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The artist Danielle Mckinney, photographed at her Jersey City, N.J., studio on Dec. 20, 2023 in front of "She" (2023).

DANIELLE MCKINNEY NEVER THOUGHT HER PAINTINGS WOULD BE SEEN LIKE THIS

BY M.H. MILLER

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The subjects of Danielle Mckinney's paintings are exclusively Black women, like the artist herself. They are generally posed inside darkly lit but nevertheless inviting domestic spaces. The effect is both casual and courtly: Her women lounge on couches and read magazines. They smoke gracefully but with what Mckinney, 42, described as "a worldly tension." In person, she shares a kind of understated glamour with her subjects, and she paints the act of smoking with nostalgia and envy. She started smoking when she was 13; when I first visited her Jersey City, N.J., studio last April, she was trying not to fall off the wagon. "After the last one, it's been 70 days," she said. "But I had two in between there."

Her paintings are small and, as more and more people have seen them — something that's been known to make other painters' work expand in tandem with their egos — they've only gotten smaller, often not much larger than a sheet of notebook paper. She uses a richly textured oil, a more stubborn material than acrylic, which dries faster and is easier to control. And whereas most painters favor white gesso to prepare a canvas, Mckinney chooses an almost counterintuitive layer of black. Her figures seem to emerge out of shadows, like a photograph being developed. Being in this kind of demand is untested territory for Mckinney. When 2020 began, she was living in New Jersey, just on the other side of the Holland Tunnel from New York City, with her husband, Robert Roest, who's Dutch and also a painter, and working full time as a manager of course planning in the architecture program at the Parsons School of Design in Lower Manhattan. Seven years earlier, Mckinney had completed an M.F.A. in photography at Parsons, a degree for which she was still paying off loans. Her mother gave Mckinney her first camera when she was 15. Her art, she'd say, was about "watching people look." She shot one series during her morning commute, asking fellow subway riders if she could touch them, and photographing their reactions.



The artist's 2023 painting "Shelter." Credit...© Danielle Mckinney. Courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. Photo: Nik Massey

But once the city went into Covid-19 lockdown in March of that year, she no longer had a morning commute. Everyone was wearing masks and, as she put it, "personal space became something so sacred." Her old way of making art wouldn't work anymore. "I was watching the world, but the world shifted," she said. "I couldn't enter it the way that I did before." She found herself painting more, which she'd done off and on since she was a girl. (Her grandmother had encouraged this activity.) She'd always enjoyed it, though it was more like a diary: "Something I just did from the soul of my heart," she said. But in that strange first year of the pandemic, when it felt like the world could end at any moment, Mckinney thought, "Why not show my paintings? Who cares?" She [made an Instagram account](#) and started posting. She sent emails to dealers — sometimes as many as 20 a day — but her expectations were low.

After a few weeks, she'd developed a small following and, within a matter of months, had heard from Davida Nemeroff, the owner of Night, and the New York gallerist Marianne Boesky. (Mckinney will have her [third solo show](#) with Boesky next month.) She'd spent her entire professional life pursuing photography without showing in a commercial gallery, but soon she had dealers on both coasts, solo shows lined up and a waiting list of collectors and institutions interested in acquiring her *paintings*. She was excited and perplexed. "I felt crazy," Mckinney told me.

The art world is as fickle as any other business. There are trends, often dictated by larger shifts in public opinion, and Mckinney knew she'd found herself in the middle of one. Galleries and museums embraced figurative painting by Black artists following the election of Donald Trump. By the time the video of George Floyd being murdered by a Minneapolis police officer went viral in the late spring of 2020, igniting mass protests across the country, art institutions quickly issued statements like this one from the New Museum in Manhattan: "We denounce the ongoing murder, abuse and mistreatment of Black and brown people that is the continuing legacy of slavery and entrenched white supremacy and entitlement. A reckoning is long overdue. ..." Even a few months earlier, arts institutions (like many media outlets and other cultural gatekeepers) hadn't been nearly as invested in such a reckoning, but now an auction house such as Sotheby's was decrying the "legacy of systemic racism and discrimination" on Instagram. ([According to Artnet News](#), work by Black American female artists comprised 0.1 percent of total auction sales between 2008 and mid-2022.) Galleries added Black artists to their rosters, prioritizing them in a way they never had before. When she started showing with Boesky, Mckinney says, she asked her point-blank: "Are you representing me because you like my art, or is it because you need a Black artist?"



McKinney's "Twilight," from 2021. Credit...© Danielle McKinney. Courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen

In conversation, McKinney was frequently doubting herself. It may not help that only a few artists have followed a similar trajectory to McKinney's, arriving at their true calling relatively late in life, like Lorraine O'Grady, who was a writer before starting to make performance and video art in her early 40s. Last fall, McKinney was looking at some paintings online by John Singer Sargent, one of the pre-eminent portrait painters of the 19th century. "I'll never be that," she concluded. She talked to her hypnotherapist, who was helping her to quit cigarettes, about being insecure about her craft. "I don't feel like I'm a good artist," she told him. "I'm scared to paint. I don't know what to do." "Art is subjective," he responded. "There are so many great artists I know," she told me, "like my husband. Nobody called him up."

To me, and to many of the people who've championed her work, McKinney is so clearly a great painter that it's odd to witness how much she questions herself. When Boesky brought McKinney's paintings to the Art Basel fair in Switzerland last June, she saw a collector stand in front of one with tears streaming down her face. In 28 years as an art dealer, Boesky told me, "I'd never seen that happen." If McKinney's talent is a given, the marketplace she has entered into is not. In five years' time, the artist said, "maybe no one's looking for a Danielle McKinney."

