

Natia Lemay

The Art of Being Seen

Interview by Charles Moore // Portrait by Fountainhead // October 7, 2024

Natia Lemay entered her first gallery space when she was 33 years old. This feels quite relevant to reference as we look at the trajectory and backstory of the artist. Born in Winnipeg and now dividing time between Toronto and New Haven, Connecticut, the mother of three entered the Ontario College of Art & Design University at a difficult time in her life. Her mental health was on the brink of collapse, and she just wanted to survive, to break the cycle of disenfranchisement, dispossession, and marginalization that defined her upbringing. She likens her art practice to therapy, emphasizing that her origin story is rooted in cheap canvases and paints from the Dollar Store, only later evolving into a form of meditation.

Lemay discovered she was most at peace seated in front of an easel, brush in hand, and a palette of black paint before her; finally, she could examine the systems of oppression that once bound her—taking that information, reconfiguring it, and incorporating it into her work. To this day, her practice remains improvisational. The artist and curator, who received her MFA from Yale University in 2023, seeks to infuse her paintings with lived experiences, reconstructing emotions through concrete

experiences. Largely inspired by musicians like Tupac Shakur, Lemay appreciates how other Black artists have recontextualized their own histories, and these shared experiences have helped her understand that other Black people are going through identity crises parallel to hers.



What do you say to a Tree, Oil and acrylic on Canvas, 68" x 52"

These moments of isolation and grief are universal, she notes, and Lemay strives to capture them in her paintings: moving quickly, planning the composition, and adding a figure who can communicate with the viewer via body language. She completes each painting in a day or two, because once she adds the brushstrokes, she feels she can no longer change them. Her work is, above all, an unraveling, a way of letting her imperfections shine through, always leaving things open. Just as the childhood experiences that inspire her are unchangeable, her work is equally immutable: a response to being a woman of color in situations where one has no choice but to survive. And by applying black paint to each piece, she can document the feelings that once defined her—exploring the issues that have shaped her experience, with a glimmer of hope shining through via her subjects' emotions. Lemay quite literally shows the viewer that where there is darkness on the canvas, there is light.

Charles Moore: If I snap my fingers and tomorrow all the black paint on earth disappears, what color would you use?

Natia Lemay: Ooh, that's tricky. Does this mean that I also can't make my own pigments? No? Well, first off, I've tried the technique that I use in my paintings with other colors, but I don't think that it's as effective with the other colors as it is with black. There's too much of a spread in tonality, and the hues between other colors don't create the same effect, making them seem monolithic when they're not.

Because the paintings are mostly black, they don't document well at all, and I like that the work doesn't document well. I think about how it is to detach when consuming information through a mediating device. There is also a reference to the history of photography and its inability to capture dark skin, and how that relates to the image as a record or a tool to tell a story. So, there is also a bit of resistance on my part to putting everything out into the world. Also, because it's black, in person it requires movement from the viewer; you have to look from different angles to see the full image, which can still shift depending on the light. There aren't many mediums out there that create the same kind of effect.

I think that if there was no black paint, the entire practice would shift because if that color goes away, then the word Black would go away. Without capital B Black and lowercase b black the conceptual framework no longer holds up the subtext in the work.

There would have to be a shift in the whole practice. I think I would focus more on the manipulation of light because, really, when I paint in all black, I'm really sculpting with the light. I'm using the way the light hits the surface and the way the brush makes marks on the surface to sculpt and create space alongside the subtle shifts, cues, and tone of the paint.



Untitled, Oil, acrylic, graphite on panel, 48", 2024

I want this to be kind of fun. But for people who don't know you, tell me about where you're from.

I was born in Toronto, Canada, but I grew up in Winnipeg. My family is originally from New Brunswick and Pensacola, Florida, where we have deep roots. I moved to Winnipeg when I was around one or two years old and lived there until my early twenties. After that, I moved back to Toronto.

And so now you're living partially in Canada and New Haven, Connecticut.

