

BOMB

Agency and Transcendence: Naudline Pierre Interviewed by Amelia Rina

A painter seeks to expand the world's visual library.



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

Ethnic and cultural diversity in Western art history are notoriously limited. For hundreds of years, the paintings, drawings, and sculptures found in museums, galleries, and books were almost exclusively produced by white men. This doesn't mean that exquisite works weren't being made by members of other demographics, but they didn't hold equal status in the broader conversation. Today, however, an increasing number of people from historically marginalized groups are asserting their presence and restructuring the art world's hierarchies. Brooklyn-based Naudline Pierre is one such artist, whose paintings, steeped in religious and art historical references, offer an alternate view of the past, present, and future. Pierre produces lush, emotionally charged vignettes reminiscent of canonical Renaissance paintings, then inserts her alter ego into the scenes typically populated by white bodies. Through these interventions, Pierre both identifies and works to fill the void created by the lack of differing subjects and perspectives.

—Amelia Rina

Amelia Rina

Your paintings are saturated with narrative, but none of them reveal the full story. What inspires your subject matter?

Naudline Pierre

The world I'm creating through these paintings isn't one where a linear narrative makes sense. I'm interested in accessing moments from a place where time doesn't work the way it does in my own reality. I'm constantly aware of the fact that there's always more than the eye can see. There's more to the scenes being revealed to me, outside the borders of the painting, and that's inspiring to me. I'm inspired by the religious iconography of Renaissance painting and sculpture, and by colors that make you feel, personal experiences, and emotions. I'm especially inspired by moments that transcend the everyday. I'm looking for transcendence, always.

AR

Can you elaborate on what you mean by transcendence? That word has such a loaded history, so I'm interested to know more about how you're using it.

NP

Yes, transcendence is a word with a loaded history. I'd like to think that I am creating experiences, for both myself and the viewer, that go beyond the everyday. It's important for me to make images that move away from what I think I know and into a space where I get to experience a different reality. I think that transcendence is inherently spiritual, whether you're encountering something bigger than you or you're encountering yourself.



Naudline Pierre, *Lest You Fall*, 2019, oil on canvas, 96 x 60 inches.

AR

How does your religious background influence your subject matter?

NP

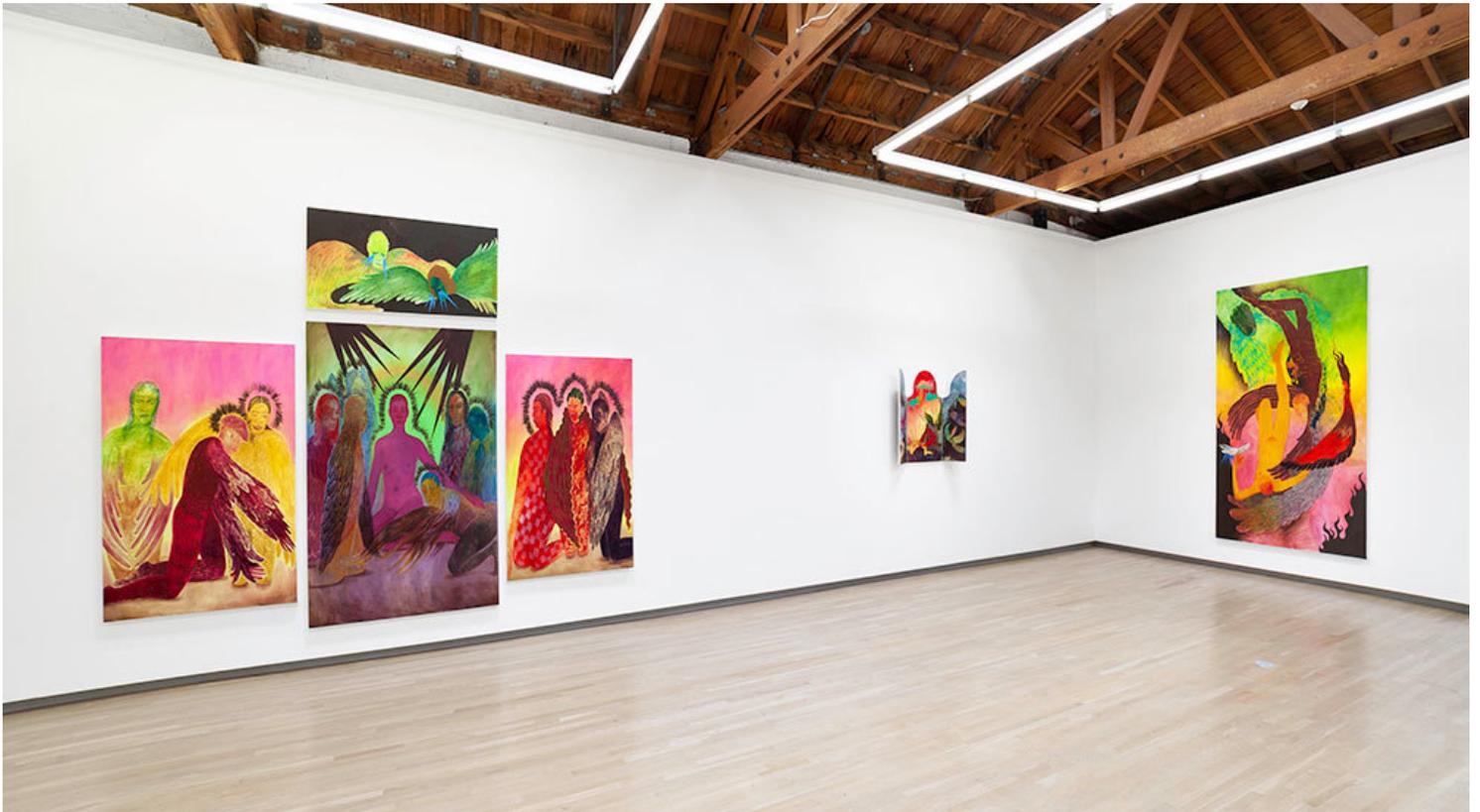
I grew up in a Protestant Christian denomination that had an emphasis on the end of the world. As a child, I spent a lot of time thinking about the apocalypse and imagining what would come after it. A new world. The conversations surrounding life on this present earth made it seem like this existence—this reality—was just a layover. When I was six years old, I thought that by the time I was twelve the earth would be destroyed, and I—if I was righteous enough—would go on to live in a beautiful fantasy world that was beyond my imagination. I think the creation of an alter ego and her surrounding characters living in a slightly unformed, hazy place is part of the residue from that experience.

