

Naudline Pierre

by Stephanie
E. Goodalle

Naudline Pierre's large-scale paintings are glimpses into a fantastic, unfolding world. At times, her characters acknowledge the viewer but often they are preoccupied with their own plans. With or without you, they continue to evolve, presenting their selves in many ways—held by one another, flying across the canvas, or entangled with a creature. Most importantly, Pierre's figures are never alone as they tend to their personal and collective needs.

Speaking with Pierre over Zoom this past summer, I was reminded that care is a responsibility to oneself and external support arises from openness. World making—real or imagined—is exciting, nonlinear, and can be messy. It requires nurture, discipline, and time for the painting to be birthed.

opposite: *A Timely Rescue*,
2019–2020, oil on canvas,
84 × 60 inches. All images
courtesy of the artist and
James Cohan, New York.
Photos by Paul Takeuchi.



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NAUDLINE PIERRE: Hi.

STEPHANIE E. GOODALLE:
Hi. Thank you so much for being here.
How are you?

NP: Thank you for having me. I have some background noise—my dog and my air conditioning unit. Apologies in advance for that.

SEG: No worries, it's a really hot day, so do whatever you have to do to stay cool.

I'm super excited to talk with you.

NP: Thank you. You asked how am I? I am—(pauses) I think right now is a time of growth and reflection and transition. And excitement with my upcoming projects. It's a mixed bag. But if I were to answer your question, I would say I am well.

SEG: I like to start off with that because the emotional state is essential to creation.

NP: Yeah, yeah.

SEG: I feel like that is overlooked a lot. We are not machines. And you know, the totality of the entire eighteen months of the pandemic, no matter how a person has experienced it, has been a lot.

NP: It has. But I am here.
How are you?

SEG: I am well. I wish *well* meant more.

NP: Yeah, *well* can hold a lot—

SEG: Like, I am physically well, I have my health, I have shelter, I have all my needs provided for. I am safe. I am of sound mind. I don't worry about where my next meal is coming from. I am grateful. But some days it is the mask of me just wanting to glaze over the reality of the situation, because I can't express what is happening to others.

NP: I get that.

SEG: Also, I wanted to say I appreciate how you're very much here in the moment. You are very present.

NP: Oh, wow. Thank you. It's been an ongoing exercise of mine to be present; it doesn't actually come easy. There are times when it's impossible for me to be present in the body, in the moment. So it's really nice to hear someone say that I am being present. I'm trying to be intentional about where my mind and my body are connected and having them at least stay around the same place.

SEG: Being present has to be intentional.

NP: Sometimes I have to be open with people and say, "Hey, I can't be present right now. So if you are telling me something important, I'm going to miss it." Or, "I just spaced out, can you say that again?" I'm trying to have more acceptance for the way my brain works.

There is so much to just getting up, having a day, showing up to things, and also walking in your purpose. There are many things I feel I have to carry in order to show up with a smile, or sometimes not a smile. The least I can do is be transparent with my loved ones, or even strangers. Like "Hey, I'm not actually here right now, my body is, but I'm not."

SEG: Do you find that your artistic practice helps you slow down in that way? Or is that not even considered upfront? Is it more like, "This is what my human body needs right now"?

NP: It's both. I have to be super intentional to make this work because I'm accessing a place that doesn't exist here. One day I can approach the canvas and be spaced out and not be able to tap in. And that's a different painting day than one where I feel like I'm breathing alongside the characters that I'm making. And both days are valid.

For me to really hone in on the work, intention is key. And when I have worked a long time without seeing or talking to anyone, it takes a moment for me to get back into real life, or into conversations. I usually provide a disclaimer to anyone I'm speaking to, "I've been in a painting hole, I can't form sentences right now, but I'm here with you." So, yeah, it requires a lot of intention to make the work, to bring myself to the work, and to take myself out.

SEG: I know you have two exhibitions coming up this fall. A solo exhibition at the Dallas Museum of Art and you're participating in Prospect.5 New Orleans: *Yesterday we said tomorrow*. How are you preparing for each of them? How are you harnessing that intentionality for such large projects? Especially since you've just rolled out of your residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

NP: There are days when I am like, "I am killing it today." And there are days when I'm like, "Wow, what am I even doing?" For me, trying to keep intentional with these large projects just boils down to telling myself, "My *one* job today is to make a painting, or to add to this painting." I have to shut everything else out in order to tap in. When I'm painting, I am like a sponge anyway. While I'm making work, I tend to isolate a little bit, not in any intense way, but I try to be very intentional with what I'm absorbing. Also, for me it's important to stay physically active. Especially coming out of last year, when I lost some of my personal routines. I know people who loved doing yoga in their homes, but I couldn't do it. (laughter) I need something that grounds me as a ritual. It can be as simple as walking my dog. But to answer your question of how am I preparing for these projects: I'm just going and going and going, letting the fear settle around me, meeting the day and keeping my promises to myself about what I'm going to do. But making the paintings is very slow work. A lot of it is sitting and staring, sketching, just thinking. It's like an incubation period.