Yeah, I split my time between the cities, two weeks on, two weeks off. Two weeks in Toronto, two weeks in New Haven, and back and forth. In the weeks that I am with my children, we are in Toronto. When they are with their father, I am working in New Haven.

I spent two years at Yale completing my MFA with all three kids alone, and it was really difficult.

Tell me, what's your idea of perfect happiness?

My idea of perfect happiness? That's a tough question. I've been learning to embrace joy and happiness, which is challenging because there haven't been many opportunities for me to sit with these kinds of moments. You don't know what you don't know, right? But stability for me and my children would alleviate a lot of the stress that weighs on my mind. Spending a lot of time in the studio makes me happy, but beyond that, I'm not sure.

Well, I think obviously there's been interesting philosophers who discuss happiness and sadness throughout history. And some of them got it right, and some of them got it wrong. And I don't know if anyone can define what perfect happiness is—not just you, but with what historical figure do you most identify with?

The first person that popped into my mind was Tupac Shakur. There's something about how he used his storytelling ability to connect with people. I appreciate the range of his music and the different levels of vulnerability. His music is filled with contradictions; he was at once hard and soft and showed that two truths can exist in one person. I think I gained a lot of understanding and a sense of freedom from his music. Growing up in Winnipeg as one of the only black people in my community, more specifically as a multiracial woman, I had lived experiences that didn't align with the people around me. When I started listening to his music, I was like, Oh shit. These are not singular experiences. “Changes”, “Brendas Got a Baby,” “Dear Mama,” and “So Many Tears” were a few songs that I connected with. They hit home. The ambivalence within his discography, the simultaneous expression of pride and shame, hope and discouragement, and the acceptance of unresolved feelings, was freeing. It was okay to not have an answer but just to let the feelings exist. I saw myself in the music. I think this is why his work touched so many people and was so successful, but I think he's probably one of the historical figures I most identify with.

What's your process like in the studio day to day?

My driving factor for making art is healing and understanding myself and the world around me. Many people aren't aware of this, but I attended art school at 32 as a mother of three. I stepped foot in my first gallery or museum at about 33. Before going to school, my mental health wasn't great, and I was in survival mode. Most of my life was trying to make ends meet, trying to go day by day, trying to break cycles, and trying to heal from my traumas, but I didn't have the language, skills, or tools to do that in the way that was necessary for me to do more than survive.

So, at 32, I started painting as a form of meditation and a form of therapy. To place my feelings outside of myself. I realized that the moments where I was most at peace were when I was pushing paint on a canvas. When I started painting, my practice was purely therapeutic. Over time, it's transformed into something bigger and more profound. Through education, theory, sociology, and philosophy, I gained a greater understanding of the framework behind the social and systemic circumstances that led to my positionality. This transformed my practice. I took the things I was learning to recontextualize my lived experience, and then I integrated them into my practice. Art became my language and my tool. It was through the process of creating that I found a way to express and process my emotions, to understand my experiences, and to heal from my traumas.



I've Carried That With Me All My Life, Oil on canvas, 26" x 32", 2024

I work from memory, so the work is not a literal reinterpretation of an event but more of a reinterpretation of an emotional experience. I approach new work by embodying this emotional moment and putting it into the world. Life is filled with cycles, events that repeat over and over in our lives, moments that trigger us, and instead of just pushing these feelings down, I engage with them, draw them out— and feel them.

My practice is necessarily improvisational. A lot of people assume that because I'm a figure painter, there's a lot of planning, sketches, or photos, but there's not. I focus on the feeling I'm trying to recreate and get to work. If I do prep work, I lose the need to do the actual work. I paint fast with a sense of urgency to maintain the moment and the feeling on a surface. I map out a space quickly and roughly place a figure into the space with body language that I think can communicate what I'm feeling. Because the background of my work is very textural, it's usually painted with a wet-on-wet technique, allowing for quick completion. As soon as it dries, the brush strokes are down, and I can't alter anything, so the paintings are usually completed in a couple of days. But yeah, that's a quick overview of the practice.



