



Installation view, "Danielle McKinney: Tell Me More," Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, August 20, 2025–January 4, 2026.
Photo by Julia Featheringill Photography. Courtesy of Rose Art Museum.

IN CONVERSATION WITH DANIELLE JOY MCKINNEY: THE EMPATHETIC WITNESS

BY ALYSSA GAINES
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In the Baptist church, "witness" is both a noun and a verb. It is to account for miracles, openly profess faith, to testify, to become living evidence through one's story. This is why in black¹ church tradition, after the pastor establishes a premise, he often asks, "Can I get a witness?"

When painter Danielle Joy McKinney explained to me the power in her painting, she spoke about the artist's responsibility to be empathetic to what they witness and to formalize it in a way other people can then understand. Interpreting McKinney as such a witness and her work as testimony, it is only fitting that her show at the Rose is titled "Tell Me More."

McKinney's intimate paintings impressionistically render black women across private moments of lush interiority and comfortable rest. In our conversation we spoke about shared and divergent points of cultural reference, and McKinney reflected on her extraordinary way of seeing color beyond mere observation of race. Preparing for our conversation, I read countless interviews, delighting specifically in all that was familiar to me: mentions of the radio station *Quiet Storm*, of dollhouse building, a video of her singing the same song by Sade my mother sang to me as a child. That video perhaps best captures her demeanor—soft-spoken, reflective, and deeply attuned.

A painter from Montgomery, McKinney's work has been featured everywhere from the *New York Times* to the *Brooklyn Rail* to *Vogue*, with shows at Night Gallery in LA, Galerie Max Hetzler in Berlin, Marianne Boesky in New York, and Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin. She recently collaborated with Dior and her work is in the Studio Museum in Harlem. Now, she is the 2025 Ann and Perlmutter Artist-in-Residence at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis where she's currently showing her first solo American museum exhibition, curated by Dr. Gannit Ankori.

Her friends and family call her Joy, and she invites us to do the same.

The following conversation has been edited and condensed.



Danielle Mckinney, *Tell me More*, 2023. Oil on linen, 11 x 14 inches (27.9 x 35.6 cm).
Courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, and Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin | Paris | London | Marfa.
© Danielle Mckinney. Photo by Pierre Le Hors.

AG: There's something very familiar to me in your work, in every sense of the word.

I'm thinking of your "Quiet Storm" show at Marianne Boesky—I grew up listening to the *Quiet Storm* in Indianapolis with my mom. The colors you choose, as well, remind me of WAK Williams, Annie Lee, and all the sorts of paintings every black family has. Did you grow up around a lot of art?

DJM: I really didn't grow up seeing art. I grew up in a very Southern, Baptist family, and I would spend a lot of time at church. So my first understanding of art was really looking through old-school Bibles and seeing these vintage illustrations of Jesus and Mother Mary, and being intrigued by the very saturated colors. I also grew up looking at the old photographs my grandmother collected with their beautiful saturated colors too.

That's how I got into photography; I was interested in this notion of trying to hold onto or trying to capture memory through the photograph. I always wanted to know who the people in my grandma's photographs were—they were the origin of my understanding of art, color, memory, time, and place.

AG: Something I love in your work, beyond the ladies themselves, is the scenery that *frames* them. How do you approach staging this scenery and building out certain recurring themes across it?

DJM: It's like I'm dollhouse building. I want to find a little house for these ladies to go into, and I want to make the scene very comfortable. We didn't have much when I was a child, but my mom really tried to make our home cozy with small touches—music, low lights, little details that made the space feel warm. I try to carry that into my paintings, adding large lamps or green sofas to make the domestic spaces lush.

There's also the Christian symbolism present in much of my early work. In a way, I feel spiritually connected to my paintings; it's my way of communing with... I guess, God.

I am also really drawn to the natural world. I feel like animals and plants have their own kind of communication, so I add those elements in the work. There will always be a butterfly—or, in earlier pieces, a praying mantis—adding another layer of symbology. It's not so blatantly religious, but it reflects how women, black women in particular, are very spiritually attuned.

AG: I definitely noticed the Christian symbols as recurring in your work, from cross necklaces to white Jesus. In my Southern Baptist church—Great Migration Southern Baptist, I should say— we had black Jesus.

