

# BORDERCROSSINGS

## PAINTING



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# The Art of Painting

## Fifty Ways to Weave Your Story



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## Ekene Emeka-Maduka Azadeh Elmizadeh Laura Lewis

Interviews by Robert Enright

1. Ekene Emeka-Maduka, *After hours*, 2019, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist.

2. Azadeh Elmizadeh, *Hunt*, 2023, oil on linen, 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy the artist and Franz Kaka, Toronto. Photo: LF Documentation.

3. Laura Lewis, *Embrace*, 2022, oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Laura Lewis.

To say that painting is complicated is as true and useless as saying that life is difficult. It takes you nowhere. You can go somewhere, though, in saying what it is that a painter sets out to do through their chosen medium. These three young painters have some things in common: they are all women, they all are in the early stages of their careers, and they all have an interest in using painting to represent individual perspectives and to tell particular stories. I don't mean to say that any of them is strictly a narrative painter, but each does use the circumstances of their experience to shape the content and meaning of their work. A story, invariably, emerges from what they do in their studio.

Ekene Emeka-Maduka was born in Nigeria and emigrated to Winnipeg, where she completed her Honours BFA at the School of Art at the University of Manitoba in 2020. She has participated in eight group exhibitions in London (UK), New York, Los Angeles and Winnipeg, as well as solo exhibitions at the Fabienne Levy Gallery in Lausanne (2022), the DADA Gallery in London, UK (2020), the Mirror Mirror Gallery in Toronto (2020) and La Maison des artistes visuels francophones in St Boniface, Manitoba (2019). In August she is part of the STAGES biennial presented by Plug In ICA in Winnipeg; in October she will be included in a group exhibition in Lagos curated by Faridah Folawiyo; and in November she will show at UTA Artist Space in Los Angeles in collaboration with ADA Contemporary Gallery. She is represented by the Fabienne Levy Gallery in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Azadeh Elmizadeh was born in Iran, where she received a BFA in communications and design from the University of Tehran. At 23 she emigrated to Toronto, studied painting and drawing at OCAD University, graduating with a BFA in 2016, and was awarded her MFA from the University of Guelph in 2020, the same year she won the Plaskett Award. She then spent some time in Berlin, travelled to European museums and now lives in Toronto. She has had five one- and two-person exhibitions in Milan, Los Angeles, Toronto and Lethbridge, and has been included in 10 group exhibitions in New York, London (UK) and Canada. In October she will have a solo presentation at Frieze London, as well as two-person exhibitions at Tube Culture Hall in Milan and Sea View in Los Angeles in September, and is part of a group show in November at Anat Ebgi in LA. She is represented by the Franz Kaka Gallery in Toronto.

Laura Lewis was born in Kijipuktuk (Halifax, Nova Scotia) and has lived in Los Angeles and Montreal. She moved to Winnipeg in Treaty 1 Territory, where she now lives and paints. In 2018 she graduated with a combined Honours BFA from the School of Art at the University of Manitoba and NSCAD University. She has been awarded grants from the Canada Council, the Manitoba Arts Council and the Winnipeg Arts Council. She is the founder and facilitator for the Critical Painting Perspectives reading group at MAWA (Mentoring Artists for Women's Art) and teaches art classes at the Rainbow Resource Centre and the Winnipeg Art Gallery. She has been included in six solo and group exhibitions since 2019 and has an upcoming solo show in May 2024 at Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre in Kingston, Ontario, as well as a group exhibition with the Winnipeg Pantsuit Collective at aceartinc in late 2024.

Ekene Emeka-Maduka was interviewed on June 8 in her Winnipeg studio apartment; Azadeh Elmizadeh, by phone to Toronto on June 29; and Laura Lewis, on May 9 in her Winnipeg studio.

# Performing the Visual Self

## An interview with Ekene Emeka-Maduka



**BORDER CROSSINGS:** Tell me about growing up in Nigeria.

**EKENE EMEKA-MADUKA:** My dad is Anglican, my mom is Catholic and I went to a Catholic boarding school. The school in Kano was called the St Louis Secondary School. I like to take a real concept or something I've seen before and make up a different world, almost like world building. It's like dreaming. I feel that dreams have this tricky way of borrowing our reality and skewing it a bit, so you feel, "I know what this is," but it doesn't exist. For one body of work I made up this imaginary school called St Agnes that was similar to St Louis, but I composed things in a way that was a bit off. I like to have things looking a little bit uncanny.

**Did you draw and paint as a child?**

All the time. We would make our own toys, as well. My two sisters and I did it together. That's probably why we can't ride bicycles; we were busy indoors, painting and drawing. We went to a nursery school run by two British ladies, and they would make us paint and draw, constantly. My mom liked that we made little Christmas trees out of cardboard toilet paper tubes.

**Becoming interested in the arts, with a mother who is an interior designer and a father who is an architect, was almost inescapable for you and your sisters.**

It was inevitable. I think that's why all of us ended up here. I had no desire to study math in school. All I was waiting for was to be done with my secondary school so I could do art.

**The "here" you mention is, of course, Winnipeg, where you live with your two sisters. How did the three of you end up here?**

I know that Mercedes was passionate about going to Emily Carr, but the architecture program for undergrads at the University of Manitoba was advertised as being good and Akum wanted to study architecture. My mom was like, "You all have to be in the same place. I'm not having you in different places." Both my sisters applied to come here, they got in, but then they chose to go to Egypt. They decided to go to the American University because it was close to home, but then there was an uprising and war broke out, so they called the University of Manitoba where they had applied, and said, "Can we still get our admission here?" Since they came here, I had no choice. Akum was studying architecture, and Mercedes applied to the School of Art.

**Since we're dealing with family, let's talk about the "Family Portrait Series" that you painted in 2019. There are five of them, right?**

Yes. I was thinking about how we see members of our family. Because they're in such close proximity, we feel we know them. But when we think about it, we realize there's lots we don't know. There are things I still learn about my mom or my dad years later and it's often surprising. You're always learning and you see them in a different light. I was fascinated by our tendency to want to reduce people's complexity. What I did for the series was I got my friend to take multiple shots of me. I just sat down without much planning and said, "Okay. Just take a bunch of pictures." I made a simple expression that I thought represented each member of my family.

1. Ekene Emeka-Maduka, *Sowing Seeds: Chinedum's itchy yellow lace dress*, 2023, oil on canvas, 36 x 72 inches. All images courtesy the artist.

2. Ekene Emeka-Maduka, *Ekene as Father*, 2019, oil on birchwood, 15-inch diameter.

3. *Ekene as Mom*, 2019, oil on birchwood, 15-inch diameter.

4. *Ekene as Ekene with Tyler*, 2019, oil on birchwood, 15-inch diameter.

5. *Ekene as Akum*, 2019, oil on birchwood, 15-inch diameter.

6. *Ekene as Mercedes*, 2019, oil on birchwood, 15-inch diameter.



