

It's Nice That

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Coady Brown paints alluring figures that “have a lot of secrets”

There's much to say about the work of Philadelphia-based artist Coady Brown, who paints detailed scenes of women “not just put on some sort of pedestal.”

Ayla Angelos | June 4, 2021



Coady Brown, *Make Believe*, oil on canvas, 42 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

“I was hypnotised by this other world I could create out of just pen and paper,” says artist Coady Brown, of her first creative moments. Drawing for as long as she can remember, Coady’s childhood consisted of living in an alternate illustrated universe, putting ideas to paper for hours on end. She did this to such lengths that in nearly all of her family photos, she’s hunched over a sketchbook with her nose deep in her artworks. So to say that Coady is a natural born artist, would be cutting her title short. Now she creates colourful paintings of transformative bodies, atmospheric scenes and meaningful postures – all of which are deep in context and “have a lot of secrets”, or so her mum says of her work.

Born in Baltimore, Coady moved with her mum and brother to Cincinnati, Ohio, so that her grandparents could help raise them following a divorce. A contrast to Baltimore – that’s “extremely conservative and close-minded” – she had a rather homogenous upbringing in this new location, “and always felt like I never fit into my environment.” So much so that she knew she needed to expand her horizons and move elsewhere. “It’s unbelievable the amount of ridicule people faced for being even just a little different. If you were a single parent, adopted, gay, anything other than some psychotic norm of the community, you were an outsider.” Art, in this sense, was Coady’s release and form of escapism. Then, after leaving Ohio for college in Philadelphia, her mum relocated back to Baltimore and her family has been there ever since. “My childhood in Ohio can feel

like a disorienting dreams since I have no connection to Cincinnati whatsoever now. And while it could be a really ugly place, I am grateful that living there allowed me to understand that I had the power to create my own community, to choose what kind of life I want to live, and that the standards and expectations of others don't define me."

Of how Coady came to define her artistic style, it comes to no surprise to hear that Picasso has always been a big contender throughout her younger years, alongside Modigliani, Gauguin and Cezanne. Even to this day, she gives a firm nod to the aesthetics of cubism in her works, where warped and slightly disfigured bodies take centre stage amidst detailed, patterned backdrops – things like colourful mosaic windows, pinstriped wallpaper, a busy party or dimly lit bar. "I was especially drawn to their paintings of women, who were clearly their muses, lovers and companions," explains Coady of her influences. "Something felt compelling but also troubling to so wantonly depict their desire of the female body. It felt very one-sided, like there were entire aspects of the narrative being left out, i.e. the woman's experience and perspective. What did these women think, did the end result feel true to how they saw themselves? Did they even recognise themselves so heavily drenched in someone else's desire?"



Coady Brown, *Despite the Divine*, oil on canvas, 60 x 56 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

With these questions in mind, Coady decided to give her own artworks a dose of her own perspective – more specifically adding what it's like to be depicted as a woman and what these experiences are like, "not just put on some sort of pedestal". To put this into context, *Confidante* is one of her most recent paintings that was exhibited in a solo show at Stems Gallery. The image portrays a woman at a bar, her arms resting on the side as she gazes into the eye of the viewer. The backdrop is filled with other bodies who are all out and enjoying their evening, the lights illuminating the setting and hinting to the fact there might be music and dancing. The first piece she'd crafted for the show and the last one to finish, it had been sat in her studio for quite some time. "I think because for so long I felt disconnected from the subject matter," she adds. "Like a lot of my paintings, this is a nightlife scene, and since we were so deep in quarantine, it felt like a lifetime since that was any type of norm."

Another piece, *Despite the Divine*, presents two characters in a romantic embrace with one another. A green floral backdrop (a wallpaper of sorts) frames the couple, while artistic emphasis is placed on the subjects, like

their detailed, almost fluorescent striped shirt, the strands of hair, the glossy lips and tidy nails. But the story isn't quite what you might think. The piece is based on a "lamentation scene by a follower of 15th century Flemish painter Quentin Massys," says Coady. "A lamentation scene, which is inherently morbid as it depicts Mary cradling Christ's dead body, it shows a lover's obsession, as the figures desperately cling to one another in this odd embrace."

Going back to what Coady's mum said about her work – that it beholds lots of secrets – it's as if there's some kind of hidden narrative behind every line, shadow, glance and glow. "There is always a sense of something lurking in the shadows," she says. "Rarely is it crystal-clear what is occurring." Perhaps it's Coady's way of understanding the world around her; depicting the scenes and moments of her life and upbringing. Or maybe she's drawing from observation, simply replicating the moments and events of daily life. But even if the message isn't plain to see, it only adds to the allure and charm of it all.

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