DJM: Man, y'all were not from where I was from. It's funny, I spent a lot of time talking to Gannit about this. I grew up around a lot of old people. My grandmother pretty much raised me, and I spent a lot of time in this church out in the deep roots of Alabama, where I'd see these white Jesuses everywhere. I never questioned why his color was different. It was just a repetitive, soothing thing. It reminds me of my past.

During the earlier works, I was newly married and doing a lot of the Christian symbols like the cross. I was struggling with my own spirituality and I was subconsciously putting that in. It was a little blatant, but I always added some humor too. A lady would have a face mask and her breasts out and a picture of Jesus in the background.

AG: It's an example of the sort of loaded comfort you build out in your scenes, like with the art historical references as well.

DJM: With those, I was studying the old masters. I'm not formally trained as a painter, so I really had to do a lot of deep-dive study into painting and its history. I didn't see a lot of contemporary painting with the emotion that photography could capture. Photographers like Steven Cuffie, for example, can just hold you in a space through the image. In painting, for me, the old masters really did this with mood and story, with light—and then Matisse was the one who truly broke through for me.

I've made it a mantra: Don't paint what you see, paint what you feel. That was the breakthrough in Matisse. The repetitive "Mats" in my work are a way of affirming that it's okay for me to paint the way I do.



Danielle McKinney, *Dream Catcher*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 18 inches.

Courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, and Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin | Paris | London | Marfa.
© Danielle McKinney. Photo by Pierre Le Hors.

AG: What was that like, moving between the medium in which you trained extensively to one that was completely new?

DJM: In the beginning I was trying everything. I photographed a lot of people on the streets. But after COVID, no one wanted to interact or be photographed. So I had to really rethink how my creative work could reemerge.

I poured into paintings and I was taught that whatever you make, push it. So I just started pushing it. I went through a period of guilt, though, thinking like, Wow, I spent almost twenty years training [as a photographer] and then I just picked up a paintbrush. Everybody's talking about Danielle McKinney, but for me it was like I'd abandoned my craft. But I met with mentors who helped me realize it was all the same—whatever you touch comes from the same part of you. I look back at my photographs, and I was photographing ladies on the bed. I still use these images as a source. It's all connected.

AG: You once mentioned that you didn't grow up seeing images of "black women with black skin," which I find really interesting. When you talk about making Sargent's women black, I'm curious about what you mean by that specification: "black women with black skin." Could you say more about that?

DJM: Well, my grandmother is mixed with white and black but looks like a white woman. Being raised by her in her world, I never saw other black women with my skin.

I remember once I was in the car with her and someone pulled up after she had cut them off and commented, "With that little black girl in your car," but they didn't say "black girl." That was the first moment of wow, I'm black. I'm different. I never thought I was different from my grandma. I never *saw* what her color meant.

Then I would spend a lot of time as a child making little dollhouses out of paper, hence why I first made these ladies in these little houses. I would just flip through magazines. I never once ever saw a black baby, black woman. So that's what I meant...

But what's so beautiful is my family wanted to teach me diversity, and my grandma always made me understand it's not about race. She'd say, "Don't let that get into your skull," but I think in some ways I still always wanted to flip through magazines and see myself, not as a model, but I wanted to see someone with my color.

AG: A lot of writing on your work has to do with how you navigate that representation, how you show black women with your color and allow them to see themselves, despite each of your ladies being so individual and self-possessed. Thelma Golden says, "There's a strong sense of self-emanating from each of the figures" that, to paraphrase, unveils assumptions about what's afforded black women at rest as much as it maintains a protective distance from the viewer.

Can you speak a little more about this aspect of your work? What is Thelma qualifying?

DJM: I'm really thankful Thelma put that into words for me. I felt it myself. I'd look at the women and see them so vulnerable, nude, sprawled out in these introspective moments and think, Damn, I wouldn't want someone to see me like that. But they allow the viewer to experience that vulnerability. What's beautiful about the medium of painting is that it allows you to project into its narrative.

If it was a photograph of a woman sleeping or a black woman at rest, it is almost like a frozen portrait and you're left with that. But with painting, people have to project onto it. They have to locate themselves in it. I never had the intent of *I want to reclaim this* or *I want to show that*, but I was fascinated by the idea of slowing down, and people in general see themselves in that.

AG: I'm interested in what you've identified about the medium of painting as a particular kind of conduit. Can you speak more about how painting specifically allows you to build the kind of "self" Golden describes?