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**You paint yourself as each of your family members, including one of yourself. You were performing your family? Exactly.**

**What mood were you after in your father's portrait?**

The first expression is that he's very stern, but he's also very funny. But you wouldn't know that unless you went to dinner with him. He's a chief in our village and he had sent me this one picture where he is wearing a ceremonial hat, and I really liked the hat and the feathers. I thought it would come across nicely in a painting, so I decided to include it. The backdrop looks like the kind of studio where families would go to have family photos taken. I reference these moments and feel like it's a way of looking back, in a strange way, as I'm going forward. That was why I dressed my mom up in a specific sort of regalia. On Sunday, or if they were going to a wedding or a really big party, you would see a lot of Nigerian women dressed like that. I feel Akum is very mysterious when you first meet her. You almost can't read her immediately and her personality unfolds. She's quiet, too, so I wanted to keep it simple and have almost no gestures. Mercedes is our little fashionista, so I put her in colours and earrings. I think I'm the most mischievous and dramatic one in the house and I share my self-portrait with Tyler. He's the one dog we still have. There was a time when we had 14 dogs and it was crazy fun with them all running around the yard. My mom always sends pictures of Tyler to show me what he's doing. After I'd made the family paintings, I showed them to her. I said, "This is what I did, and this is how I represented you all. Guess who's who." She guessed everything right. It made me realize that we see ourselves in a very similar way.

**The "Family Portraits" are all oil on birchwood and are 15 inches in diameter. What made you decide to use the tondo form?**

I really like this circular shape. If you look at family paintings from the 16th century, they would have these oval shapes but less circular than mine. I play with time, and you can't really tell what time frame these are from. When you see the Chanel earrings Mercedes is wearing, you get a clue that it could be far back, but you don't know how far back. I like to borrow that sort of language and infuse it into my work. When I was thinking of doing a family portrait series, I thought it would look nice if you were to hang them up on a wall as opposed to doing one big portrait.



**Would you go back to the family and do another set?**

I would, but instead of painting them as me, I might just paint them as they are.

**Are you making self-portraits where you present yourself in different moods?**

Absolutely. Before I start drawing, I take lots of pictures of myself. I take them in this space and they're not really good photographs. I take random studies, or I look online for a lot of references, so that I'm basing my things on reality.

**Is there always a performative side to what you're doing?**

It's very performative. Sometimes I embody a character I'm not really familiar with, so I have to ask myself, "What would I feel if I were in this moment? How would my face look if I was frightened?" I have to channel those sorts of feelings. There's a lot of psychological play.

**When you use yourself as a model, I wonder if you see yourself as not just you but you as a**

1. Ekene Emeka-Maduka, *After hours*, 2019, oil on canvas, 36 × 48 inches.

2. Ekene Emeka-Maduka, *Chaos turns placid before the bell rings*, 2020, oil on canvas, 36 × 48 inches.

3. Ekene Emeka-Maduka, *Day 65 to Visiting Day*, 2020, oil on canvas, 36 × 24 inches.



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surrogate for the Black woman, and that your representation is meant to be much broader than your physical embodiment. The Kenyan American artist Wangechi Mutu was trying to create a language for the Black female body. Are you involved in something of the same kind of project?

I think so, but not exactly in that way. My realization that I'm a Black person came to me only by virtue of moving here. In Nigeria everyone is mostly Black. We all look the same. If anything, the tension is more between tribes, like the Hausas and the Igbos. This is why the colonial project was insane, because you had all these tribes in different villages and different cultures that were trading together, but they were their own kingdoms. When you reduce the complexity of a people and say, "You're all the pawns on the chessboard, and we're going to bring you together," you have to deal with the aftermath of people not getting along. I never thought of myself as being Black. I was just a person living in Nigeria, eating Nigerian food. There was nothing to it other than what it was. Then, coming here, I had this recognition: "We're all Black." This was a new feeling. What I aim to do with my work is represent the things that I feel in the face of certain human conditions. Because I've lived in Nigeria for significant portions of my life and my orientation and way of identifying is firstly Nigerian, there is a lot of symbolism and semiotics that are personal to a Nigerian sensibility. I spend time sourcing references from multiple origins outside my limited vocabulary to enrich and expand the concepts I represent. In my perspective, however, the finished product does not fully embody the complexity of being a woman, Nigerian, or belonging to a specific race or social class. It is more an entry point to investigate what some of these concepts comprise collectively or personally. I do feel like the subjects of my work are vessels for things. In my solo show in Switzerland, I had time to think about what I wanted to do, and when my aunt passed away, I changed what I was doing midpoint. It was during COVID and we couldn't go back to see her. She was one of the last people I saw before I came to Winnipeg. There's something to say about being present and not present when a particular event happens. All you have to go on is your memory and what you make up in your head. My aunt feels very real. In my mind she's still going to the market and to work. When I speak to her daughters, they talk about her in the past tense and I can't make sense of that. A painting like *Grief Circle* (2022) embodies what I was feeling because every day of mourning was different. My work channels those kinds of sentiments.



1. Ekene Emeka-Maduka, *Morning Assembly*, 2020, oil on canvas, 60 × 60 inches.

2. Ekene Emeka-Maduka, *Last Supper*, 2020, oil on canvas, 60 × 96 inches.

**What has been the influence of Western religion in Nigeria?** Religion has had a big influence. I did catechism and was confirmed. We would say the rosary every night at school. You can see evidence of Catholic symbolism in *Lamb among a homogenous choir* (2023), a painting with a lamb. I grew up in Kano state, which is northern and predominantly Muslim, and then I went to a Catholic school. There were Muslim girls in the school and as children we would pray together; I could say all the Muslim prayers and they would say some of the Christian prayers. In a place like Nigeria with heavy religious and tribal tensions, it was interesting how those two things could exist. In an adolescent school setting, these differences were not always in the forefront because, to children, finding a trusted playmate wins over politics. That doubleness was evident in other ways as well. There is widespread traditional practice in villages and you have a lot of churches, especially Catholic ones in the East. In my village, Ngene, if you go to the little grocery stores, the brand name of the local bread is likely Mother Mary Bread. Those two worlds—the religious and the traditional—are

in conversation and, as a result, history is visible. You can see remnants of time and these are points of knowing. That's why I like to explore time. I'm able to see shadows of the past in a contemporary setting. It never fully changes. For Nigerians, the concept of religion is everything, yet still remains separate from our day-to-day being. There's so much nuance in the way that we think. Your life isn't only centred on religion and tribe, yet it appears to be mostly ruled by it. My tribe is Igbo, but I grew up in the North and identified as a Hausa person. The Hausas are predominantly Muslim. As a child you're picking up everything and assimilating as you're growing up. I like the ignorant innocence of childhood, and I approach a lot of my work from that childlike entry point. I like not-knowing but wanting genuinely to know and being naïve enough to ask questions. An adult wouldn't ask the questions a kid would ask. I find this curiosity so interesting.

**In your first year in the School of Art, you thought graphic design was going to be your major.**





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Yes. I always knew I wanted to paint, but I didn't want to paint formally. I wanted to find my language in painting and explore what painting meant. I felt certain things would make me a better painter, so I started with graphic design and I did some animation. The good thing with the School of Art program is you could dabble in a bunch of things. I liked art history, so I took a number of art history classes. Then I took small-format painting. We made these tiny paintings and there was something captivating about seeing something so small on a big wall. I used acrylic in that class, and I immediately decided I wasn't going to work with it long-term. All I said to myself was, "I hope oil works out, or that's it." Then I took a class to see what oil could do, and I loved it. That was all I needed. I decided not to take any more classes and to paint on the side. At the time, I found Chloe Wise, who's also from Canada. She was making portraits and I was interested in portraiture. She was doing video; she was dynamic and she had a bit of satire in her work. In one class the assignment was to make our own version of an artist's work and I chose her. She has a painting of a hand holding a tomato soup can, which I blew up into a 3 x 4-foot painting, and then painted myself holding the soup can. The School of Art wasn't too structured, so you could experiment and find your own language. I was doing photography and performance, and I felt those things were feeding my painting. Now the performance comes in when I take pictures. For the *Last Supper* (2020), all those figures at the table identify a person. I had to channel what I was thinking about them in the painting. I based what I was doing on what I'd seen and what I'd researched. It was problematic, but I liked the duality. I even performed as Muhammadu Buhari, the president of Nigeria at the time.

