

## THE CUT



The Miami Beach Convention Center during Art Basel Miami Beach  
Photo: Courtesy Art Basel

### DANIELLE MCKINNEY WANTS YOU TO SLOW DOWN

BY CHINEA RODRIGUEZ

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Even if you don't know Danielle McKinney, you know her work. You've seen her women at rest against a moody backdrop, draped in furs, reclined with a cigarette in hand. The photographer turned painter's work has been pinned, tweeted, reposted, and hosted in galleries worldwide like Galerie Max Hetzler and Marianne Boesky Gallery. McKinney's women (or her dolls, as she sometimes refers to them) are portrayals of Black women in decadent spaces.

Her latest venture is a book and a journal of her work produced in tandem with her mother, Barbara McKinney, who wrote 50 prompts to accompany McKinney's paintings and encourage self-reflection. McKinney cites her mother as her biggest inspiration. Pieces like *Shelter*, featuring a butterfly, prompted letters from people "that were so moved by the work and their own metamorphosis or it really brought a lot of emotions up for them," McKinney says. "I asked my mom to look at some of the paintings and ask them questions based off what you see and what the ladies may be communicating."

#### **Your mother provided the prompts that accompany your paintings. What inspired that?**

It was a project I started years before my painting career took off. My mom is my best friend; we're always encouraging each other, and she is the undercurrent of my work. The work I create in my paintings is a reflection of the soothing experience I feel with my mom, as she creates an atmosphere in my home that really encourages me to slow down. We're always looking to help other people, so I wanted to work with her because she has a way of asking deep questions. The prompts were our way of giving back and sharing our energy.



Photo: Courtesy of Phaidon

**You were a photographer first; then you started painting. Was that something she encouraged?**

I was a rebellious teen, but she knew I gravitated toward art. In school, I would photograph my friends, and she bought me my first black-and-white Nikon. When I had the choice of going to med school or going to be an educator, she asked what I wanted to do and I said art, so she told me to go to art school. That was so taboo because I'm from the South, traditional, and she took her last dollars and sent me to New York. Even with the paintings she pushed me, I was fine with photography. She encouraged me to paint to get the creative energy out.

**Having a background in photography, it seems like you frame your paintings in a similar way. I'm curious about your process.**

Even as a child, I used to build dioramas and dollhouses with shoeboxes with pieces from interior-design magazines, and I'd find a figure and put her in a house. Part of me is still doing that. I'll go online and find an interior that looks soothing, then I'll find a figure and juxtapose that into a collage. Or I'll look at old master painters like Sicard or Whistler and say, "Wow, that would be so beautiful if that were a Black woman," so I take that painting and re-create it with a Black woman.

**I love inserting people who look like you in a space where you don't see them. I'm interested in the spaces you create, because they seem intimate but also luxurious.**

I worked in interior design and architecture at Parsons School of Design. It really shifted my perspective on how space can influence feelings and emotions. We didn't have a lot, but my mom would light a candle and put on some jazz with low lights, and I felt like we were living in Rome. When I go to make a painting, I want to re-create that feeling, so I look for very modern, minimal, eclectic spaces that trigger that feeling. I pay attention to lamps, lighting; that's really important. I look at Pinterest too; I follow amazing designers. I'm doing the same thing I did as a kid: I look at a space and I want to put someone there.

**What I'm drawn to in your work is that the women seem relaxed. You've been referred to as "depicting Black women in rest," and I'm curious as to why rest is so important to your work.**

I'm an only child, from the Deep South. I grew up around many elderly people, so I spent a lot of time in silence. I also spent a lot of time with my granddaddy on the farm. I witnessed a lot of older people working all the time and then resting on the front porch, so that ingrained the idea of stopping within me. Now, everyone is trying to create, trying to be better, and the only time to reclaim your identity is when you're lying on the sofa watching Netflix or scrolling on your phone, taking a shower, or listening to music. Those are such sacred times that really recharge and give you power back. I watched my granddad, grandma, and mom work their asses off with nothing, and the moments they

had listening to jazz in the afternoon were like money in the bank. This idea of reclamation, reclaiming parts of yourself that society, individuals, parenting, and relationships can take away, that's your right.



Photo: Courtesy of Phaidon/Photo by Pierre Le Hors

**You've talked about stillness in your work, and I think that's another reason people are drawn to it. Your woman is resting.**

She's resting and frozen in that moment. I'm not going to the painting and trying to reclaim rest and reclaim this identity, I'm just painting soothing, feeling, softness, low light. You can hear music. I'm being authentic, painting this woman in this natural state. As a painting, it reads differently than a photograph; if it were a photograph, it would be a portrait of someone, as opposed to a painting where you can project. She becomes everybody. I really wanted to find that mix of saying what I'm feeling but not saying it all and leaving enough space so people can feel like it's theirs.