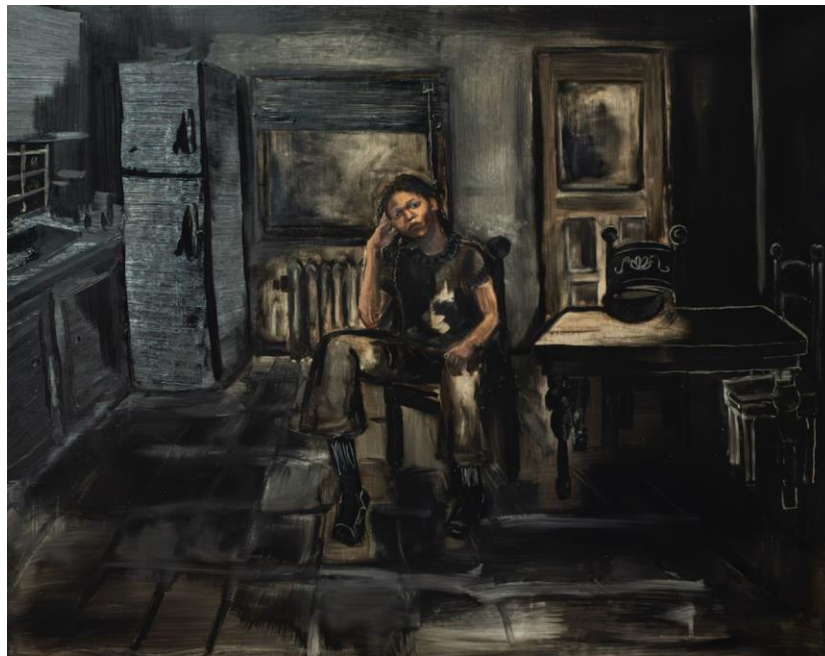
I Knew She Would Come For Us, Oil on canvas, 90" x 66", 2024

Two things that really stuck with me were your references to body language and positionality. How have your body language and positionality changed personally over time and affected your work?

The body language within the work has become more open. In my earlier works, when I drew from more childhood experiences than I do now, the body language was very stiff and static, and the figures felt very tense. This tension and rigidity, now read to me as a lack of mobility, as if the figures are stuck. I realized that I was exploring something new and scary, and the hesitation to share came through in the body language. It's hard to put vulnerable moments out into the world for everyone to see.

The paintings have been moving into more adolescent moments, reflecting on my teenage years and when I became a mother. I noticed that there is more fluidity and integration with the space. They're resting a little bit more. There's less tension in body language, and they feel more reflective and thoughtful. There are also often secondary figures in the pieces with the main subject, or, I should say, part of the main subject. The paintings are becoming looser. I'm freeing up how I use paint on the surface. There's more of an unraveling that's happening.

I think that the need for perfection comes with every new painter, where we feel like we must prove that we can paint. That we can make the thing look like the thing. But I am trying to follow my intuition, and it's telling me to let go and allow the imperfections, the unresolved, and the incomplete to exist, both within the work and within myself.



I Didn't Act Like a Black Person, Oil on canvas, 32" x 26", 2024

But I think that's something I'm still working on, the act of my whole self being seen. You would think that because I'm a painter and my work is a form of self-portraiture, I enjoy putting myself out there, but I don't. I still need to get used to navigating the same rooms where my work is collected or shown. I'm six foot two, so I already stand out and have a big personality. People are going to notice me, and I often don't feel like I'm yet ready for that much attention; it makes me very self-conscious. Since the work is vulnerable, when people want to talk about a particular piece, the in-person conversation becomes very personal and emotional. I want to allow myself space to be emotional and unravel a little bit, but it feels risky, so I avoid these situations. I'm trying to be more open. I'm forcing myself to show up to things because I know it's necessary not only for my personal development but also for the development of the practice because these things are so intertwined.

I don't think my positionality in life has changed much, except class-wise. I will always be an intersectional woman. I'm someone who grew up with racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia in Canada, which is obviously a very different experience than in the U.S. When you have to navigate these complex spaces at a young age, it can affect how you see yourself and how you relate to the

outside world. I learned at a young age to make myself small to survive, so it ingrained a fear of being too emotional or being seen as too much, creating this pressure to be perfect that, I think, a lot of black people also feel. These experiences will always be carried with me but I'm constantly trying to work on how I let them affect me.