**Is he at the centre of the composition, in the place of Christ?**  
Actually, that was a colonial master. I had done a performance where I actually dressed up as a colonial figure and I ate over 50 pancakes. But it was interesting to work with the body in that way. Later, when I had to make that painting, I channelled that same persona.

**The paintings come out of personal memory, but who else are you making the paintings for? Who's your intended audience and what is its emotional register inside that intention?**

I like to start with my memory and how I experience things. For the show I had in London, I wanted to make a body of work that spoke about the boarding school that I went to because I never fully unpacked that whole experience. There were so many strange things about it. In Kano, it gets really cold during the season called Harmattan, and you get up at 5:00 a.m. to shower in cold water, and you're saying all these prayers. It was such a rich experience that I couldn't make sense of it. You don't make any sense of it, because you're just living in that reality as a kid. So many kids in Nigeria had gone to schools like this. It was such a common thing, but nobody talked about it. We would have Irish Sisters who would come to the school and when they visited, we had to make paintings for them. At my first opportunity, I said, "Why don't I think about that experience?" Even if I don't know exactly what it means. Those were foundational experiences, so why not take little moments from those happenings and highlight them? I thought it was important to show the work in England because our schools were modelled after the British ones. But some parts of Nigeria are frozen in time. A lot of the things that they don't do in England, they're



still doing in schools in Nigeria. You have corporal punishment and bizarre rules, like if you're caught speaking in vernacular, which is in a language other than English, you have to pay a fine. But then you wonder, "Why is it vernacular? I'm in Nigeria. This shouldn't be vernacular. This should just be the language." I thought, this is the perfect time and place to build that conversation. So I made up the name of the school, which I called St Agnes, because they are always named after a saint. Then I modelled the uniforms on my school uniform, and I did the same thing for the design of the school crest. Everything was made up. It was a total fiction. In a way, it was like writing. In this fictional story, people could relate to what they saw because it was borrowed from my experience. In *Day 65 to Visiting Day* (2020), I painted the day when your parents could come and give you provisions. There was a list of stuff they could bring, which included Oxford brand Cabin Biscuits, which were acceptable because they weren't too sweet. This was real, but we relate to it in a different way when taken into the context of

art. It becomes satirical. The meaning the objects took on when I froze them in time was particularly interesting. In one of my videos, I had myself eating these biscuits. I like to bring these references back again and again.

**In a painting like *Morning Assembly* (2020), you go back to those memories. Is that process one where you begin to understand yourself better? In a sense these are instructions about or interrogations of your own life.**

I think so. That's why I say you have to face your own bias by performing. Then I ask myself, "Why am I painting this?" or, "Why am I representing this in this way?" It says something about the way I've internalized the meaning of the experience. In some way, I'm also the viewer; I'm the audience for the paintings. I have to keep thinking about it. I still have *Morning Assembly* and I'll never give it away. It's another one, like the "Family Portraits," that I've decided to keep. It was my first experiment with exposing the canvas and after it I started



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1. Ekene Emeka-Maduka, *Grief Circle*, 2022, oil on canvas, 30-inch diameter.

2. Ekene Emeka-Maduka, *Kpa! Mama Delivers Sunday Best*, 2023, oil on canvas, 36 × 48 inches.

making the body of work that I showed in London. There was so much experimentation happening. I don't know what it means, but I think it's unfinished in some way.

**Like your memories, it's not fixed.**

Exactly. I liked that it was a mysterious painting. Actually, one day I was here, I'd had a really bad day, I don't know what it was, but they moved me and so I said, "I'm not giving this away."

**There are 12 students and maybe a 13th whom you don't entirely see.**

I wanted it to imply there were people outside the frame that we can't see. Every morning in school, you'd have these assembly lines. Another thing I was interested in was playing with the perspective. When you install the painting above eye level, it totally shifts the meaning. They have this different presence that almost takes over the viewer.

**The figures look like they're carrying a history.**

That's interesting because they're based on my image. I wonder how the work will change over time as I age. When I decided to go into self-portraiture,

using my image as the subject, finding that out was one of the things that made me want to do it. I was interested in how these subjects would grow with me and take up my appearance. Sometimes I intentionally age them or make them look younger or childlike. It's interesting to see how I'm growing with the images.

**You describe yourself as a storyteller, so is one of your aims to articulate a kind of invented narrative of memory?**

Absolutely. I explore different topics, different things and different subjects. I see the "Boarding School Series" as one story from my experience. In some way, they talk about bigger themes in life, about all the different things you're internalizing. Then you take bits of that and tell a story about one thing. It's amazing the kind of conversation that can come out of telling just this one story.

# The Translation of Painting

An interview with Azadeh Elmizadeh



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**BORDER CROSSINGS: How old were you when you came to Canada?**

AZADEH ELMIZADEH: I was 23. In Tehran I did a degree in graphic design. I was interested in art, but we didn't have any artists in our family history. At the time I made the decision, I wasn't entirely sure myself if I could make it. But I loved painting and the materiality of paint. I ended up doing graphic design, and it turned out I didn't have much talent at being a designer. Eventually, I got better, but I was at the bottom of my class for the first two courses. I realized that design requires a very different kind of thinking from what I use in my studio practice. There, everything is open. There are loose ends and ambiguity and you don't quite know why this thing you're looking at has so much resonance. The whole process of making becomes one of exploration and excavation without arriving at any resolution, which is quite different from design. So I used the move from Tehran to pivot entirely into art. I enrolled in drawing and painting at OCAD and educated myself in Western contemporary art.

**You use narrative in fascinating ways. Was story part of growing up in Iran?**

I have this memory of my mother reading stories to my brother and me. It wasn't sophisticated reading but tangible and accessible. Story was always there, but for a long time I resisted making work with any cultural connotations.

**Why was that?**

I wanted to make something that was universal. I think it had something to do with premodern conceptions of difference and the notion that culture exists as an unchanging, homogeneous

entity. I hold multiple senses of belonging all at the same time, and the mark of every place I've been is still very much inside me. As a whole being, you bring all those influences into the studio with you. I don't know why I thought that I would find a way to escape that. But it failed. I wasn't happy with whatever I was making, and I realized I had to deal with what I was trying to avoid. You want to work with something that has some weight of meaning and you hope to translate that into a form of care, a care that could be felt by the viewer as well. I found that connection in language.

**Which language? Farsi or English?**

I have to say it's Farsi. I'm not sure first-generation immigrants ever pass the stage where they don't translate while they're talking. For me, the barrier remains. I think in Farsi and end up writing in English. The connection is there on a regular daily basis.

**So your life is a process of constant translation?**

Yes. I often think about my work in relation to the existing gap in translation. The paintings feel like translations that have gone wrong, where miscommunication becomes a generative space to arrive at new and multiple readings.

**Were *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings* and *One Thousand and One Nights* part of your education?**

I was familiar with fragments of these tales throughout my upbringing. As my interest grew, I decided to delve deeper in terms of research and explore the connection between these mythological characters and motifs that have travelled from pre-Islamic texts to more modern takes on *Shahnameh* by the 10th-century poet Abul-Qâsem Ferdowsi. Tracing the role of these characters through generations, and the way they have mutated as a response to changes in society, is fascinating. They've never disappeared. In my last solo show at Franz Kaka called "Sister Seeds" (2022), what became meaningful to me was the way the two sisters stood for the continuity of the feminine soul throughout time.