McKinney was born in Montgomery, Ala. (Among friends and family, she goes by her middle name, Joy.) Her father died when she was 1 and she was raised by her mother, an educator, her aunt and her maternal grandmother. "My grandmother, she's white," McKinney said. "I mean, she's mixed, but she looks like a white woman." That, in combination with McKinney's dark complexion, didn't go over well in her hometown. "I would be riding in the car with my grandmother and people would ask her, 'Why are you riding with that [expletive]?' " McKinney recalled. She spent a lot of time alone. When she was in middle school, and she and her mother moved to the suburbs of Atlanta, it was like arriving in a progressive refuge.



"Oolong and a Spirit" (2023) reflects McKinney's interest in painting scenes of rest and relaxation. Credit...© Danielle McKinney. Courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. Photo: Nik Massey

Yet she would continue to struggle with not feeling accepted at various points in her life. When she attempted to share her paintings while she was still a student, a teacher told her, "Stick to your photos." For years, her experience with the art world in New York was ostracizing. She'd go to all of the openings at galleries and museums and art fairs, but "I never, ever saw any Black art, let alone another Black person looking at the art," she said. "I was like, 'Where is everybody?'"

Many in the market now see Black art as a monolith but, aside from the race of her subjects, McKinney's work shares little in common with other contemporary Black painters. She doesn't paint from history, like Kerry James Marshall or Henry Taylor, artists who explicitly depict inequality and violence in America. But she doesn't paint figures in her life, either, like Njideka Akunyili Crosby or Jordan Casteel, who use family and friends as models to create scenes of exceptional personal intimacy; McKinney's only painting like this is a portrait of her daughter, now 2, which she has no intention of selling, much less sharing with anyone other than her husband. Her paintings aren't of specific people, and yet they are inspired in part by her own experience with exclusion. Last July in her studio, she showed me a box of clippings from old magazines, which she'd found on eBay and in thrift stores, with a particular eye for Eisenhower-era decorating magazines, Vogues and Ebonys. She also has a few Playboys from the 1970s, about which, she said, "Honestly, I like to see women that are not boobed up, plastic surgeoned up. It feels really natural." When she finds a pose or room she likes, she'll cut it out of the magazine and use it as a template, mixing and matching images in collages and creating her paintings from there. "I never saw myself in a magazine," she'd told me earlier. "Meaning, a Black woman with Black skin."

Her paintings are "my way to show that": a rather simple proposition but radical, too. The canon of Western painting includes relatively few portraits of Black women, figures whom critics and historians have largely ignored even when artists didn't. The most famous exception is the maid in Edouard Manet's 1863 painting "Olympia," who stands over a white prostitute, clutching a bouquet of flowers, her expression either distracted or evasive. The woman for whom she works is lying in bed, confidently holding the viewer's gaze, nude except for a pair of white heels and a pink flower in her hair. The power dynamic between the two has been the subject of much critical discourse. In a 1992 essay titled "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Subjectivity," O'Grady herself argues, "It is the African female who, by virtue of color and feature and the extreme metaphors of enslavement, is at the outermost reaches of 'otherness.'" O'Grady is referring to the maid in "Olympia" (she was a recurring model for Manet who appears in the lesser-known circa 1862 work "La Nègresse") but also to Black women generally in modern art.

McKinney's paintings are reminiscent of "Olympia," but if the women in it had managed a miraculous role reversal. Race is obviously an important theme for her, yet so is her focus on the mundane — on boredom, something rarely explored in art and often reserved only for white people. (Manet's prostitute has always looked bored to me, which is part of what makes her so appealing.) In art, as in media of all kinds, Black women have often been either represented as subordinate, like Olympia's maid, or as a dignified heroine (and in Hollywood movies, usually a little

of both). McKinney looks past these extremes at something altogether more subtle. Perhaps only someone with her experience — an artist who was only recently able to quit her day job — could truly appreciate how important the act of doing nothing can feel. “I can show us taking a nap and smoking a cigarette, butt naked on a sofa at the end of the day with red fingernail polish,” she said. “I can show us [being] normal.”

Like the women in her paintings, McKinney also spends a lot of time alone in a darkened room, though she struggles more to relax there. Many artists’ studios are utilitarian, but McKinney’s is exceptionally austere. When I visited, she had only one chair, and there was no visible clutter, other than an orderly stack of art books devoted to the Dutch old masters atop a small table against one wall. There was no window, either. (Within a few months, she’d move to a different studio in the same building; it has a small window that looks out onto a brick wall.)

“Sometimes,” she told me, “I can be very hard on myself.” She has a tendency to destroy her art. At one point she gestured to a row of new paintings leaning against a wall of the studio, which she intended to paint over. Someday soon, she said matter-of-factly, “Those paintings will be black and in the trash.” Later, I asked her if I could see some of her photographs, as I’d only heard about them from her. She told me the prints no longer existed. “I one day got so angry with photography that I threw them all in the trash,” she said.

But the more time I spent with McKinney, the more I came to appreciate how quiet her paintings were, and how lacking in anxiety, despite the anxiety she may have about everything that surrounds them. They were like self-portraits from an alternate reality, a world with no deadlines for shows to fill or schedule to follow, no vultures eyeing her for profit, where she could eternally drag on a cigarette without any repercussions. I asked her why none of her figures have a companion.

“They just want to be in their own little worlds,” she said. “I guess that’s me, in a way.”