home – take a seat, have a rest, have a moment.”

Michaela Yearwood-Dan is at Hauser & Wirth London from 14 May to 2 August. Hair: Lauraine Bailey. Make-up: Niamh Quinn. Nails: Simone Cummings. Set design: Staci Lee. Production: Chloé Medley, Mini Title. Digital artwork: Ochre Post