SEG: I ask that because I know preparation looks very different for people.

NP: When I'm working on a project, I have a one-track mind: get to the finish line. And then I start to have space for other things. Some things might fall by the wayside, and I tell myself, "Alright, I'll get to it when I'm done with the work." Don't know if that's good or bad, but that's the way it is.

SEG: You refer to your paintings as one large body of work and in them you are exploring elements such as water and fire. They evoke creation

We Are Here, 2019–2020,
oil on canvas, 30 × 40 inches.



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



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stories. Which part of the world are you constructing now?

NP: I love mystery; the unknown is very important to me. Or keeping things unknown. So I don't necessarily know what part of the world I'm exploring, I know that it used to be kind of arid and now there is dampness. And I may explore some other place, but I think it will take my lifetime—and my lifetime might not be enough—to fully understand what I am doing. Or understand the images that I am making.

The pleasure for me comes from not knowing. "What is this, what's happening? Who are these characters?" I don't know, and that is exciting to me. Things are revealed to me as I am painting. And I may get a little clue, and I am like, "Thank you for that gift, now I know what's happening here, or what this vignette is about."

But in this current work, the essential character that I have been painting understands her power a little bit more and she is now able to harness and conduct and kind of move fire and energy around. The work is in the very beginning stages. I don't know her future, but right now she is experimenting with these two elements. I'm sure I'll figure out other elements to include or reveal. For now, I'm trusting the process and allowing myself to not know things. To reveal a corner of this world I'm creating and look at something else. I have some idea, but a large part of this world is not for me to know yet.

SEG: That is very much trusting the work to lead you. It's an intuitive process you are following. Even in the metaphorical sense, sometimes we try to make things stick and it turns out not quite how we envisioned. Maybe it's a little crooked. But that doesn't take away from the beauty or essence of it. It's just transforming into a different identity that we haven't labelled or discovered or touched or sensed yet.

NP: Exactly.

opposite: *Too Much, Not Enough*, 2019–2020, oil on canvas, 60 x 40 inches.

SEG: Do you protect your mind a lot?

NP: I have to. If I don't, it'll find its own way to protect itself, and it won't be as cute. (*laughter*)

SEG: Does the painting help to filter through the thoughts? Or is it the thoughts that become the painting?

NP: I think they weave in and out of each other.

SEG: So, the pieces just come to you while painting?

NP: I'll have some initial feeling that sparks a composition. It can happen in the shower, or when I'm going to sleep. I can be walking around, or having a good time laughing and think, Oh, that's an image I want to see. So, it starts with a kind of thumbnail image, very small and not at all fleshed out. Maybe it's just a color that starts my thought process and then I end up reacting to the canvas in front of me and I create some sort of under drawing or under painting. And then, as I'm painting, things expand and build on top of each other in the composition. Basically, I start somewhere and eventually I end up somewhere else, but there are remnants of that first thought, sometimes more so than other times.

It's definitely an intuitive process, the thoughts and the painting in progress are weaving in and out of each other. And then I can step back and reassess how the painting is going, what colors are needed, the texture, the composition... Maybe I've put an initial color down and I don't like it, or I cover over part of the composition. All that is important to adding to the work. If I get stuck I open a book and kind of absorb.

SEG: You drybrush a lot. Why?

NP: I use many techniques in addition to drybrushing, but I enjoy drybrushing because the feeling of resistance of the canvas underneath the brush is really special. I like having to work to get the paint, to move it or spread it. And I like the texture drybrushing creates. It leaves spaces open for what was underneath to show through, so it has a nice layering effect. You can really

see the brush strokes in a way that is very exciting to me. I enjoy washing over things when they are dry and then waiting for them to dry and then doing it again.

SEG: When did you start painting?

NP: I made my first paintings in undergrad. I didn't really paint much as a child, I was a math and science kid. I was convinced I was going to be a doctor. But then I pivoted in undergrad and it's been art ever since.

SEG: Would you say that your interest in science helped you with the painting?

NP: I was always interested in exploring the figure. I had my flirtations with abstraction, trying to figure out what was important to me. But, I always came back to the figure.

