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Photo Credit: Pierre Le Hors

Danielle Mckinney Embraces the Golden Hour

By: Annabel Keenan
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The artist discusses her steady rise to prominence as a painter, her most recent works, and how motherhood has influenced her creative process.

Danielle Mckinney has had two very transformative years. Since the start of the pandemic, she swapped her photography practice for one devoted to painting, joined the rosters of Night Gallery and Marianne Boesky Gallery, and gave birth to her baby, Charlotte. She has been on a steady rise as a painter, making a name for herself with intimate, candid scenes of solitary female figures, specifically Black women. Mckinney's paintings, "her babies," as she calls them, blend her photographer's precision with a sensitive, contemplative understanding of the experience of being a woman. Her latest work is the subject of a solo show at Boesky's New York location. Titled "Golden Hour," the show captures the moments of calm just before the day begins.



Danielle Mckinney, *Dream Catcher*, 2021. Photography by Pierre Le Hors.
Image courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, and Night Gallery, Los Angeles.

“As a photographer, the golden hour was always my favorite time,” she says. “Nobody’s awake, the sun is rising, and the orange and yellow light comes in, casting a shadow in the house and setting the tone of the room. It’s majestic, even moody. Light becomes like another figure.”

Light and shadow add a Baroque element of chiaroscuro to her work. To create her compositions, Mckinney begins with a black background and builds her figures on top, using vintage magazines, internet searches, and found imagery as source materials. She sometimes weaves in references to art history, like the nod to Henri Matisse in the painting hanging behind a lounging figure in *After the Dance*, 2022.

Mckinney’s figures are central to her work. They are alone, afforded with solitude to self-reflect, rest their eyes, or just exist in a moment of peace. She provides little context for her subjects, ambiguity that allows viewers to create their own narrative and escape into the small worlds captured on each canvas.

“It’s important for me to leave room for people to build their own story,” she says. “The figure always comes first and then I create the interior around her. This is the fun part, but it can also be frustrating. I’ve worked so hard to get the figure perfect and freeze a specific moment, and the interior can mess that up.”

Underneath some backgrounds are hidden layers of past interiors that didn’t fit the work. She also leaves the background black at times, as is the case with *Reading Room*, 2022, a stunning image of a nude woman lying on a bright blue couch.

While most paintings show entire bodies, some feature closeups with unexplained objects like praying mantises or a glimmering gold key. The latter appears in *Eternal*, 2022, in which the face and shoulders of a resting woman are shown on a brown couch. The figure holds a key, its vivid color contrasting the overall dark palette. Her nails are bright pink, a color that appears often in Mckinney’s work.



Danielle Mckinney, *Eternal*, 2022. Photography by Pierre Le Hors.
Image courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, and Night Gallery, Los Angeles.

“My favorite thing to do is paint my figures’ nails,” she says. “These hot, red and pink moments break up the moody atmosphere. For me, these moments are like sticking something in an outlet. They give the atmosphere the electricity it needs. I also do this with the bright orange of a cigarette, but I don’t smoke anymore, so the meaning has changed. Before, I gave them cigarettes because I was also smoking and it was something of an act of rebellion, but now I think of them as representing this ultimate human sensation of taking a deep exhale.”

As she has honed her skill as a painter over the last two years, Mckinney has learned to embrace the challenges of the medium, a lesson she also faced navigating her new life as a mom.

“I see paintings in my head the same way I see photographs, but when I paint an image, it’s never what I had in mind. Trying for that level of control is difficult and sometimes I really struggle when I want an image so badly to reflect what’s in my head, but it doesn’t translate. Being a mother helped me accept these challenges. When I became a mom, I had to do something that I had no idea how to do. Being a mother has taught me that there is patience and grace in allowing things to happen. I’ve noticed this come through in my work. My brushstrokes are different. When I paint, I give myself freedom. I’m no longer thinking about what the world wants of me, but rather what I want to say to the world.”