

MISSTROPOLIS



Danielle McKinney, *Shelter*, 2023. Oil on linen. Private Collection.

DANIELLE MCKINNEY'S LANGUAGE OF INTERIORITY

BY ROBIN HAUCK
November 01, 2025

Danielle Joy McKinney makes paintings of Black women at rest. Composed and tranquil, alone in exquisitely modern and minimalist interiors, her “ladies” as she calls them, read, sleep, smoke, lounge, luxuriate, and contemplate deeply things we can guess at but will never know.

I first encountered McKinney's paintings in 2023 in Marianne Boesky Gallery's Frieze London exhibition. Her moody color palate, languorous poses, and impressionistic brushstrokes stood out for their quiet confidence in an art fair crowded with loud, aggressively-scaled work. She's been gathering momentum ever since, with shows in Los Angeles, New York, Berlin, London, Maastricht and Paris, and a high-profile collaboration with Christian Dior. Now, McKinney is in residence in the Boston area as the 2025 Ruth Ann and Nathan Perlmutter Artist-in-Residence at Brandeis University.

On view through January 4, 2026 at Brandeis' Rose Art Museum, *Danielle McKinney: Tell Me More* brings together thirteen of the New Jersey-based artist's small, luminous paintings for her first solo museum show in North America. I spoke with Dr. Gannit Ankori, Henry and Lois Foster Director and Chief Curator, Rose Art Museum, and Professor of Fine Arts and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Brandeis, about the significance of McKinney's work in the current moment, and the joys of collaborating with the artist whose star is very much on the rise.

RH: Congratulations on a remarkable season at the Rose. Tell me about how you came to curate *Tell Me More*, Danielle McKinney's first solo show in North America?

GA: I came across Danielle's paintings and I was smitten. It's not just that she continues the art historical tradition of the intimate interior or the reclining nude, she follows those traditions—and you can see that she looks at art historical precedents—but she also undoes them in many ways. She doesn't allow the women to be objects of desire. You can tell that they have this interior life and that they are in charge. She gives them agency. They are Black women. They are taking their time. They are resting. They are contemplating and making their own worlds. So just as she uses art as world-making and meaning-making, her protagonists create their own worlds. You can tell it's not just a tangible interior space, but their own introverted, self-reflective world.



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

RH: Entering the gallery, I immediately experienced a full-body calming, like a long exhale. The low lighting, upholstered benches, and plum wall color really grant permission for visitors to slow down and simply *be* with the work. Can you tell me about how you achieved that?

GA: My curatorial philosophy is that I follow the artists. I look at the artwork and see what that specific artist and that body of work needs—space, lighting, colors—what is needed to lift and amplify the vision. I think part of it is the way I curated the show with the lights lower and the spots only on the paintings. It gives the paintings this jewel-like luminescence. The paint color is called “Porcelain,” it was discussed with Danielle.

The paintings are small in size and have this intimate feeling. People come in and their pulse goes down, they sit and identify with these women. They take a break from the exterior world that is full of noises and that pushes you in different directions. People come to the Lee Gallery and respond differently than they do to any other shows we’ve had.

RH: Danielle trained as a photographer and only began painting full time in 2021 during the pandemic. Can you talk about her evolution since then?

GA: In the show you actually see a development. Some of the works are from 2021 (*Reading Room*, *Secret Garden*) when she moved from being a photographer and taught herself how to paint. You see her brushstrokes are more outlined, more subscribed, there is a kind of stillness to the figures. Then [over the next four years] the brushstrokes get looser and freer. In the two works she made especially for the show, (*From Square One* and *Fate*, both 2025) the palette is more adventurous. The brushstrokes are loose. They are really beautiful paintings, and the more you look at them, the more you appreciate the textures. Some of the flowers almost use impasto. Colors respond within a

composition. There is a dialogue between the pillows and the background and the carpet. You see it as a stunningly beautiful composition, stunningly beautiful formal brushstrokes. But then you also see that layer of these women who are confident, who take control of their own time and space and lives.



Danielle McKinney, *Reading Room*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas. 20 1/8 x 16 1/8 inches.

Courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, and Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin | Paris | London | Marfa.

© Danielle McKinney. Photo credit: Lance Brewer.

Each canvas is a portal, a place where I explore the soul, the self, and what it means to be free within one's own space. I'm creating a language of interiority that resists interruption

— Danielle McKinney

RH: There's a subtle thrill looking at the work in this show because while the paintings are in many ways quiet and while the women are still, they have an incredible intensity and power. The women appear self-possessed and almost defiant in their determination to stop and rest and think. How does McKinney achieve this?

GA: By showing women who are not working for others—which women have always done, and Black women in particular in this country—but are actually thinking of themselves and finally taking stock of what they want, and resting. Taking time for yourself—that is a sin according to some. 'You have work to do,' so there is that.

