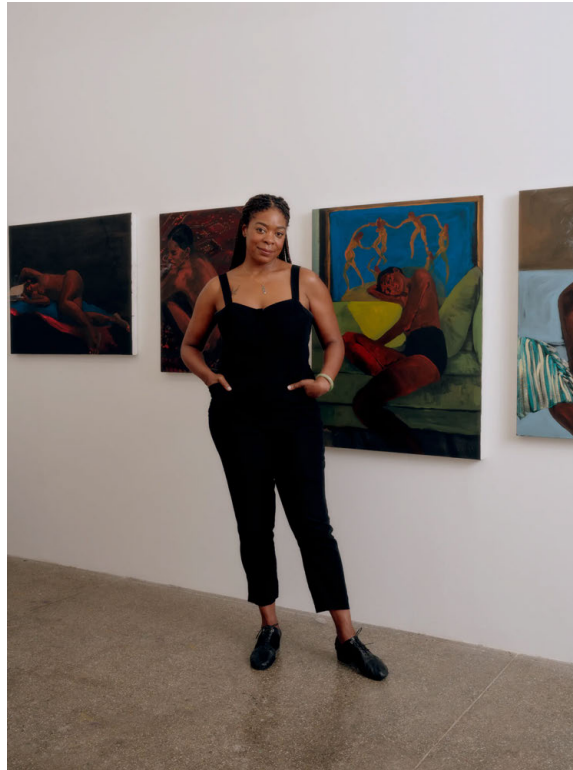


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Photos by Meghan Marin

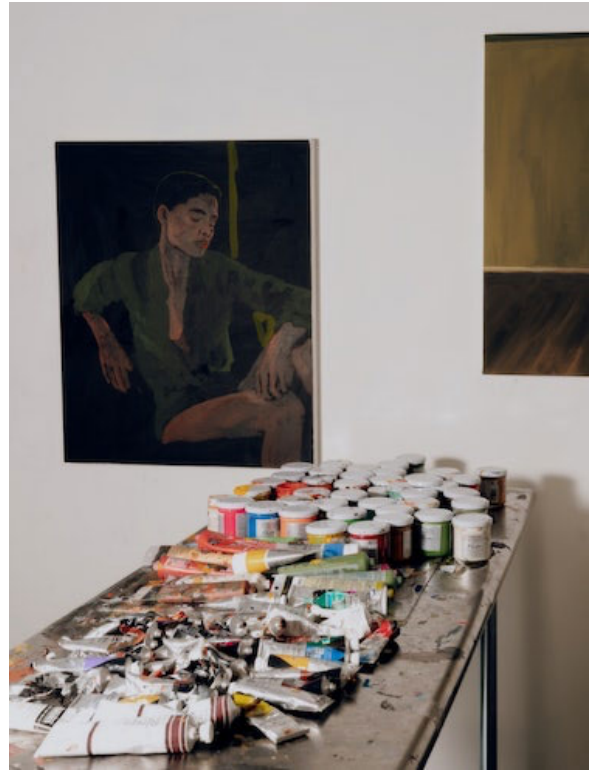
In the Studio With Danielle Mckinney, the Artist Bringing Intimate Moments to Life

By: Stephanie Eckardt
September 28, 2022

The former photographer is interested in human connections and how we behave when we aren't "on."

Just a couple of years ago, Danielle Mckinney's practice was entirely different. Her most prominent work, titled *The Guardian*, consisted of a series of photographs and videos of her touching more than 130 strangers in New York City, without their consent. As a deep introvert, the 40-year-old artist has always been interested in human connections, intimate moments, and how we behave when we aren't "on." On a surface level, *The Guardian* has little to do with the paintings that comprise *Golden Hour*, the solo exhibition that will go on view at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York City on October 13. But since devoting herself to painting, Mckinney has discovered she no longer needs to approach strangers to explore the topics that have long fascinated her—she can do so through portraits of Black female figures at home and at ease.

The first thing I notice when I log into our virtual studio visit is that Mckinney is bathed in harsh fluorescent light. She can't yet afford to join the dozens of artists (including the painter Amy Sherald) on the upper four levels of Mana Contemporary's Jersey City outpost, so she's been capturing the first hour after sunrise and last hour of light before sunset on canvas from the million-square-foot facility's basement. For her, that's just fine. "I was trained as a photographer, so my happy place was a dark room with red light," she says. "It's kind of soothing, this atmosphere of just having a low light and some Frank Ocean on—almost womb-like. Then you step out and it's 80 degrees, and you're like, whoa, where was I?"



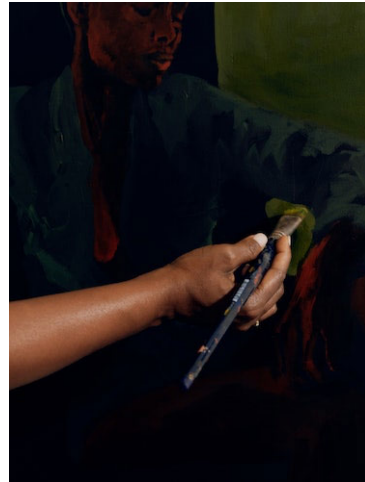
Growing up in Montgomery, Alabama, Mckinney was always connected to art. Her grandmother introduced her to painting and signed her up for lessons, and her mother gifted her an old Nikon film camera when Mckinney was 15. She studied at the Atlanta College of Arts, and earned her MFA in photography at Parsons School of Design in 2013. She was comfortable with the idea that she would be a photographer, but never stopped thinking about painting. Then, in 2018, at a Parsons show, she threw in some paintings with her photos and everything changed.