**I'm interested in the influence that Sufic thinking has had on you. My reading of Sufism is that in temporal and spatial terms it represents a condition of constant becoming. The obvious place to go, then, is to wonder how that philosophy of thinking about time and space aestheticizes itself in the work.**

I think it's the making in the studio that puts you in a condition of becoming. There are aspects about Sufic thinking that resonated with what I was doing three years ago when I was researching the

1. Azadeh Elmizadeh, *Hunt*, 2023, oil on linen, 48 x 60 inches. All images courtesy the artist and Franz Kaka, Toronto. Photo: LF Documentation.

2. Azadeh Elmizadeh, installation view, "Sister Seeds," 2022, Franz Kaka, Toronto.



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1. Azadeh Elmizadeh, *Blizzard*, 2022, oil on linen, 12 × 16 inches.

2. Azadeh Elmizadeh, *AzhiDahak and the Cow*, 2022, oil on linen, 52 × 72 inches.

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underlying philosophical and theological ideas that are infused in Persian miniature painting's mode of representation. Now I'm trying to distance myself from its religious context. When I look at the work I'm doing now, I think about "becoming" in relation to the physical presence of making work in the studio. There exists a dialogue between what you have in your mind, the image in your imagination, and how you're hunting for it while painting. You initiate that dialogue, and it changes constantly; it changes you and it changes the painting. You "become" together in a very intense presence in the moment.

Does the Sufic notion of becoming determine why so many of your works are about a journey, a voyage, a transitional

**moment in moving not just from one place to another but from one state to another?**

Thank you for the articulate way that you put it. What has drawn me to the allegorical narratives of voyage in Sufic literature and poetry is an open-ended dimension that allows interpretation to occur at a personal level. Making the paintings brings you to linger on transitional moments of moving, too. While I am in the studio, the experience of time is ecstatic and joyful. As a painter, that's a very sweet spot to be in. It's not always like that. But once you achieve it, once you're there, it's very productive.

Are you naturally predisposed towards the threshold and the liminal?



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Moving from one place to another, speaking in-between languages and being in two different places at the same time are a condition of liminality. I can't quite confidently say that it's a diasporic condition. But knowing my own experience and that of friends and family makes me able to draw the conclusion that being in a state of mental and physical movement is a liminal state that has meaning besides living as an immigrant in diaspora. The image projected onto the imagination appears and disappears in a liminal space, too. There's no way that you can hunt it or hold it down. It's flickering and dynamic. Dealing with that also puts you in a space of uncertainty, where you can't quite be sure if it's there, or if it's not, or where you can draw the line. My solution for that is to make peace with non-resolution.

**You've been resistant to the idea of fixed categories, so in your hybridizing of East and West, your interest has been to find the interstices between them. You talk about Helen Frankenthaler, Pierre Bonnard and Paul Klee and you also talk about Persian miniature painting. Was your way of fitting into an aesthetic world a strategy of resistance to simple categories?**

That's a fair way to put it. To me, painting has become a space of convergence for multiple histories and temporalities rather than division, where I simply have the chance to bypass reductive categorization. It allows for the creation of an aesthetic world that is delimited with shifting and dissolving boundaries. I hope my work suspends the enforced fictive binaries of the East and the West, while at the same time it turns into a form of expression

for the sense of belonging residing in the symbolic universe of language and rituals.

**You have a body of work called “In Between” (2022) and the painting *Spherical Waves* (2022) takes the fluidity of the wave and turns it into a form. Fluidity seems to be more formative in your sensibility of making than does fixity.**

It’s all about fluidity, really. It’s in the use of colours, the way the paintings are constructed, the way they go through stages of transformation over long periods of time and the way they never really arrive at resolution. Whenever I start a new body of work, I think, well, this one is going to be as cohesive as possible, but it never ends up like that. There are always loose ends and paintings that lead to other bodies of work. Allowing those things you can control to leak out eventually gives form to newer bodies of work and a new voice to the work.

**In 2022 you made a lot of paintings.**

Yes, 2022 was a productive year for me. I found a great work flow.

**The exhibition “Sister Seeds” is interesting because it includes a pair of paintings of water and soil, there’s a painting called *Embryo*, another called *Mother (Oracle)*. These are the components of world-making, and all the elements you need are there. Were you reflecting an existing story, or were you making your own story?**

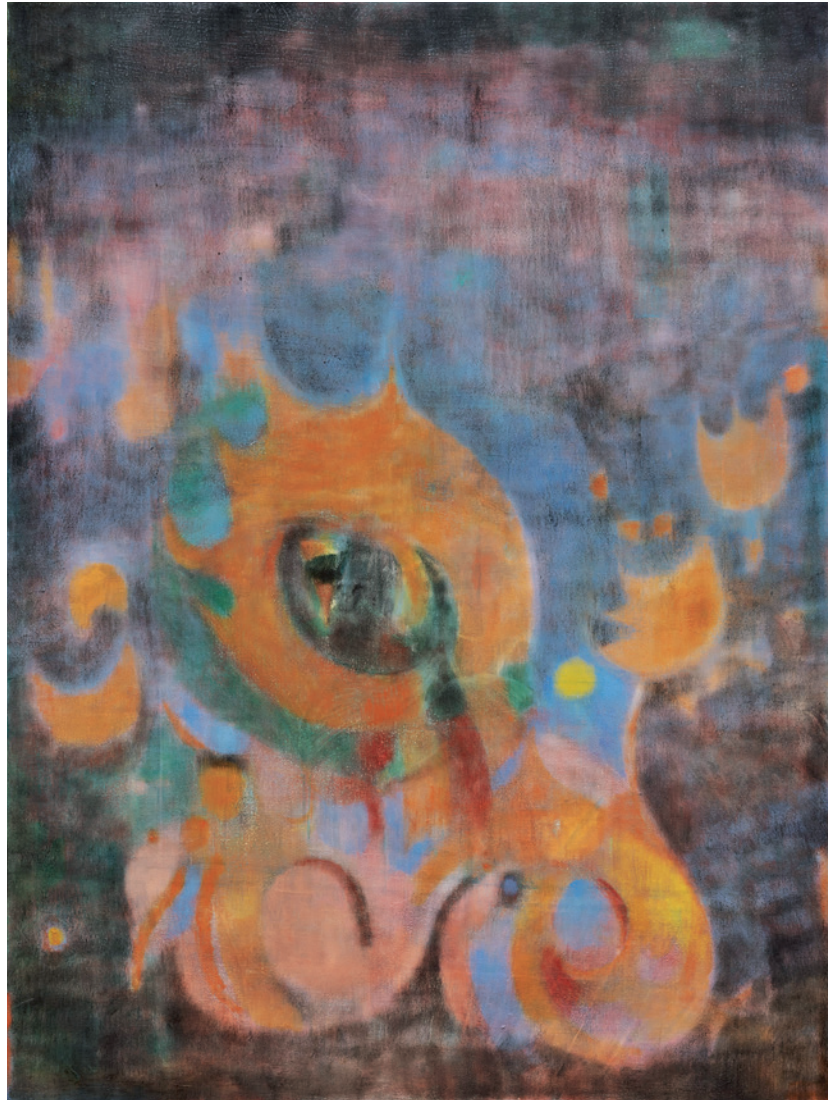
I’m not sure if I was successful in creating a story of my own, if that’s what you mean. But the desire to create one is the first impetus to excavate a distant history. That’s a long process and it’s something that will probably take a couple of more years before I get there.