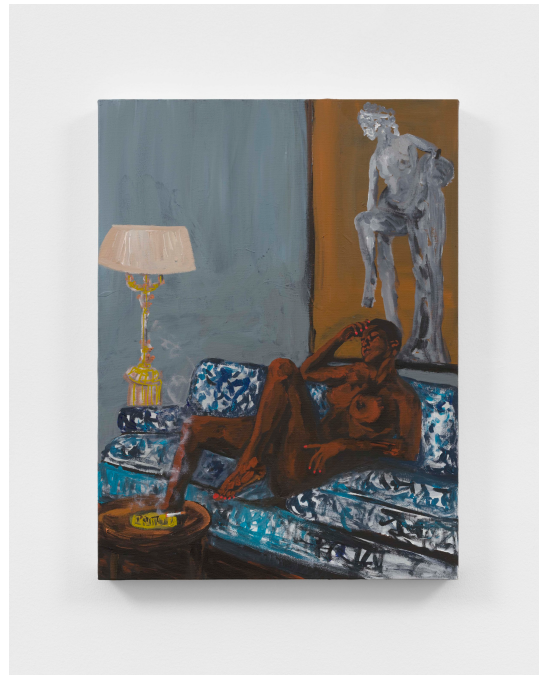
Also, she manages to paint these beautiful women who are not sexual objects the way that women often are in the *odalisque*, reclining nude motif. She manages to have them with their eyes closed, or engaged in reading, or sleeping, or painting their nails, or smoking, and she paints them so that you realize whatever they are doing, they are doing for themselves, not the presumed male viewer. It is radical to take a naked woman in bed and de-objectify her, make her the subject, the protagonist, of her own narrative.

And there is always this idea of pleasure. For smokers, for example, it's very pleasurable. You see [her women] taking their time. It's like a decision to disconnect themselves from the rat race outside and to embrace their own pace and their own rhythms.

RH: McKinney studies art history intently, has spent time in France studying painting, and openly discusses the old masters who influence her technique. In fact, she begins her paintings with a black or dark ground in the style of Caravaggio and emulates his dramatic method of modeling light. Can you talk about how McKinney's work gains power from its dialogue with art history?

She has absorbed all of art history like a sponge. But when she wipes the sponge across our consciousness, the message is all Danielle Joy McKinney.

— Dr. Gannit Ankori



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 credit: Pierre Le Hors.

GA: [Consider works like] *Olympia* by Édouard Manet (1863), the paradigmatic reclining nude. There is something artificial about the way that those women lie. [With McKinney's work] we don't feel awkward as if we are voyeuristic and entering their space without their permission. It's their space, but it is a comfortable space for us to inhabit. Their gestures and the way they position their bodies is very relaxed.

Though they reference art history, the works are contemporary because of the nail polish, the cigarette, the art she chooses to put behind the women. Take Picasso's *Le Rêve* (1932) of Marie-Thérèse Walter (featured in *Sandman*, 2024). She was his 17-year-old model. He thought of her as constantly dreaming. It's a beautiful painting of a painting, but I am reminded of the fact that Picasso was 50, and she was a 17-year-old model and truly exploited by him. Then we see this other woman that Danielle paints, and Danielle won't let her be objectified or exploited.

RH: It's interesting to think about McKinney's work in relation to The Black Rest Project conceived at New York University's Center for Black Visual Culture at the Institute of African American Affairs in 2022, and the "Rest is Resistance" movement started in 2016 by Tricia Hershey with The Nap Ministry—social initiatives focused on depicting Black women at rest in a late capitalist society where rest is often denied. Does this show consider the idea of Black rest as a radical act?

GA: If you think of the history of Black women in this country, from slavery, domestic workers, expectations of black women to be the mammy figure, working in the fields... This history is part of the work. If I had shown it in dialogue with our Betye Saar, (*Supreme Quality*, 1998), wanting to liberate Aunt Gemima, it would be in dialogue with that, because there are expectations of unpaid labor from Black folks in general, and Black women specifically. That is the historical background.

In addition to the wall text, the show includes quotes by Danielle where she said she had never seen depictions of Black women resting... so she thought it would be wonderful to have it in her work. She also talks about her paintings as a spiritual project with a spiritual dimension. She writes that art was her refuge, always.

Whatever the source material might be, whatever the inspirations might be, when it comes through the prism of her vision, it is absolutely unique and very easy to recognize. You see those faces, you see the closed eyes, you see the nail polish, the smoke, it's not just that they have cigarettes, it's her way of painting smoke and being unapologetic in terms of that indulgence. Taking time, setting your own rhythm, being really attuned to your interior self is something we all need to learn. And she is a great teacher.

The figures in my paintings convey a sense of poised strength, embodying the grace that can be found even in moments of stillness. Their expressions and postures resonate with a quiet confidence, suggesting a second wind – a renewal of spirit and energy.

— Danielle McKinney, *Artist Statement, 2025*