Wallpaper*



Danielle Mckinney, photographed in her studio in Jersey City with *Milk and Honey*, 2026
Photo: Pierre Le Hors

ARTIST DANIELLE MCKINNEY CHAMPIONS THE SOLITUDE OF THE BLACK FEMALE SUBJECT, CAPTURING PRIVATE MOMENTS IN PAINT

By Hannah Silver
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'These women I create have a mind of their own,' says artist and Wallpaper* US400 honoree Danielle Mckinney. 'They really challenge me. There is an alchemy that has to happen as I paint.'

American painter Mckinney is a chronicler of the human condition, and particularly adept at capturing that very specific sensation of being alone. In her cinematic and atmospheric portraits in oil paint, Mckinney's solitary women are at home; smoking in the bath, slouching over a cup of tea, curled up on the couch or sprawled in bed. They emerge, tantalisingly, out of the depths of a darkness that doesn't quite engulf them, drawn in richly observed palettes of colour.

Mckinney was born in Montgomery, Alabama, attending the Atlanta College of Art before studying photography at Parsons School of Design in 2013. Until the pandemic, painting was only a hobby, with her main work photographing social environments. She was drawn to the way people interacted in public spaces in New York, but when Covid hit, the streets cleared and the population donned

masks, Mckinney moved inside. She began taking her painting seriously, and sending her work to galleries.



Read the Room, 2024
Photo: Pierre Le Hors

In the sense that her paintings are snapshots of grand and imagined narratives, they are a natural development from photography. 'I think about the frame when I make the painting,' Mckinney says. 'Photography is all about capturing the moment, and I think I'm doing the same thing in the paintings. I'm really intrigued by interior spaces, and I really enjoy collaging those worlds together photographically and creating another moment within the painting. I feel like I never abandoned my craft. It's just that I'm using it in another way to tell the story.'

Running consistently within her stories are musings on the significance of domestic space. Throughout, the home is as consistent a character as the women themselves. Mckinney is happiest at home – 'space for me is sacred', she says – and is building on an art history canon by documenting its domestic rituals. She is intent on stripping back the layers of a persona to get to the heart of who a woman is when she gets home at the end of the day, and closes the door.

'I was intrigued by the interior space and the woman. I started to look, first, for Black figurative painting, and it wasn't anything that I could really find. I went deeper, and that's when I fell in love with Vermeer and Bonnard. You feel the energy of the sitters in the room, you feel them as a watcher. They create a stage for you to enter.' Their eschewing of hyper-realist scenes, epitomized by the likes of Rembrandt, is something Mckinney embraces in her own work, choosing raw emotion over perfection.

This emotion plays out in her richly drawn interiors. Mckinney's women are framed by darkness – she begins by painting the canvas black – and then come the hands, the body and the face. 'That's the signature, because I feel like that is what people are going to look at to define the mood. So I talk to her – come on, come on, don't mess up on me, please come. And she does, but she's sometimes not who I want her to be.'

The interiors follow, rendered in dark green, browns, burnt umber and sienna. 'I love to adorn her in her space. She represents this intensity; she's by herself and sometimes not smiling, but when you look and you see these fluorescent red fingernails, it brings wittiness to the intensity.' For the interior detailing, Mckinney pulls from Pinterest, or riffles through vintage magazines from the 1940s, which she finds on eBay. Sometimes, she listens to music, and makes the mood it triggers tangible.

By painting women alone, Mckinney is still reframing, this time rethinking the connotations inherent in the idea of a solitary woman. 'The idea of interior space to me is extremely important, because it represents rest, it represents shelter and safety. When people enter an interior space, they're moved by it, or alarmed, or they're registering their sense of safety within that. That's a natural thing in a painting, because people want to enter it.'

Mckinney can't help but become attached to her women, she says. 'I love my ladies. When they leave the studio, I'm grieving, but they don't belong to me – and they are definitely not me. I think they represent the collective, and belong to everybody. I really think they're real – in a fictional way, like how my daughter believes that her dolls are real, and she loves them just the same. The women exist in that very special way, and they're really powerful for me, because when I'm in my studio and I'm having a hard time and I have three good paintings on the wall, those ladies will give me the energy to make the rest of the show. They feed off of each other.'

'*Danielle Mckinney: Shelter' is on show until 4 October 2026 at the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida, norton.org*