



Naudline Pierre

Higher Love

Interview by Kristin Farr and portrait by Bryan Derballa

With vibrating color and radiating light, Naudline Pierre renders scenes that converse with art history and continue pushing the door open for representation. Seemingly connected with the past in deep ways, she notes the tricks and tools of the old masters, deftly expressing complex emotions through paint. The support of spiritual beings is prevalent among her figures, and she often functions as her own model, though her paintings are not self-portraits. They represent a dance with her alter-ego and higher dimensions. Raised in a religious family, the work can, indeed, be considered a spiritual meditation on what is most important in the world right now—pure love.

Kristin Farr: What would your paintings sound like if they were audible?

Naudline Pierre: My paintings would sound like [Kelela](#)'s Aquaphoria with a splash of [Pink Floyd](#)'s Any Color You Like, and a dash of organ music wafting through a vaulted wooden ceiling sprinkled with some choral vocalizing.

Sounds glorious. Who are the artists from history that you connect with most?

At the moment, I feel especially connected to [El Greco](#)'s altarpieces and large-scale religious paintings. However, I admire the imagery and I'm not so concerned with the artist.

Which of your many recent shows has felt the most meaningful?

I was recently in the group exhibition, Prisoner of Love, at the [MCA Chicago](#) where my painting, Pass Me Not, shared a corner with [Kerry James Marshall](#)'s Souvenir I. Right next to it! That was a huge moment for me.



The Thrill of Affection, Oil on canvas, 30" x 24", 2018

Do you have plans for your upcoming residency at the [Studio Museum](#)?

I'm so looking forward to it and I'm excited for the culminating show in collaboration with [MoMA PS1](#). It's a dream come true to be part of a program that's shaped so many artists' careers. I do have plans for my time there: I hope to make more altarpieces and expand on some themes I've been exploring. Ultimately, I'm excited to have the room to grow and shift the work in subtle but important ways.

Which materials are you most comfortable with and which do you want to experiment with more?

I absolutely adore oil paint: the texture, the smell, the way it blends, and the history it carries. Also, the way it forces you to wait for it to dry! In an effort to decrease the toxicity of the process, I've pretty much stopped using drying mediums, alkyds, and OMS. It's all

about patience and knowing how different pigments react. I don't know what the future holds, but I think I'll always use oil paint in some way. I do, however, have sculpture and installation on my list of things to try. I have time to get there. For now, I'm loving working with the materials I have. I love using such an old material like oil paint in service of images that are new.

What do you think is the most spiritual color and why?

I think each color carries so much feeling. I've been drawn to violets and magentas for a long time now and most recently became obsessed with a pulsing lime green that I mixed. I don't know if I can say one color is more spiritual than another, but I can say that colors on the warmer side of the spectrum radiate differently to me. They hit me in a unique way.

What stands out or influences you from growing up in a religious family?

So much of my upbringing has shaped my existence and I can't ignore that. I've found a way to create images from the many facets of my upbringing and for that, I'm thankful.

You've said the act of painting is like a prayer, and I agree. Can you say more about that?

There are moments in my painting practice when I focus on a specific thought. I daydream about what I want for my life and for the lives of those I love. I cry and I laugh at memories, too. And I always, always express gratitude. I'm essentially leaving remnants of those thoughts in the paint, in the texture and in the intention of it all.

I feel an interior force guiding me--perhaps it's my intuition combined with the things I've absorbed and experienced. The work is coming from within me, somewhere deep inside the layers. I guess it's part of my DNA.

Have you experienced any miracles lately?

Yes, I have. The miracle of making an image out of what can seem like nothing. An internal moment or idea turns into a painting; and then that painting resonates with someone else! That's a miracle to me.



Deal Kindly and Truly With Me, Oil on canvas, 56" x 52", 2018

What has been your experience explaining spiritual or religious content in a contemporary art context? I use religious iconography as a tool, just like I use paint and color to get at other themes and experiences. The work isn't necessarily a commentary on religion, but an expression of the complexities of existence while examining my relationship to Western art history. I'm seeking to create images that include me, a Black woman and a person of Haitian descent, containing a vast history within her. The images that I'm making aren't here to replace the ones that they're influenced by. I can't erase what happened before. I want to be included in the conversation. How do I love this imagery from the past when it doesn't love me back? By making my own.

