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Alison Gingeras, "Taming the Bird: Danielle Mckinney," Mousse Magazine, May 7, 2021.

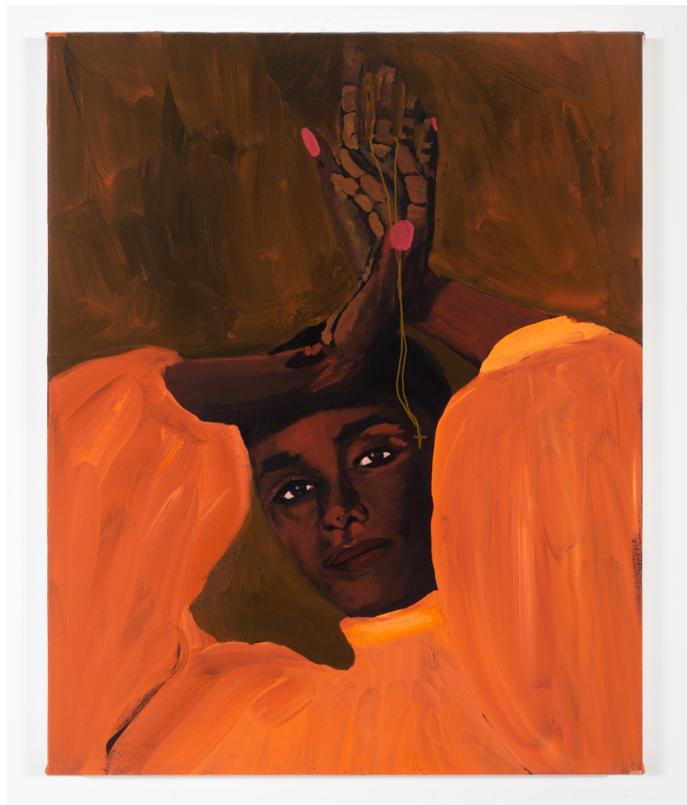
Mousse Magazine

CONVERSATIONS

Taming the Bird: Danielle McKinney

Danielle McKinney in conversation with Alison Gingeras

In the early 1990s, *all* painting was reputed to be dead, with figuration targeted as the most suspect of contemporary art practices. Yet by the end of that decade, a new generation of artists gleefully and somewhat "wrongly" "returned" to figurative painting, spawning updated versions of the same old early-1980s ideological debates around the reactionary status of figurative painting; young artists like John Currin, Elizabeth Peyton, Neo Rauch, and Luc Tuymans succeeded the Neo-Expressionists and trans-avant-gardists who had offended the political and aesthetic sensibilities of academia and the art cognoscenti a generation before. Now almost twenty years have passed since I organized *Dear Painter, Paint Me: Painting the Figure since Late Picabia* at Paris's Centre Pompidou in 2002, an exhibition that attempted to sketch a genealogy of



Danielle Mckinney, *Let's Be Real*, 2021

Courtesy: the artist and Fortnight Institute, New York.

Photo: Jason Mandella

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artists across the postwar period who knowingly infringed upon the taboo surrounding figurative painting within the confines of “advanced art.”

Two decades into the twenty-first century, painting is no longer under attack. Quite the opposite: markets and museums have bullishly embraced a younger crop of figurative artists while also looking back to revive under-recognized artists such as Alice Neel, Benny Andrews, and Robert Colescott, who pioneered radical painting positions yet never got their institutional due. And so I am once again compelled to investigate why and how artists are investing in this medium and how it relates to the complex identity issues and politics of our current moment. Just as I did while preparing *Dear Painter*, I am conducting a series of interviews with an emerging cohort of painters who are inflecting their love of this anachronistic medium with the pressing concerns of their own lived experiences. This conversation with Danielle McKinney inaugurates the series.

ALISON GINGERAS: Your current debut show as a painter, *Saw My Shadow* at Fortnight Institute in New York, is simply stunning. Are you pleased?

DANIELLE MCKINNEY: Yes! To see the work here, alive—it makes me so happy.

AG: How many years of work is this?

DM: It’s probably about a year’s worth of work. I started painting this show last May. I’ve been painting all my life, but when COVID-19 hit, I painted every day.

AG: You were professionally trained as a photographer, so I am intrigued to hear you’ve painted your whole life. Tell me something about your earlier painting practice and how it related to you taking up photography, then switching back to painting.

DM: I went to the Atlanta College of Art for photography. Afterward, I took some time off and lived in Europe for a while. I studied in France, again for photography. While I was in Pont-Aven, I also took a formal painting class. I ended up staying there two years, and that’s when I really painted. Then I left France and figured painting was just not my thing. Then I came to New York and went to Parsons for grad school in photography. My work centered on social issues. Photography was always about me watching other people—their gestures, social engagements, boundaries, et cetera. Whereas painting was this world I could get lost in, where I could really put my feelings, my thoughts, my emotions. No one was there to judge. It was a place for me to formally become “unformalized.”