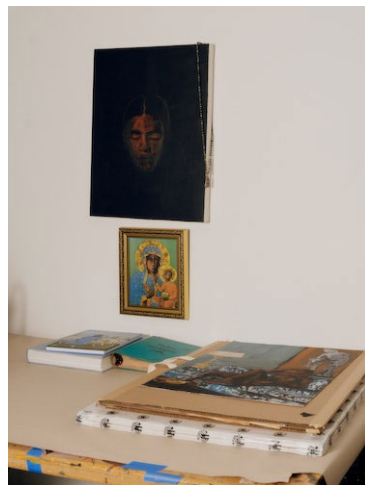
Danielle Mckinney, *Dream Catcher*, 2021, Acrylic on Canvas.
Courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, and Night Gallery, Los Angeles.

Mckinney created an Instagram account hoping galleries would give her work a look. She only had around 50 followers when a curator from the Brooklyn Museum responded to a DM and put her in touch with Fortnight Institute, which proposed that she open its new 3rd Street location in Manhattan, in April 2021. Davida Nemeroff, owner of Los Angeles' Night Gallery, offered her another solo exhibition just a month later. And less than a week after that, Mckinney's work was also on display at Marianne Boesky's Aspen outpost.

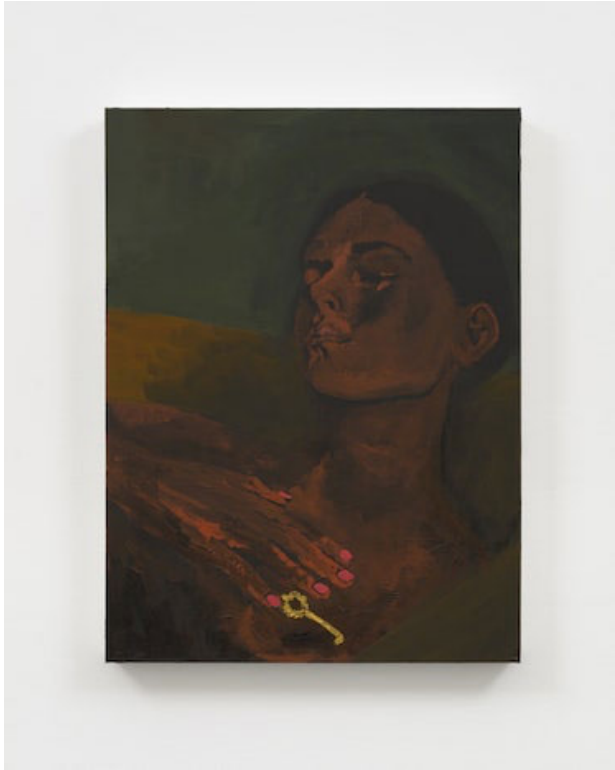
Mckinney's rise has been so swift, it's only after we say goodbye and I'm reflecting on our conversation that I realize when she says she's stopped incorporating religious iconography into her paintings, she's comparing her current work to what she exhibited just last year. The Night Gallery exhibition, for example, featured a canvas depicting a woman with a bible on her lap. These days, the nods to Mckinney's faith, which began with her Southern Baptist upbringing, are less obvious. "Part of my background is Native American, and they believe in animal totems as messengers to the spirit realm and higher beings," she says. "I have this make-believe idea that I am still connected to my father, who passed away when I was one. I put him in some paintings as a praying mantis, as a testimony to the spirit world, to the other realm, to God." She hopes that viewers will find their own symbolism in such motifs.



Mckinney starts each painting by completely coating the canvas with a layer of black gesso. "I was struggling because I had always worked on a white canvas and had to work to build the whole figure—the eyeballs, the eyebrows, the nose. And all of a sudden, I was like, black—how beautiful. It was almost like being in the dark room again." The way that her characters' brown skin comes across on a black backdrop was key to the switch. "God forgive me, but I don't think of them as Black women," she says of her subjects. "I mean, obviously, they're Black women. But what I love so much is that people from all races, men, women, have told me they see themselves. My objective is to paint this feeling of like, 'Okay, TV's off. I'm sitting here. Do I smoke? And when I smoke, where does my head go?'" (A lifelong smoker currently on her tenth attempt to quit, Mckinney often gives her figures a cigarette so that she can smoke vicariously through them.)



After years of photographing people out on the street, Mckinney is now almost entirely focused on interiors. She relies on Pinterest boards and 1960s and '70s design books and catalogs from eBay for material she can use to build a world for her figures—people she finds on Instagram and in her old photographs, whose leisurely and contemplative gestures catch her eye.



Left: Danielle Mckinney, *Eternal*, 2022, Acrylic on Canvas.
Courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, and Night Gallery, Los Angeles.

“It’s almost like decorating a house,” the artist says, likening the process of hunting for furniture and other details for her paintings to going shopping. She used to assemble the settings by cutting paper, just as she did when she would build houses out of shoeboxes as a kid, but now mainly maps out her interiors via the photo and design app Bazaart to avoid keeping scissors around her toddler. Whereas her photographs were largely black and white, Mckinney’s paintings are peppered with bright details—often in the form of brightly colored nails, artistic references on the walls of her interiors, and the lit ends of cigarettes.

Mckinney thinks of her figures as unique little babies. “I get so excited when I come into my studio and see them. I’m like, ‘hi, babies!’,” she says. “When they come to pack them up for the gallery, I have to leave the room. And when I go back and they’re gone, I sob.” She had a similar sense of attachment to her work when she was a photographer. “Now, the gallery will send me photos of the collectors with the paintings in their homes. And that makes me happy, because they have a new life—my babies aren’t just packed up and hanging out in the back of a truck.”