**You say you’ll always have a studio practice because you never properly finish any painting, so you have to go on to do something else. You’re still looking for the finished painting. You seem to have made peace with that as both methodology and philosophy. So you don’t resist it anymore?**

No, I don’t resist it. It’s the hope that keeps you going. You think, well, with the next one, I’m going to be able to achieve it. But the more you paint, the more difficult it becomes to get to that point. Operating within that philosophy of work, I continuously want to get back and want to do it again and again and again. And perhaps I never get there.

**So it’s generative?**

I think it’s generative. How can I say? It’s this obstacle that I can work against. By the time I start the new work or the new body of work, it’s



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gone. The initiative of wanting to get there and then the making of the new voice urges you into a new direction. You explore things that you haven’t explored before, and things happen that are not predetermined. Making the work in the studio, for me, is what keeps it alive.

**Is a salamander bird a mad mix of a species?**

The salamander bird was based on a story from *The Book of Surprises*, a book produced in the Jalayirid Sultanate at the end of the 14th century. It’s a tale similar to the phoenix. But instead of one bird, there are multiple birds living within this mountain of fire and the salamander is known to be the reptile that survives fire.

**You also have a painting called *Blossoming in the Fire* (2022). You take what we think of as a destructive element and turn it into a condition of growth and beauty.**

I see fire as a paradoxical signifier. It could be destructive, but it’s also illuminating. In *Blossoming*

1. Azadeh Elmizadeh, *Embryo*, 2022, oil on linen, 35 × 48 inches.

2. Azadeh Elmizadeh, *Mother (Oracle)*, 2022, oil on linen, 42 × 60 inches.





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*in the Fire*, I was thinking about certain seeds that germinate only when they go through a fire. In this work fire became a portal to the creation of new forms and beginnings.

Fire obviously brings up a particular colour. You've also used a nocturnal palette and underwater colours as well. Do colours mean specific things to you?

Colours signify certain moods for me. It's a bit cheesy, but what draws me to certain colours is an emotional reaction.

**How do you make a painting?**

The making is non-linear. The surface is primed with gesso and I just grind into the surface. That creates a very interesting texture that would give you the palimpsest of what was happening underneath.



Azadeh Elmizadeh, *Fall*, 2023, oil on linen, 48 × 60 inches.

But linen doesn't allow that type of removal. It's very delicate. So it's just removing with a piece of cloth and a little bit of solvent, and sometimes covering the parts that I want to remove. I cover them with white, let them dry, and then I go into it and add from there. It's a constant editing of the image. After the first layer, the whole process of painting becomes adding, removing, adding, removing. Then what I described as an experience you haven't experienced before, suddenly happens. I have learned to get there through this process of adding and removing. I'm not saying this is the only way to do it, but I think artists work with their limitations, too. The way we learn to deal with material and to be comfortable working with material dictates our way of thinking and making in the studio.

**You move from a 12 x 16-inch painting to one that is 72 x 50 inches. What determines how large you want to make the painting as opposed to how intimate you want to make it?**

Both these quite contrasting scales are created with intimacy. I make the larger works on the ground, so I have a very close proximity to the surface and I maintain that proximity with a brush that is relatively small. I don't know why, but I think it has to do with what happens when you're working on a large painting at that close distance. There are moments when you see only patches of colour. It empties your mind. You're looking at these waves of colour coming through one another. You don't quite know whether it is blue on top of red or red on top of red, or where the yellow is coming from. And that long period of looking brings in the present moment in a really interesting way. Your mind empties for just a couple of seconds. Smaller works do provide an opportunity to arrive at the image at a faster pace, but I wouldn't say there's much of a difference in making them.

**Let me backtrack a bit. *Salamander Birds* (2022) is a gorgeous painting, but for you it is deficient. What doesn't it do?**

It's an impossible question that I can't even put in words. I think if I could do what it needed, I would probably use that formula to get back to the paintings and get them done the way that I think they should have been done. But there is a moment in the studio where I think it's done. It's when the painting leaves the studio that I wish I had it back so I could add another layer or cover it entirely. But when I get to that threshold where I experience something that I hadn't experienced with the painting before, then that marks the ending of it for me.

**That's the ecstasy, not the rupture.**

When you get there, it's amazing. But we change. By the time the painting reaches that place, you've started something else and then you're changed by the new voice that you started. It's a psychological barrier that eventually I have to get along with in order not to be always defeated or unhappy with my work.

**In *Gathering*, there seemed to be more figuration going on, and the content was more human than animal. I don't know if you feel in your work a drift towards either the human or the natural world.**

*Gathering* came out of a time in my studio practice where I felt disconnected from the mystical aspects of the text and literature

that I was looking at. I was going through my archive of imagery of miniature paintings, and I recognized these figures who are not part of the main narrative, marginalized characters who were only markers of a specific cultural and historical context. There were just ordinary people doing ordinary acts of weaving, planting, or just being in their immediate environment. So *Gathering* became about gathering these ordinary figures in the picture plane.

**Were they already ghost figures in a sense?**

Perhaps ghost figures in relation to any central and dominant narrative.

**Do you start from a broken world and then patch it together? Or do you start from a whole world and what you're doing is showing us the component parts of that world?**

It's from a broken world. It's working from remaining fragments of a broken world. There is access to bits and pieces of ancient and archaic references that have travelled throughout time. The origin story that I'm working with now is only from existing fragments. I'm bringing those pieces together and trying to make something that feels cohesive and where each painting is a window to parts of a larger world.

**A painting like *Passing* (2021) looks like a religious painting, as does *Ascending* (2022); then you have *Diving Messenger* (2020), which could be your version of an angelic visitation. Your work often suggests a connection with religious painting.**

It's a true observation. The other world, which was taught to us through religion, is something that is going to have a place in our memories; you're born into it without your making a decision, and it's going to have a mark on you. Even in rejecting it, you're still creating the connection. It's there. Finding its way into my work wasn't totally intentional in some cases, but it is a question for me. I'm not sure about it. I think painting is a place where those questions of religion and spirituality can remain. Let it be. My upbringing was definitely loaded with these ideas, and it's only natural for them to find their way into the work one way or another. But instead of having someone impose it, what I appreciate is when there is an open dialogue about it.

**Does understanding the narrative and the complications of the story you're telling matter to the viewer? It matters to you in the making, but how much of it needs to be translated for it to have meaning?**

I think the intention of making a painting is different from its reception, or how the work is going to be perceived, and is going to be different from the result. Narrative is both a departure point and an anchor for me. I also consider titles as entry points where there is a return to language. At times, I include some hint in the title, and if the viewer is interested to know more about the narrative content of the work, I've given them a clue. But as I said earlier, what I hope is that the painting can stand on its own and not be confined by the narrative arc.

## Safe Space

### An interview with Laura Lewis

**BORDER CROSSINGS:** Tell me what determines your scale.

**LAURA LEWIS:** Well, Jenny Saville has been a huge influence of mine, and specifically for this work. These people you see are all queer artists and friends, and the scale of the work was tied to taking up space as queer people in institutions. I wanted to construct an immersive space. I wanted to make the figures larger than life to have a presence that is all-encompassing.