AG: What was your work like before you went to art school? Was painting something you did systematically? Do your earliest paintings relate in some way to what you’re doing now?

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DM: Yes, it's all very much related. I was an only child, and so I was by myself a lot. I come from a family of women (my dad died when I was young). They would give me magazines and paintbrushes, and I would build shoebox houses and paint inside them. I'd make little furniture, and take a little figure, often a woman, put her in that house, with a little baby. Then I would present it to my family. I was building worlds.

AG: Did you keep any of those painted houses?

DM: I didn't. My grandma recently said, "I really wish I had some of those shoeboxes now."

AG: It sounds like you were making little vignettes from life. Those little houses are not unlike how your paintings present minor narrative moments. They have a timelessness. It's hard to place them in a particular historical moment, yet they're not totally of the current one.

DM: Exactly. I look at some of my newer paintings and still see that seven-year-old or ten-year-old who made those boxes. That little play-world. Once I built the interiors, they became living beings. It's the same with the paintings. Once I build and find the interiors, the subjects become the living beings occupying those spaces.

AG: This begs the question: Who are the women in the paintings? Are they you? Are they an amalgamation of you and other characters?

DM: Sometimes they're me. Sometimes they're an emotion I'm feeling. Sometimes they're a story that my best friend told me. Sometimes it's an observation of a feeling inside me that I'm processing. Sometimes it's a conversation I've had with my husband. The women are me, but they might also be men. Sometimes my husband will look at one and say, "That's me."

AG: They are an every person. Humanist portraits.

DM: Every person, regardless of color or gender. That's where my photography background comes out. My photo work was about humanitarianism and sociology.

AG: Beyond the social aspect, the formal composition of these scenes also seems to come from photography or photographic vision. It reminds me of how the advent of photography occasioned a radical paradigm shift from the Impressionist artists and their snapshot-like compositions.

DM: I can't undo that photographic training—it's embedded in how I begin a painting. First I paint the canvas with a black ground, and that black ground serves almost like the camera's viewfinder. It allows me to build the image.

AG: The black grounds you deploy are totally apparent. It's interesting, because you are not exactly a self-taught painter, but in a way you are. How are you feeding your painting practice? Are you looking at a lot of other painters' works? Are there particular painters you find useful for your practice?

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DM: Of course I have favorite painters, for instance Barkley L. Hendricks and Kerry James Marshall. Helena Almeida is also an important artist to me. But there was a time when I could not look at other painters because I was so intimidated. I didn't trust my painting. Whereas with photography, I felt comfortable in the medium. I'd go to the Met and think to myself, "I wish I could do that." But this past year I had a great teacher—my husband, who is trained in painting—who helped me to get everything out of my head and onto the canvas. He helped me a lot with formally understanding where I was going.

AG: Where do your paintings start? With a narrative idea? A formal concept? A chromatic idea, maybe? There is so much going on with the color range.

DM: A lot of them are sourced images. Something I'll see that triggers me. I'm constantly looking. Not at art necessarily, but I love images. I'll be on my phone, on Pinterest, following accounts that have tons of weird, atmospheric things happening. I'll take a given photographic reference and build upon that, adding in my feelings.

AG: So these images are mostly built from vernacular references?

DM: They're from everywhere. *Negroni* (2020) is from a 1930s photograph of an Art Deco woman sitting at a table. She was not drinking a Negroni, but I thought, "She needs a Negroni." I'm triggered by an image, just like when I was a child, and the spark was the furniture or the space.

AG: In this group of paintings at Fortnight Institute, certain things are jumping out at me. For instance religious symbolism and spirituality pops up in several.

DM: Spirituality is a common thread in all of them, along with the cigarettes, or the vaping.

AG: In *Let's Be Real* (2021), I love the way you painted the woman's orange blouse. It seems like a very signature thing in your work, these transparent strokes of saturated color. And her gaze is so distant. She is looking out of the frame; her eye doesn't meet mine.

DM: I just finished that one about two weeks ago. It's kind of a resurrection for me. It's funny about the gaze; a lot of them have an indirect look. A gaze can be intimidating. That's also true with the photographic gaze. I don't want the eyes to be cornering, intimidating, or angry. When I finished her eyes, the last thing in the painting, I sat there for maybe an hour and a half, just watching her. They become real beings to me.

AG: Is that what you mean by "resurrection"?