SEG: In your work, the figure is rarely alone. And to me, the figure presents as a Black femme. Which is a loaded identity. Can you talk about ideas of community and belonging and emotions surrounding those environments?

NP: Yeah, she is never alone, physically. But although they may be together, there are moments where you can perceive a sort of mental aloneness. The notion of care and touch and being held is very important to the work. For me that goes hand in hand with community. I'm building images or pictures of a world where these characters are experiencing deep unconditional love, unconditional care. But there are also pitfalls. There is heaviness, too, but in "my world" you are okay. And you are going to be okay.

Basically, I'm making images that I want to see. As this "other" that I have created is held, sometimes it can feel to me like I am being held as well, through these images. I'm not an expert in what community should look like or what it needs to be, but I know what the images make me feel. And I can assume what the characters feel. It's this ambiguous space where it's not just about the experience of being held, but that exchange is part of a greater environment. When you're being held,

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you're supported by the person or figure that holds you, and all the rest of your surroundings.

So, I don't have it all figured out, but I know that these characters are sharing themselves with each other. And they also allow the viewer to see these very intimate moments. In some paintings, no one is looking at the viewer, they're all looking in different directions, engaging in their individual experiences and levels of awareness or acceptance of the viewer. I don't have much more to say about the different levels of community within the work, that is still a mystery to me. But I know that a lot of the work is about protection.

SEG: There is something very tender in ambiguity, where it's like, You don't have to be placed, you can just be. And you are an ethereal being because you *are* an ethereal being.

NP: Yes.

SEG: I think that that's an important optic to have in the world, not just as a Black person. Everyone should see that. Within that is a particular advocacy for openness. You seem pretty adamant about that for your work. Like, "Don't box me in."

NP: Yeah. I think for me it's about being slippery, being allowed to be expansive, to be many things. That's part of my identity. The openness I am asking of people, I think is my right. I shouldn't have to ask.

I need for people to know that there are many doors to enter the work, many lenses through which to see it. I have to be adamant about not letting myself be pinned down, and if anything, the multiplicity of this character that appears in so many different variations and different spaces, advocates for that.

Let me be where I am, what I am. I don't want any boxes. And if I am going to have boxes, I want *all* the boxes so I can go in and out of whatever one I want. I think people want to understand and categorize, and that's part of human nature and I can't fault people for that. But for me, I don't want to be boxed in. In any way, for anything.

SEG: Yeah, it's that tension. I feel that identity, no matter which facet we're exploring within ourselves, has become so central that if the rubric isn't there, people don't know how to enter. As you've said before, "It's this, but that, but also not that, it's *all*." Or maybe it's nothing and you're just like, this is my projected world.

Is there a difference between imagination and fantasy for you?

NP: That's a good one. For me, they are connected, with subtle differences: imagination is the umbrella, and fantasy is underneath that umbrella. My work comes from my imagination. In this moment for me, I think of imagination as the tool, and fantasy is what I do with that tool. My imagination is a tool I have been using my whole life, even as a child, before I knew I was going to be this person that is making this work. Now, fantasy comes into play because I'm being super specific about desires of what I want to see on the canvas.

SEG: How do you consider the dual roles of scale and composition in your paintings, in world building?

NP: There's so much here. It's important for me to paint as close to lifesize as possible, because I want the viewer to feel like they can step through this door and be a part of what's going on. When I paint these characters at my own height, in the painting process I can also have moments with some of them as I'm making the composition happen. A lot of the painting process for me is sitting and staring. Sometimes in the moments where it's quiet, I'm waiting on feedback from these characters—waiting for the painting to tell me where to go next. And when I'm at the height of the character, eyes at the same level, I can have these exchanges, I can look and really absorb the personality of the character I'm building out.

In general, scale and composition are tools to me, just like imagination, fantasy, color, and texture. But I don't think too deeply about it. I let my intuition start me off. It leads me to mystery. I have a starting-off point, but I don't know until it's finished what it's going to become. Later, I can come back in and think about hierarchy within the image.

SEG: What are nonnegotiables that are foundational to your practice?

NP: Time, space, and freedom.

The most important thing I need is time to sit with the painting and think. A lot of sitting and staring, and the space to do that. I can't stress that enough.

Freedom to make this world what it needs to be, to stand in its power, to not have to explain it. To let the images come as they are, and I can choose to refine them or not. Freedom to experience my life in order to feed the work.

opposite: *Tell Me Where it Hurts*, 2020, oil on canvas, 66 x 48 inches.

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