**You avoid the problem of figure/ground because you only have figures.**

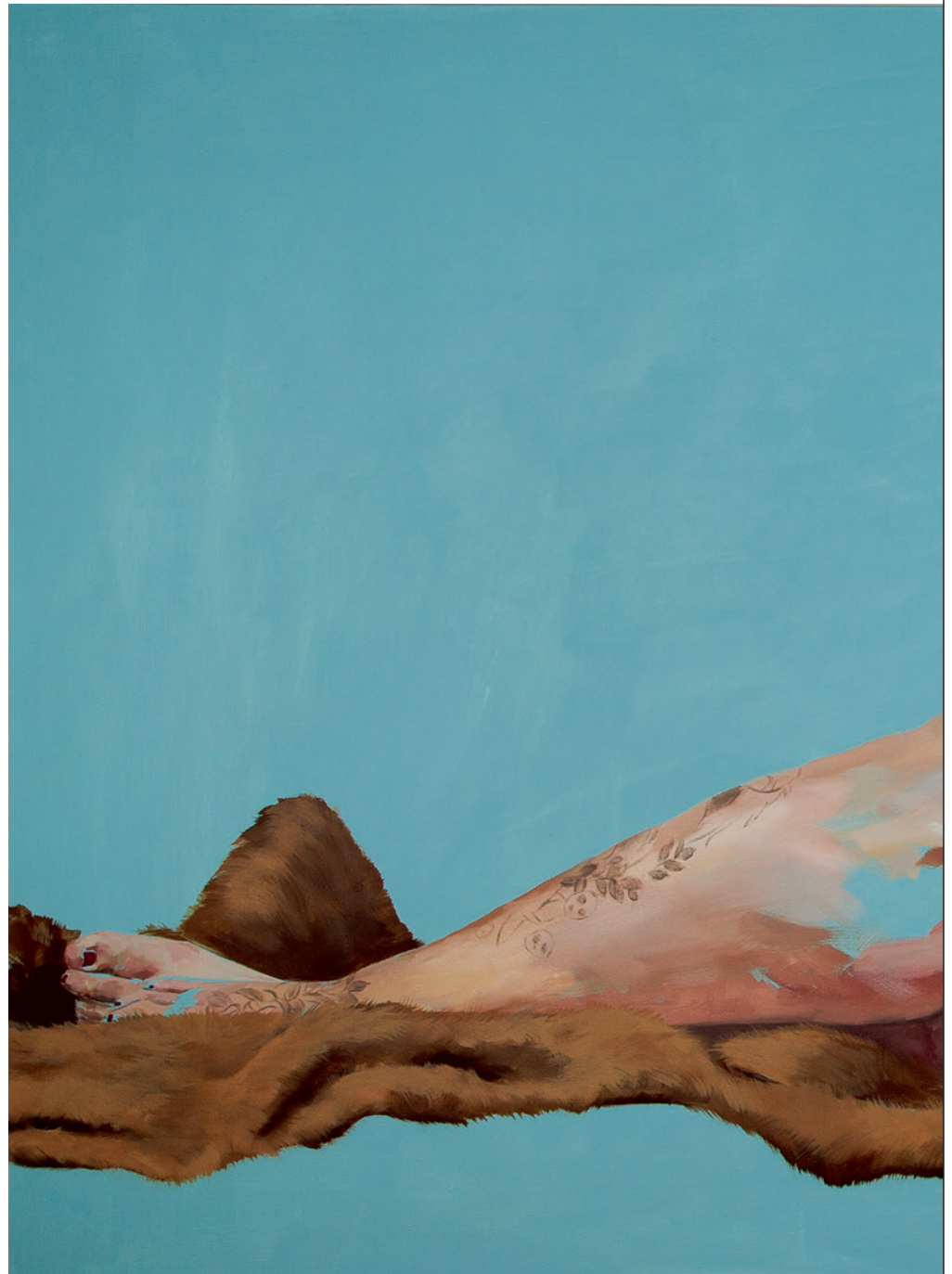
Yes, I love colour theory and I'm interested in how the figure is oscillating between the background and the foreground.

**They're all foreground, aren't they? You pay attention to the background colour, but it's a space or a set because the real space is occupied by flesh.**

Absolutely.

**Are they photo-based?**

They are, and I take all my own photos. I probably take upwards of 200 per person. Some people wanted to see the final image, and some people were like, "Don't show me. I want to be surprised." It depends on the individual. Essentially, I'll pick 10 or 15 images that I think will make a good painting, I'll make sketches, and then I'll start comparing and contrasting them in the sketches. It's important to figure out the person's face and their expression. What do I want to include? What don't I want to include? I often test the background colour to make sure it's correct. Frequently, I mix the colour for the test and then realize it's slightly off, too dark or too light, or not nuanced enough. It's important to map it out, especially at this scale. After I received funding from Canada Council, I held a photo shoot, and my top priority was to construct a safe space for everyone involved. Initially I sent out a



questionnaire to see what people were comfortable with. Some of those people I know very well. For example, Arjun Lal is a childhood friend whom I've known since I was five years old. He's a professional artist in Halifax. Most of the subjects I've met here in Winnipeg. So constructing a safe space was important to me. Obviously, vulnerability is an extreme prevalence in the work, and I wanted to make sure that everyone was comfortable. If they were presenting nude, it was totally their choice.

**You gave them the choice not to be dressed and to dress in the way they wanted?**

Everyone brought their own clothing. They presented in ways they felt comfortable. Several of the poses were also their choice.

1. Laura Lewis, *Jessie in Blue*, 2022, oil on canvas, 120 x 60 inches. Photo: Laura Lewis. All images courtesy the artist.

2. Laura Lewis working in her studio, 2023. Photo: Rylaan Gimby.



In your artist's statement you wrote about being interested in the similarities between queer and kink. When you advertised, did you tell people they could focus on whatever aspect of their sexuality they wanted to present?

It was very fluid. For *Arjun with Butt Monster* (2022), Arjun made the device he's wearing in the painting, which he titled *Butt Monster*. He's very interested in the kink world, and he wanted to be represented with his artwork.

That is interesting because he's wearing briefs, so he's also modest.

Yes, it was his choice, and I kept that idea of choice as a common thread. At the photo shoot, I did bring some props, including kink objects, but it ended



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up that most people brought their own stuff. For *Madeline in Oil* (2022), Madeline brought her own collar.

**The paintings don't push kink. Is that because the subjects aren't moving in that direction?**

Yes. I might be interested if someone wanted to be presented that way or if that narrative was one I was interested in exploring. I think I'm more interested in the moments of intimacy. Arjun is dressed in kink wear and his art object has obvious and explicit sexual ties, but he is also in a moment of intimacy with the viewer. It's very soft and very vulnerable, and I'm interested in having the duality of kink objects and beauty.

**We think of small as intimate and you talk about vulnerability. You could argue that vulnerability would be more essentially captured in smaller scale, but you've made a very conscious choice to make big images. You can't ignore them; you can't walk into a room and not see them.**

They definitely take over the space. That was a conscious choice, not only because of, like I said before, queer people taking up space, and I really wanted to construct an immersive environment. But also because I just enjoy painting at a large scale. It's more fluid for me. I work quite quickly. I usually do one of these a month. I find it more challenging to work in a smaller scale.

**It is interesting to hear you talk about safe spaces because all your characters look aggressively back at the viewer. Does their directness undermine a problematic reading of the gaze?**

Yes. I wanted them to acknowledge the viewer's presence and I thought that was important. So it was very intentional. Everyone is staring directly at the viewer. I don't think it's quite confrontational, but it is an acknowledgement that they exist, that they're real people and that they exist outside of the work as well.

**Certainly one of the most theatrical paintings is *Malaikah in Ostrich Feathers* (2023).**

Malaikah Rang'inya is my friend and a long-time model. I've been painting her for probably six or seven years now. I'm enamoured with her beauty.