DM: She has had her spiritual "coming to" realization moment. I had one myself. My dad was a Southern Baptist preacher. My mom's New Age. My husband's family is Dutch and very Orthodox. My husband is an atheist. I think this spiritual thread has been coming through especially now that I am pregnant. Having a baby, what does that mean? How are we going to raise them? I'm very deeply spiritual. This painting makes reference to my sense that whatever I believe, it's okay.

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The symbology of spirituality is more a generic signifier of faith or belief as opposed to a specific religion. I still have an affinity for these symbolic meanings, it's ingrained in me. *Quiet Mind* (2021) has a painting of Mary in the background; she's a significant icon to me. But I question those things. When I was home, I saw a picture of Caucasian Jesus in front of my granny, who was asleep, and I was thinking, "What! She's as dark as me!" That's my confusion; it's also my peace; it's my rest; it's my security blanket. All of this comes through in the paintings.

AG: Perhaps that's why, whenever you conjure a religious icon in the background as a reproduction or a painting, it's blurry. That feels extremely deliberate.

DM: When I paint an interior, I know I'm going to add it. I'll get a little scared and think that this could be labeled or dominate her environment. But then I figure out how I can twist the environment a little bit so it's not so clearly religious. Sometimes I've even wanted to paint the Virgin Mary as a subject. But it starts with the environment.

AG: What about this painting of the woman with the bird, *Whisper* (2021)? She's so mysterious and timeless. When you mentioned Dutch painting, I immediately looked at that canvas. It could come from the seventeenth century.

DM: She's a mystery. As I said, for a long time, I wasn't ready to look at other painters. But then when I was ready, I was really inspired by the Old Masters—their brushstrokes, their colors, the way the figures move. I was trying to imbue my work with that formality. And yet, still, my hand still came through. I still wanted to give her that lazy eye. Then the little bird appeared. It appeared at the same time that I was finally feeling all right with my painting.

AG: So is *Whisper* an allegory of your relationship with this medium? You're taming the bird?

DM: Exactly. It felt safe. *[laughter]* You know, she's very formal, but the bird was not so easy to paint. For me, it's her face, her hair, everything. I felt like I nailed it. But when I got to that bird, and to her hands, I said to myself, "That is just not proportional. This is not right." I wound up telling myself, "You've got to let the imperfections be." It is not about a perfect painting; the imperfection is part of the perfection, or the balance of the painting itself. I had to fight myself to put the brush down.

AG: There's a chapter in Elkins's book called "Crying in Chromatic Waves." That title could be applied to your work. There is so much happening with your palette, the chromatic precision and saturations just wash over you. Both in an individual work, and from painting to painting. Can you also talk about *Provence* (2021) and what's happening with the color there?

DM: There are mangoes in the foreground on the gold doily. I like her. Some of my paintings, I have a deep connection to. Since I am pregnant right now, there is a visual metaphor with those mangoes breaking open. This is a painting of my family. My grandma is always making those lace doilies. It's also about the boredom of sitting with yourself, of being alone.

AG: Does drawing play a role in your painting process?

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DM: No, I just directly go at it. I put down the four colors for the figure, and I build her in the black ground. I let her, the subject, come out.

AG: There's also an amazing tension. Smoking a cigarette, sitting in the kitchen, taking a shower, putting on a face mask—all banal activities, yet I read them as rituals.

DM: It's so true. Even painting them is a ritual. I sit down and be quiet. I have nice music playing, or I'll listen to a certain lecture. Or it's silent.

AG: When does the color start to emerge in your process? The greens in the shower painting *Ritual*, or the peach colors in *Mala Beads* (2021), or the blues of *Daybreak* (2021). Now I'm thinking of these canvases as like those shoebox dioramas you created as a child, imagining how the color plays such a big role in building an emotional and physical world.

DM: Color is the key. It sets the mood. *Ritual* would be completely different in a pink bathroom. The colors are a means for me to construct the intimacy of the narrative, or to give a kind of "pop" to the environment that the subject lives in.

AG: Color in your works also seems to transport us to an otherworldly place. I've never seen a green like *Ritual*—it feels like an exotic palace, yet it could be a derelict motel. I love the ambiguity that your palette creates.

DM: I had to remake the green color on the spot, and I could not do it. When putting colors together, I'll just add, add, add, add, intuitively. Suddenly, there's the color!

AG: I suspect that's why *Prophetic* (2021) stands out in your show. This stark grisaille landscape. It's also the only work in which the figure is outdoors.

DM: She's one of the only ones I've ever painted depicted as outside. I am craving nature; it's a work about yearning. On this one, I started with the background. I'm very fond of Asian art, particularly the calligraphic landscapes. I thought about adding smoke covering her face. I thought about how to portray wind. That's why I called it *Prophetic*, because it's like she's receiving a message, but it's the wind.