DJM: Well with photography you can just snap the picture, but it's really hard with painting. I have to put a lady on a sofa, then I paint the sofa, and I'm shaking the whole time. Then I have to put a painting behind her. I build the frame, and for days the frame will be empty. What painting do I put in there? What goes over her head? Why? And then finally, I jump into this abyss in hopes that formally it will all come together, and it will feel good. It's a very spiritual thing and I tell myself, "Joy, some things you just gotta let go."

I definitely think people think I just go in the studio and paint ladies with cigarettes, but it's not like that. In the show I'm currently doing at Max Hetzler, called "Second Wind," my colors are brown. They're really brown. My ladies are knocked out sleeping and they're looking out into this deep abyss. I was talking to a lot of curators and they asked, "Where's the colors?" But it's how I feel in the world. I can only paint what I feel and hope people resonate and see that we are feeling something together.

AG: Is there anything you hope viewers can feel or see in particular?

DJM: The wittiness. I'll add bright red fingernails or some humor to kind of break the mood. It's not always rest and reclaiming, or dark colors, where they're so serious. They also just got their nails done, listening to Frank Ocean. I'll look at a lady, and I just know that they're singers. They just have an energy.

AG: And what work are you looking at now that is exciting or inspiring for you?

DJM: I've been reading *East of Eden* and just escaping down some rabbit holes of really good literature. In my studio I just went back to the *Quiet Storm* with the Isley Brothers and Luther [Vandross].

Recently, I fell in love with an artist from the UK called KWN that's really good. I've been listening to old-school hip-hop, but then sometimes I'll go straight-up classical with Chopin. Music is really a strong thing for me to get into my feelings.

But when I'm not doing that, I'm just turning everything off and sitting under a tree, regrounding myself without having my space and time occupied by something else. I'm trying to find healthy escapism.

AG: And what keeps you going creatively?

DJM: I went through a burnout. With your own work and practice, sometimes you just want to change. I was tired of these women just being moody on the sofa and sleeping. Then I was tired of my colors. When I get there and I'm feeling that, I'll find a good song or some sunlight, fresh air, heat to trigger me toward making. What will really trigger me is if I see a good painting by an old master.

That's also where that homage comes from—I go into a straight dopamine rush and do master copies. I'll put black women in these works; I'll make a Sargent woman black; I'll look at his brushstrokes and be like, alright, alright, alright. It gets me back in the mood.

I also love teaching, and I am a teacher by nature. I taught high school art for three years, and then I taught at Parsons for graduate and undergrad, and I really missed it. Every day I have to pull back from returning to teaching, just because of how the energy of academia fuels creativity.

I think about all the lovely teachers I had along the way—I wouldn't be where I am without them. I still rely on the bank of information that they gave me. Being a part of a community and hosting studio visits, that's more important to me than a gala. That's when you're in the heart of it, having these conversations and learning.

Then there's moments like when a girl wrote to me saying right before her dad had passed they spent a lot of time looking at my art. He wasn't an artist, didn't have a deep love for art, but she showed him one of my paintings and he broke into uncontrollable tears, releasing emotions he hadn't felt in years. He said that looking at my painting, he saw a girl he hadn't seen in years—his first love.

That's the beauty. These moments of connection, when the work moves people and creates emotional connection in their lives. That's what pushes me in my studio even when I say, "Oh, I'm not a good artist. I can't paint. I don't know what I'm doing. This is so ugly." It's moments like those that remind me that apparently I'm doing something right.

AG: You definitely are. Your work is powerful, in its beauty, in its emotion, and in what those forces allow it to exalt about black women, rendering us so empathetically. That feels like a good final note: the power of beauty, the emotive conduction of art, the connection it fosters. Even, as you said, the way that representing black women doesn't have to be all about race. Though race shapes how we experience the world, your paintings reveal the broader power in capturing our beauty and our interiority as well as they resonate far beyond the empowerment we black women might feel as viewers. Beyond allowing us to see ourselves, you are an empathetic witness to so much more, and I'm thrilled for the testimony of "Tell Me More."

1 In line with recent scholarship like Sarah Lewis's *The Unseen Truth*, I intentionally have chosen not to capitalize *black*, to call attention to what the term naturalizes as a racial category defined in opposition to the standardized, pseudo-factual "white." This choice aligns with McKinney's distinction between the category of race and the work of color, and aims to extend that distinction within broader academic discourse.

"Danielle McKinney: Tell Me More" is on view through January 4, 2026, at the Rose Art Museum, 415 South Street, Waltham, MA.