**There's no question about her beauty. Her lips make me think of the Man Ray painting *Observatory Time: The Lovers* (1936) in which a pair of lips float above a landscape. They almost pop off the surface.**

She actually let me pick her lipstick colour that day and I was very excited about that. I wanted to render her lips in a way that they did seem to pop off the

canvas. They are definitely the crux of the painting and they draw you in. The vibrant magenta doesn't exist in a lot of my other work.

The art historical truism is that Manet's *Olympia* (1863–65) is a breakthrough because as a model she stares so intently back at the viewer that she assumes the power of the gaze. In *Embrace* (2022), you complicate the gaze by including another person, so your painting is also about the defiant intimacy of the embrace. She's saying to the viewer, "Recognize that I'm embracing this person." Hers is a much more, and I don't say this in a pejorative way, aggressive relationship to the gaze than any of your other subjects.

I would say so, too. They're a long-term couple. I had individuals show up and some couples, but it was important that it wasn't all couples, because I think we can exist in our queerness outside of a relationship. But the confrontation in *Embrace* was incredibly important for the featured couple. They wanted their presence to be known.

Tell me how you make decisions about highlighting. In the image of Malaikah you employ turquoise in a way that is not realistic. It's some other intervention on the surface. What are you doing there?

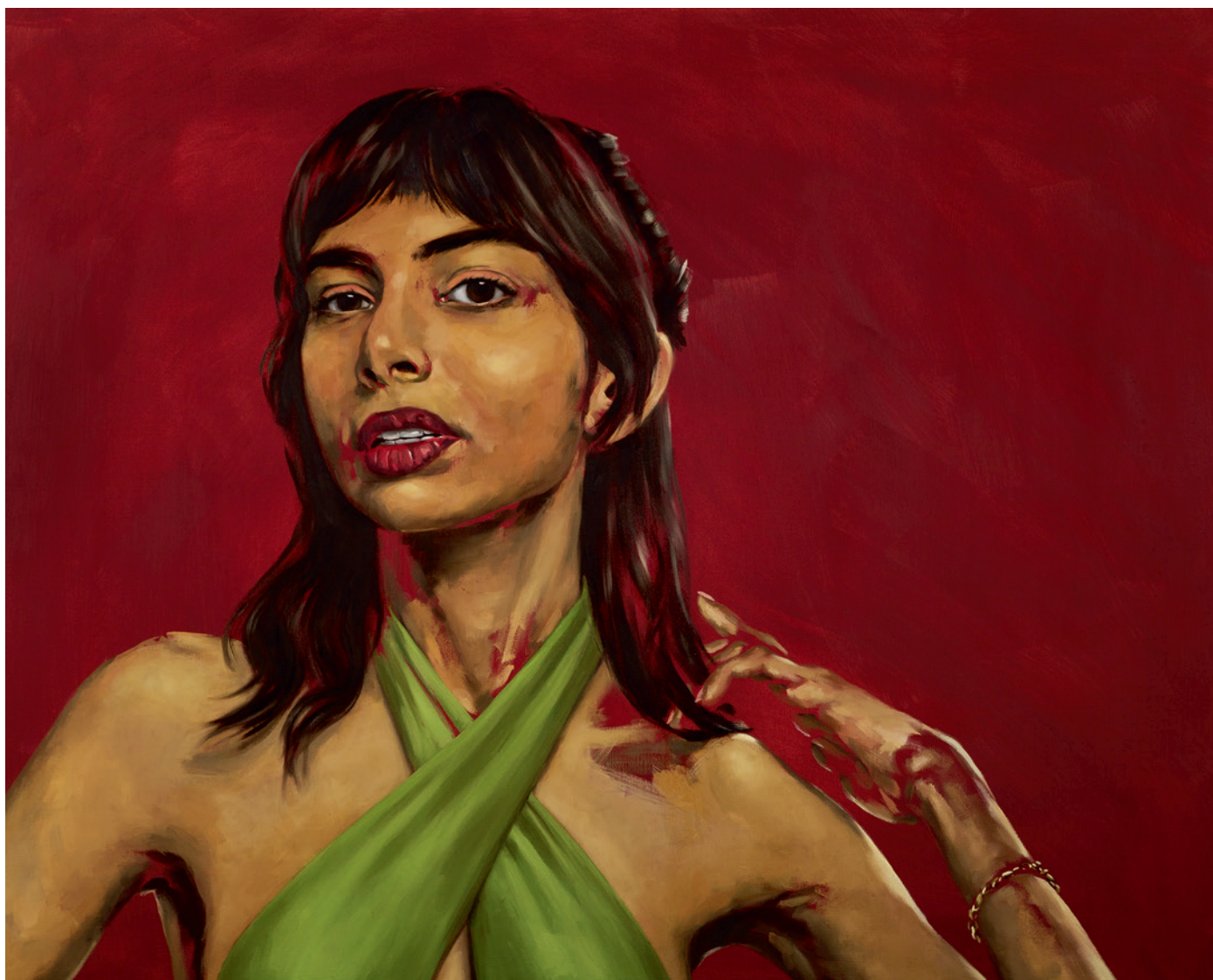
I figure it out once I'm painting the actual large canvas. Sometimes I play with it when I do tests, but I like it to be a more organic happening on the canvas. You're right; it's not actually the highlights, and it's not the shadows either. It's an ambiguous space. In some of these I like how highlighting can bring the eyes forward; it's fluctuating in and out of space and it's totally organic. I've been very intentional in these paintings, but in looking at earlier work I realize it has always been present. After *Jessie in Blue* (2022) came out so organically and so beautifully, I was really excited about it, especially in the torso area, and it made me want to play with colour more in the other figures. I think it can represent different spaces, but it's also a metaphor for the oscillation of identity. As queer people our identities are constantly in flux, and I think that quality can be represented through the brushwork. I think that fluidity is reflected in how we self-identify. It's different for everyone. Someone might identify with a specific word, and the next person who identifies the same way might find it offensive. The key is being respectful and not presumptuous about pronouns or titles or identities. I would say it's a constant navigation. Being in flux, people change their pronouns all the time, or their sexuality. I identified as bisexual for years, and then I found terminology that was more appropriate for me, which was pansexual.



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I wasn't aware of it until I was older, and I felt that my identity resonated much more with that definition. I have had friends and people in my life who have identified as he/him, then as they/them, then as she/her and back to he/him. It's a question of checking with people to locate a safe space for them. And it is tricky to navigate. I think what's important is to be conscious of that dynamic and to hold a necessary sense of respect towards the community.

**You talk about vulnerability. Do your subjects think of these as vulnerable paintings?**

I think some of the nudes are certainly in vulnerable states. There is inherent vulnerability in simply putting yourself out there and getting your image photographed. Everyone involved is familiar with my work, but being in a massive painting is an act of vulnerability in itself. Especially with Arjun, I don't think I would have been able to create this image without the relationship that I have with him.

**What's your relationship to the notion of the portrait? Do you think of yourself as a portrait painter?**

I would describe myself as a figurative painter. I'm not going to be offended if somebody calls these portraits, but portrait has a context tied to it that can sometimes be outside the contemporary art world. Sometimes you think portraiture doesn't have any conceptual underpinnings; it's just a rendering of somebody, or it's seen as other.