AG: Tell me about the exhibition title, *Saw My Shadow*.

DM: These women, these works, are my shadows. I think they could be anyone's shadows, in a way. When you're alone with yourself, and quiet enough, you may sense that you're being watched. The shadow could be the past that you want to bring back to the future.

AG: These shadows are like an index of a physical presence, yet they disappear.

DM: They're mysterious.

AG: I am also curious about them as an index of identity, as it relates to larger conversations we're having in this country about race and racism, as well as a collective desire to expand the

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visibility of people of color. How do you think about these discussions around race as an artist emerging in this particular moment?

DM: I think about these questions a lot. It's a beautiful time because before, at least institutionally, not many artists of color were represented. Or at least, the artists of color who were showcased were always the same ones—very much conforming to a certain type of art. When I tried to look at paintings—traditional figurative painting more precisely—there was not so much work to look at. Artists were approaching race from a very different standpoint, mostly with heavy identity politics. I had a hard time finding role models. But it has become a wonderful moment because so much art now has come out of this zeitgeist, both by artists of color and from artists in general. It makes me very happy because conversations about race need to be heard. It's time for people to allow a diversity of voices in the institutions. On the other hand, I'm also very reserved, because I worry and think to myself, "Are you interested in my work because it's 'Black art'? Because you 'need' a Black artist? How long will this last?" I hope the reception of my work is about the art itself. That's always the central question for me.

I am inarguably still a Black female artist working in a very Caucasian artistic context. My family's mixed-race. My grandmother is from the South. My great-grandfather's from Ireland. When we go to visit my husband's family, there are thirty white women and men standing around and I'm the only Black person. So this is relevant to my work. But in the end, I feel happiest when I get letters from people who are moved by the work, not the letters that say, "Oh, I want to support Black artists."

AG: It seems like there has been undue institutional pressure on Black artists to produce ideological art.

DM: Thank you for recognizing this pressure. Yes.

AG: Thinking back to the show I did in 2002 at the Centre Pompidou, *Dear Painter*, makes me reflect on how the critical dialogue around figuration has changed. The conversation has shifted from "painting is dead" and "no serious artist works in a figurative mode," as was said in the late 1990s, to today, when figuration is again a dominant form of art making. Both museums and the art market love figurative painting. Yet I am still searching for an understanding of the role of figuration at this moment. It is a vital vehicle for complex personal narratives that have not been told. Painting is a terrain where a huge diversity life experiences and perspectives can be visually portrayed or recorded, for today and for posterity.

DM: What you're saying is exactly why I feel safe to paint as opposed to making photographic images. That dead reality in your face, the documentary nature of the mechanically made image, can be so heavy-handed. Whereas painting, and what I've been seeing as I have been able to digest more work by other painters, operates such that any identity can be explored, and it looks beautiful. For instance artists painting different sexualities, and it looks absolutely astonishing, even when the painting shows a tragic moment. Or a painter is making a work about a moment lying in bed, feeling alone, on the part of someone who is from a completely different race, and

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they are able to communicate something about their experience in their paintings. Painting lends itself to a completely honest, authentic story.

AG: I also think you are talking about the empathetic power of painting.

DM: Yes! What *is* that power?

AG: I don't know. It's a big mystery. It's a question that haunts me.

DM: I can't figure it out, either. I feel like I would believe a painting more than I would a photograph. And it tells me much more than a novel would. Or a movie.

AG: I have asked myself the same question ever since I started to seriously study art. I have been entranced by the emotive power of this medium. Painting is a time-travel device. Not only in that it records lost elements of various cultures, say, the Dutch lace collars of the seventeenth century. A successful painting also preserves the emotions or stories of these people from the past. How can paint communicate such sensations over centuries? Its alchemical, or something.

DM: It is. I think that's what's been so hard about the lockdown: not being able to see paintings in the flesh, in real life. Of course we are looking on the Gram, but it's not the same.

AG: I often wonder about the neurochemistry of looking at paintings—what happens when you optically “drink in” a painting, how a painted image imprints on your visual memory. Ironically, I think the Instagram generation has become more interested in painting because they are able to “see” it better through the screen. They are coaxed into looking more carefully.

DM: Instagram prepares you to embrace the formal qualities of that painted reality. Sometimes the colors of a painting are not captured in a photographic reproduction. You know, sometimes my husband will send me sketches when he's painting, and then when I go to his studio and see the actual paintings, they become like living beings. I'm glad we are talking about this special power of painting—I thought I was the only one!

Danielle McKinney is an artist who lives in New Jersey.

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