What are the most memorable comments about your work? Any misinterpretations out there?

Some people have told me that the paintings move them to feel things that are beyond words. That's really special to me.

I think the misinterpretations come from people who don't want to look deeper. My identity as a person of Haitian descent is the first place some people stop when engaging with the work. They may feel like they've solved a mystery and file the work under occult, primitive, and voodoo. That perplexes me because that's a very limited way of looking at what I'm doing. I'm not usually that concerned with what people are gathering from the work, except for when they attempt to put the work into a restrictive box. So, yes, there are misinterpretations. I'd like to be allowed to live in the truth of my multiplicity and to hold space in the conversations I choose to participate in.

How do you feel when you are in the best headspace for painting? I feel an urgency. Like, I'm going to explode if I don't make this image.

Can you see people's auras?

No, I can't see people's auras. However, I do have aura photos taken with my dear friend Austin at the beginning of each year. No matter where we are, we meet up in NYC to take those photos within the first weeks of January. It's a cute tradition that I cherish.

Is there a thread or story you're working towards for your September solo show?

The title of the show is For I Am With You Until the End of Time. I was thinking about love when prepping for the show because, frankly, when am I not thinking about love? I was thinking about love between friends, love between family, love between lovers, and love for oneself. I was thinking about loving someone so much that it leads you to your demise. I was thinking about all the things that are done in the name of love, both positive and negative. I was thinking of all that comes with that word: warmth, protection, trust, but also betrayal, loss, and sacrifice. I was thinking about unconditional love. I was thinking about everlasting love. I was processing all this through the lens of renaissance painting and the ways it portrays some major Western art historical and, ultimately, Christian themes.

Do you have a non-linear sense of time or think about time in abstract, compressed ways as you mine history and communicate with it?

My sense of time, as it relates to the narrative within the paintings, is very non-linear. I take and use what I see fit, when I see fit. I mine history in a way that makes sense to me. I'm less worried about following a neat timeline and more concerned with creating the images that I want to see.



A Light in the Dark, Oil on canvas, 48" x 38", 2018

What do you think the "shadow self" expresses that the outward self cannot?

In my experience, the shadow self has space to be free in ways that the outward self may not. The shadow self is able to be confrontational and wrathful when the outward self cannot. She can be vulnerable and soft when the outward self cannot. There's a lack of self-consciousness that the shadow self possesses that is really lovely to watch.

Do you find painting your own image to be helpful in getting to know yourself better, and, if so, in what ways?

Painting this alter-ego has helped me understand myself. However, I don't see her as being a self portrait. She's existing in another world and she lets me in to make these paintings. I'm growing with her. She's been teaching me about the strength and resilience found in being vulnerable. She's been teaching me about love.

The style of your figures varies in interesting ways. Do you always paint spirits and humans differently?

I do paint the alter-ego differently than the other characters in the paintings. She is almost always completely opaque and fully formed, while the accompanying figures are more loosely rendered with wings for limbs and textured skin. I like that I can experiment with different patterns when articulating the other characters.

My color and texture decisions are intuitive, but I'm able to step back and look at things critically in order to arrive at something I like. Colors react to each other in such intricate ways. I can be fully immersed in the intuitive nature of the process, and then I can ask myself, "What's missing? Does this green need to get warmer? Do I need marigold next to this blue-violet?"

Supporting, embracing, carrying and holding are actions you often portray. Why is that, and what else is most constant in your work?

Touch is a very large part of the non-linear narrative that I explore. A part of me revisits these actions because painting this other entity being held can sometimes feel like I'm being held too. It's hard to explain, but it's a special feeling.

The most constant element of my work is the alter-ego I've created. She is important. She is at the core of the images. She's on a pedestal that historically wasn't built for her. I'm following her story and she's giving me access bit by bit. I trust her and she trusts me.

Are you the muse?

I am the vessel.

Naudline Pierre's solo show opens September 7, 2019 at [Shulamit Nazarian](#) in Los Angeles.