**You're painting figures, but they are not involved in acts of sexual intimacy. Is that a conscious decision and is that an area where you have either gone before or will go in the future?**

That's a good question. It was a conscious decision for this work. I wasn't planning on rendering anything super-explicit. I have done intimate work like that in drawings and watercolours at a smaller scale, but it's definitely something I'm very interested in and open to in the future. Obviously, expressing your sexuality can be done in a number of different ways. I

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1. Laura Lewis, *Arjun with Butt Monster*, 2022, oil on canvas, 60 × 72 inches.

Photo: Laura Lewis.

2. Laura Lewis, *Embrace*, 2022, oil on canvas, 60 × 72 inches. Photo: Laura Lewis.

3. Laura Lewis, *Madeline in Oil*, 2022, oil on canvas, 60 × 72 inches. Photo: Laura Lewis.

4. Laura Lewis, *Malaikah in Ostrich Feathers*, 2023, oil on canvas, 60 × 72 inches. Photo: Laura Lewis.

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1. Laura Lewis, *Shaneela in Burgundy*, 2023, oil on canvas, 60 × 48 inches. Photo: Laura Lewis.

2. Laura Lewis, *Mahlet in Mauve*, 2023, oil on canvas, 60 × 48 inches. Photo: Laura Lewis.





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immediately think of Jenna Gribbon, a figurative painter who represents herself and her wife in very explicit sexual acts. Her whole focus is to capture these moments of intimacy. What she does is an interesting concept because how much of it is performance? Are you doing this act with a partner or a stranger? Is it a performance? Is it a film? That could be another reason behind it. I don't know if I'd be interested in the performance aspect of sexual acts; what interests me more is the intimacy of it.

**What did Jessie say about the painting of her when she saw it?**

She was very moved by it, she teared up. She absolutely loved it. Her name is Jessie Jannuska, and she is a local queer artist. The earring she is wearing was very important to her both because they were a gift from her grandmother, and they are brick stitch fringe earrings, a style Jessie has been working very hard to learn. They are also important because she wanted to be presented as a strong, confident Indigenous woman who owns

her sexuality, who is not being objectified and who is actually standing in her power. In the way that she takes up space, she is confronting and challenging the viewer. I'm inspired by film and I think the dimensions of *Jessie in Blue* give the painting a cinematic feel.

**Is it possible to present the naked body in a way that is free of the possibility of desire? This could easily be seen as a hot painting, and is that cool?** I don't know if I have the answer. I've thought about it a lot, and I've had other people ask me that. Ultimately, when the subject knows the context of the painting, then they are owning their sexuality. I also consider that they're posing. But I admit that she's very beautiful as well.

**And if the nature of that beauty is what you desire, then we are in the territory of the gaze. It's just a different power structure. Different people have the power, but power is still an issue.** Yes, and I don't know if there is a way to escape that.

**Does that make you consciously paint differently? If you are aware of that problem, then what do you say to yourself as the maker of the image?**

What was important to me was to present everyone in a way they were comfortable with. Some people approved the images before I selected them to paint. Constructing a safe space meant that I wanted everyone to be content with what the work was going to look like. In that way it becomes almost a collaboration. Remember, everyone in this work is an artist, so they all have their own artistic perspectives. But I'm definitely thinking about that. Especially when some of them are more provocative than others. Jessie chose her classic Renaissance pose and I will say that when I noticed she was lying the other way, I had her flip over because of the gun tattoo on her hip. I thought it was awesome. Tattoos can be very much a part of our identities as queer people, they can really shape who we are and how we present ourselves. Madeline Rae is a performance artist and she is someone I have also been painting for years. For her painting she did a private performance for me. She was actually covered in oil.

**So that's realism rather than brushwork.**

It is. She is covered in oil and her performance involved lots of very fast capturing of images. There

was a lot of movement in the performance. Years ago, we did intimate performances where she was covered in honey. As a performance artist, she knows her body very well because it is her medium and using it is her method of expression. I knew it would be an awesome painting. Actually, Malaikah was assisting me with the photo shoot that day, and she poured the oil over Madeline's head while she was looking at the camera through the lens at me.

**This painting addresses the choices you make. Those are very direct interventions into the surface of the body. How do you determine when to make those marks?**

I figure it out as I'm doing it. I can spend hours mixing colours. Sometimes I'll spend an entire day mixing a colour. I'll map out the image, and then I'll start placing colours in certain places where the tone exists. Then I begin rendering the outside and building up the volume. But when I begin, I'll leave as much space as I possibly can and if it's not working, then I'll go back in. For example, in these tests I initially had an area of the neck coming through and I realized that it added a dynamic or volume that wasn't correct for the composition. It's a constant balance. In *Shaneela in Burgundy* (2023) I had a bunch of red coming through around the



mouth, but it read as more violent because red is inherently a violent colour. I think this is more of a burgundy and burgundy is definitely a sensual colour. It has so much charge. I picked it because of her lipstick. Shaneela Boodoo is a local artist and curator. She has been my friend and model for years. There's a community here that I hadn't found other places where I've lived. Winnipeg is full of culture and it's very accepting.

**The majority of your portraits reflect cultural and sexual diversity. Is that also a conscious choice?** They are my friends and fellow artists, so I'm reflecting the community here in Winnipeg. It's a very diverse community.

**Can you continue to paint this way? There will always be friends and colleagues who can be subjects. So does each painting take you to another painting in a way that you can read as a trajectory?**

Every time I finish a painting, I'm inspired to do a new one. And in a new way, too. I think there's endless ways to convey brushwork or emotion and colour. And there's endless research that can be done through exploring the medium. I think I can continue with this work, but it's going to involve

Laura Lewis, *Study of Julian (as Deb)*, 2023, oil on upstretched canvas, 60 x 24 inches. Photo: Laura Lewis.



different compositions. I'm inspired to have more figures in each painting. I think that might be where my new work is headed. I'm also interested in doing still lifes, which I haven't done in a very long time. I'm influenced by some different contemporary artists like Anna Weyant or Chloe Wise, who exhibit their figurative work with still lifes. I actually took a Polaroid of my friend's drag clothing and I'm going to do their portrait next. It's going to be quite large, and I thought it might be interesting to exhibit a painting of a still life with it. There can be a lot of nuance in the absence of the figure as well, because objects can have so much context tied to them.

**It's also a way of establishing a narrative framework. You don't present only the figure but the life and the apparatus of the figure as well.**

I really like the idea of a nuanced still life and the absence of the figure, especially with Julian K. He just started doing drag and I'm so happy for him. We went to art school together as well, and he's finding that drag is his new art form. We did this awesome photo shoot and it's going to be my next piece.

**Did he do a performance as well?**

It was much tamer than the one with Madeline. In fact, I thought it was so important to take a Polaroid of their shoes because I was doing close-up photographs of their face. And I said, "Oh, Julian, don't worry about wearing your heels. I don't want your feet to get sore." So he took his heels off and after we photographed for a bit he said, "Actually, Laura, I need to put my heels back on because I behave differently in them."

**Making paintings of figures in drag introduces a whole different performative side. Then you would most assuredly move away from portraiture into something else.**

I'm influenced by so many different things and it's also important to challenge yourself. I had wanted to paint Julian for a long time and when he decided that he wanted to do it in drag I was absolutely on-side, especially because of what's going on presently in the world. It's very, very relevant because of the drag ban in Tennessee and Don't Say Gay in Florida. Canada often isn't that far behind the States, so I think it's an important conversation. Everyone needs to be conscious of that. We can never take what we have for granted because there could be an attempt to take it away at any moment. That goes for queer people, that goes for people of colour. People say drag is a protest in itself. I think it has inherent political underpinnings. ■