



Naudline Pierre, *Love Becomes Her*, 2019, oil on panel, 34 × 48".

## Naudline Pierre

SHULAMIT NAZARIAN

In Naudline Pierre's eight-foot-tall painting *Lest You Fall* (all works 2019), a tangerine-tinged nude drops out of the sky—head first, legs flailing, arms spread wide—into a field of black flames reaching up from below. Four winged creatures (some might call them angels) plunge after her, using their wide crimson, teal, and hickory wings to scoop up her plummeting body. Meanwhile, a dove swoops in to touch her outstretched finger with its beak. Our rescued heroine, who figured at the center of every piece in Pierre's exhibition "For I Am With You Until the End of Time," called to mind a Renaissance martyr or the limp, nude Christ of Deposition scenes but was actually an avatar of the artist herself. In interviews, Pierre has described her painted cosmos as a "personal mythology" and explained, "I'm simply creating a world where I hold the power and get to do whatever I want."

Pierre's aforementioned protagonist is surrounded by ethereal backgrounds, twinkling stars, cartoonish flames, and a coterie of seraphic figures who don't have the usual white faces. The works compelled me to both stitch meaning together via iconographic analysis and linger, in a more material kind of looking, on Pierre's purposely unresolved handling

of paint. Pierre uses oil paint such that it takes on the chalky and sketchy qualities of pastel (indeed, many excellent acrylic-and-pastel drawings also populated the show). Often, the angelic bodies were composed of several wide scrapes of color or were denoted by roughly brushed-in shapes that loosely indicated scales or feathers. Her acidic palette and sublime settings called to mind peers such as Janiva Ellis and Cy Gavin, while her colors and brushwork evoked the so-called bad painting of the late 1970s, which Marcia Tucker famously celebrated for challenging “standards of good taste.” Pierre has a talent for flirting with the conventions of painting, but also for twisting them for her own purposes.

While Pierre’s exhibition invoked certain elements of biblical myths and Renaissance interpretations thereof—fallen angels, dove as Holy Spirit, altarpieces—its narratives could be read as open-ended revisions of the classics. *Lest You Fall*, for example, references a passage from First Corinthians written by the apostle Paul: “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” Paul is urging his readers not to take their salvation for granted, to rest not on their own two feet but on God. The idea of God aside, Pierre’s citation seemed to ultimately concern the meaning of being unequivocally held. I took her biblical invocation, and the four supporting angels that accompanied her stand-in, as a statement about the importance of community, of holding each other and letting ourselves be held. In all of the works on view, Pierre inserted her own icons of ecstasy, revelation, community, intimacy, and tenderness into the imagery of religious painting, conjuring alternate pasts, presents, and futures in which she is both the creator of the scene and its protagonist. Her almost Afrofuturistic reimagining of Renaissance painting foregrounds the power of fashioning a world alternate to our own, one in which the gentle hands of friends facilitate modes of rescue and salvation that are miraculous *and* commonplace.

In his classic 1902 book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the philosopher William James charted a psychological study of “religious feelings and religious impulses.” In his concluding remarks, he wrote, “The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also. . . . In the main [these worlds] keep discrete, [but] the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in.” James suggests that a certain kind of spiritual feeling or miraculous image can help us conceive of alternate universes and modes

of consciousness outside of the ones we inhabit. I'd like to think of Pierre's pictorial world-making as a meeting of two "worlds of consciousness," a place where higher energies and revelations might filter in.

— Ashton Cooper