“But I think that's something I'm still working on, the act of my whole self being seen. .”

I think that there are a lot of interesting things you said there, and I think it could be helpful for any person of color reading this to understand the process you endured and how it's helped you the most when you think about unraveling perfectionism. And how do you continue to work through that and become more accepting?

What process did I go through? Oh, that's a tough question. I acknowledge that I may sound corny when I say that painting saved my life. However, I don't mean it in the typical sense of making a living through art. Instead, painting helped me escape from dark times. I was struggling with motherhood, lacking family support as my mother is an addict and my father had passed away. I've made several mistakes and had to navigate through a lot on my own. I think that the paintings and the act of painting provide a space for me to process. They tell me what I need to sit with. I reflect, then I deconstruct and try to move through it.

I came to my conceptual framework in the same way—by creating a lot of work and reflecting on it. I asked myself: What is everything doing? Why do I keep painting children? Why am I so obsessed with this particular palette? Why do I repeatedly include certain types of furniture and specific objects that share spaces with me? Why do I keep returning to my grandma's house?

The lack of preparation frees up my consciousness and lets my subconscious dig down into myself. Once the piece is made, I move out of a subjective emotional space into more of an objective, logical space. Because I want to be a better painter, a better person, and a better mother, I search through the work, picking out the good moments and those that need further exploration or investigation. I follow my intuition and watch my choices give shape to something that has been intangible or out of reach.

I recognized that I needed to look at my need for perfection because it didn't align with what I was drawn to in the work. I enjoyed the moments in the work that were incomplete. When I allowed the paint to drip or left a "mistake," I found that it made the work more beautiful for me. Then I followed that thread back to a personal experience.

I think I first had this moment of realization. when I was doing residency at the Royal Drawing Academy in Scotland. There were beautiful, massive, gnarly trees everywhere, and I was obsessed with them. Of course, there are trees in Canada, but Winnipeg is cold. It's like minus 40 Celsius in the winter, so the trees grow very tall. But I connected with the trees that were hundreds of years old, that had weathered storms, had grown around the fences, were twisted, amputated, and continued to thrive. They had visible records of their strength and resiliency; I saw so much worth in that. Then I thought about myself. A lot of people don't know that I've had over 36 surgeries to reconstruct parts of my body after a childhood accident. I am covered in scars from childbirth and childhood neglect, and I've had a hard time finding the beauty in my scars. Both the physical ones and the emotional ones.

That's the process, making work, thinking about the work, and relating it to my personal experiences. So yeah, all these moments of evolution within the work and within myself come through the work, come from letting me make the things and then reflecting on the things, seeing the patterns, and thinking about them. But yeah. What was the second part of the question? I don't know if I answered the whole thing.

I think you did. And I think it's important to note that your affinity for or relationship to those trees makes perfect sense, since trees are metaphors for growth and development, resilience and endurance, wisdom, life, and death. That all makes a whole lot of sense.

I'm so glad you said that, Charles, because I did a series of tree paintings, and no one was into them. They couldn't see the relationship between the figure and the trees. Did I totally get it at the time? No, but for some reason it felt right to have them shown together. I know that I process my emotions slowly, which also means that sometimes these connections between work and myself also come slowly. But yeah, I think there is a relationship between the two things.



His Dad Was My First Love, Oil on canvas, 72" x 60", 2024

What is your most prized, treasured possession today?

This is a hard question. What does it mean to possess something? I don't think I have any treasured possessions. I think that as someone who's moved every couple of years—my entire 38 years on this planet—I've realized that things come and go. I would say I treasure my children, but they're not my possessions. I don't own them. If anything, they own me. When I think about my work, a lot of people ask how I let these personal moments go out into the world? Once they're out of me, once they are no longer held within me, they're no longer mine. So yeah, I wouldn't say that I have any treasured possessions.