AR

You've talked before about the lack of diverse representation in Western art history, and how you felt like you couldn't find yourself in classical painting. Can you expand on that?

NP

I've always been drawn to history paintings, paintings of myths, and religious iconography. I can't help what I love. Art history the way that I and most other people have experienced it has been Western and male-dominant. Walking through a museum gallery looking at beautiful paintings that don't at all include someone like me—except in the shadows of an *Adoration of the Magi*-type painting or from a fetishized, voyeuristic viewpoint—is a complicated way to experience art history. To see grand, angelic scenes with subjects that look like me was, and remains, my desire. To create a pedestal and then put someone different on it, using some of the same tools from the very works that I'm influenced by and excluded from, is an exhilarating experience.



Installation view of *Naudline Pierre: For I Am With You Until the End of Time*.
Courtesy of Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.

AR

I love the idea of making pedestals for people or ideas that, historically, haven't been appreciated in that way. Can you give some examples of characters you (metaphorically or literally) put on pedestals in your work?

NP

The alter ego is the one I've chosen to put on a pedestal. She contains multitudes, so even though she is one body she represents so many other things to me. The different altarpiece formats I use in my paintings, like in *Love Becomes Her* (2019), place the alter ego in a material context that acts as a pedestal. Looking at art history, altarpieces were for sacred, holy, and important characters. In *There, There (It Was Foretold)* (2019), she is central to the composition which is based on a variety of Last Supper paintings from the Renaissance. In that way, she is placed on a pedestal both in the content and in the material or painting presentation.

AR

To what degree is the alter ego an index of you and your experience?

NP

Although I use the word alter ego and she sometimes resembles me, I consider her to have an independent existence and thus she is not a self-portrait. I've recently begun explaining my relationship to her as twins who live in different dimensions. We're connected but also separate.

AR

What roles do intimacy and distance play in your work?

NP

Intimacy is everything; it's the cornerstone of the work. There's always an intimate, quiet moment in each of the paintings. I've built up a group of characters and an alter ego who experience life's complexities together, and touch plays a huge part in those experiences. I'm constantly thinking of the distance, or lack thereof, between the characters. They are all very near to each other in compositions that are based around this closeness in an effort to show intimacy.



Naudline Pierre, *There, There (It Was Foretold)*, 2019, oil on canvas, 96 x 156 inches.

AR

How do you enact agency in your work, and how do you think it relates to the work of your peers or predecessors?

NP

I'm enacting agency by making images that I personally want to see. By using references from the past, I take my longing for something new and create exactly that—something new. Having an alter ego who lives in a different world allows me to create moments for her there that I sometimes wish I could have here. It's a powerful feeling.

I realize that I'm inspired heavily by the art of the Renaissance and that I'm pushing against the way Western art history has placed value on certain people over others. It's impossible to change the past, but with my work I can add another voice to the conversation of who's important to history. It's almost like filling in the blanks. I think right now is a great time for art history, with so many other voices filling in the blanks and getting the space to add to the world's visual library.

[Naudine Pierre: For I Am With You Until the End of Time](#) *is on view at Shulamit Nazarian in Los Angeles until October 26.*

Amelia Rina is a writer and editor currently based in Brooklyn, New York.