

The Guardian

Esposito, Veronica: 'Women are not usually seen to be resting': Danielle Mckinney's portraits of repose
17 April 2024

'Women are not usually seen to be resting': Danielle Mckinney's portraits of repose

The photographer turned painter specializes in images of Black female solitude, luxuriating in the importance of relaxing



📍 Danielle Mckinney in her Jersey City studio in 2024. Photograph: Danielle Mckinney

As a painter, Danielle Mckinney has just one subject: Black women in moments of repose. From that singular basis she has managed to produce years of acclaimed artwork, developing an enviable style that has drawn the attention of, among others, Jay-Z and Beyoncé. Her new show at Marianne Boesky Gallery, titled Quiet Storm, offers 12 works that suggestively combine elements of exhalation and simmering intensity.



Inside the world of hidden Renaissance portraits: 'It's very playful'

→ Read more

Hold your Breath, one of the displayed works, is as good a starting point as any, with its alluring subject sitting atop a mere suggestion of a chair, a long cigarette perched between two fingers and a gorgeous burnt orange robe draping languorously over her body. The slight upturn to her head offers a sense of absolute restful satisfaction, and the olive green background seems the perfect complement to the subject's mood. All in all, the painting comes together with a simplicity and precision that is seductive, and that holds the eye.

Marianne Boesky, a gallery owner and longtime Mckinney collaborator, agreed that Hold Your Breath is a standout work in the show. “It kind of captures the mood and feeling of the whole show,” she told me. “It’s this moment - once you let go you can only hold your breath so long.”

Piece for piece, every work in Quiet Storm stands on its own with gravity and personality, yet together they don’t feel as though they are bumping elbows, jostling for attention, so much as they are all adding to the gorgeous mood that Mckinney specializes in. Each is set off by its own distinct features - a mischievous peek from behind a book on Read the Room, a Hopperesque light in Winter Sonnet, the majesty of Quiet Storm, the surprising brightness of Before They Wake. The exhibition’s twilight sensation is further enhanced by the choice to let the show spread out over a generous three rooms, with the walls painted a moody violet, giving each work a great deal of space and letting audiences move as slowly and as sinuously as one would expect of Mckinney’s protagonists.



📷 Danielle Mckinney - Hold your Breath (2024). Photograph: Pierre Le Hors/Copyright of the Danielle Mckinney and courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, photo by Pierre Le Hors

Long trained as a photographer, Mckinney returned to her childhood love of painting during the Covid lockdowns, finding in it both a welcome release from the rigors of photography and a way to connect with a sense of playfulness and pure enjoyment. “When I went to school for photography, everything was about the punctum and Roland Barthes,” Mckinney told me. “It became such a conceptual form. I loved how painting allowed me to just play. I love it because it’s so organic.”

Mckinney doesn’t work with live models, rather drawing inspiration from images of women that she finds in all sorts of locations - fashion photos from bygone decades, things she happens to see on Instagram and Pinterest, even photos before the

1900s. What she is most in search of is the expression on a woman’s face and how it speaks to her. From there, Mckinney mixes and matches various elements from other images, until she at last reaches a composition that feels right to her.

The settings that Mckinney conjures up for her subjects feel detached and anonymous, even as they contain particular details (a mirror, a teapot) that are integral to the work. Part of this sense of detachment comes from Mckinney's brushstrokes, which are often lumpy and meandering, contributing to an overall soft-focus feeling. This feeling is also in part created by the vaporous sensibility of these paintings, as though each of them is taking place at an eternal twilight. Mckinney works to create this feeling right from the beginning, as she starts out by painting each of her canvases black, helping to set the intimate tones of the works. She previously tried priming her canvases with white and brown, but neither felt right until she hit on black. "When I tried black, it was like chemistry," she told me. "It felt like being in a darkroom. When these figures emerge from this black background, sometimes I just want to leave them there."

Mckinney looks at preparing the mood of each painting as though she is creating a space for her audiences to visit. She wants to get the lighting and the setting just right, as she would when having guests over to her home. "I think people want to feel, they want to be moved," she said. "So that mood, I try to create it with the low lights, the cigarette smoke, the mystery. I'm very moody myself. I'm a deep introvert, so I'm really sensitive to space and sound and feeling."



📷 Danielle Mckinney - Winter Sonnet (2024). Photograph: Pierre Le Hors/Copyright of the Danielle Mckinney and courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, photo by Pierre Le Hors

Boesky, who has exhibited Mckinney since 2021, recalled the excitement of first discovering the painter via Instagram during Covid lockdowns, and her impatience to find some way to see the work up close back when Covid restrictions made that unfeasible. She met with Mckinney several times over Zoom, building up a rapport and an appreciation for her work, eventually deciding that she just needed a face-to-face visit. “I felt like I needed to see those paintings in person,” she told me, “because these screens lie. After several calls over several months, we were like, ‘Eff it, let’s make it happen, even if we have to wear hazmat suits!’”

While Mckinney and Boesky agree that the paintings have a remarkable ability to resonate, regardless of age, gender or race, Mckinney also shared that she feels her work has a special appeal for women. She has seen women walk away from her shows feeling more empowered, as though they have reclaimed a voice that has never been heard. Mckinney wants to celebrate the right for women to take a break and center themselves. “Women are not usually seen to be resting. I think it’s great that you can see a woman at the end of the day just chillaxing. It’s really normal and just something she totally deserves.”

Mckinney says that she’s tried to shift from her focus of Black women relaxing, but it just didn’t feel right. At the moment, her subject matter feels exactly what she wants to be painting, and it’s hard to imagine that changing any time soon. “I never get bored of it,” she said, “it’s like my internal spirit. It’s about them being in this domestic space. Hopper, Vermeer and other classical masters all kind of painted these similar things. It’s all I know, and I don’t think I can change it.”

- Danielle Mckinney: Quiet Storm is on display until 27 April at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York