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MAGAZINE





ARTIST: LYDIA BAKER COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MASSEY KLEIN GALLERY

Time, Memory, and Desire in the Work of Lydia Baker

By Christina Nafziger

When I look at the work of Lydia Baker, I see intimacy, spirituality, divine symmetry, and deep human connection. Through painting with oils and drawing with wax pastels, the artist renders figures that almost glow, with bodies that intertwine in a way that is deeply sensual. In her recent solo show “Sonnet” at Massey Klein Gallery, these figures appear as if they are on another plane of reality, as if their psyches have connected in another life. Through these two female protagonists, Baker explores time, memory, and desire—a romance and experience that reflects her own.

Subtle yet striking, the fourteen pieces in the show “Sonnet” draw you in while their hazy palettes and soft gradients radiate outward, holding you in space and time. Originally from Norfolk, Virginia and currently living in Brooklyn, Baker shares with us how she achieves her “glow” affect, how her current relationships influence her artwork, and the importance her artist community has had on her drive to keep going.” with the following sentence: “Originally from Norfolk, Virginia and currently living in Brooklyn, Baker shares with us how she achieves her “glow” affect, how her current relationships influence her artwork, and the importance her artist community has had on her drive to keep going.

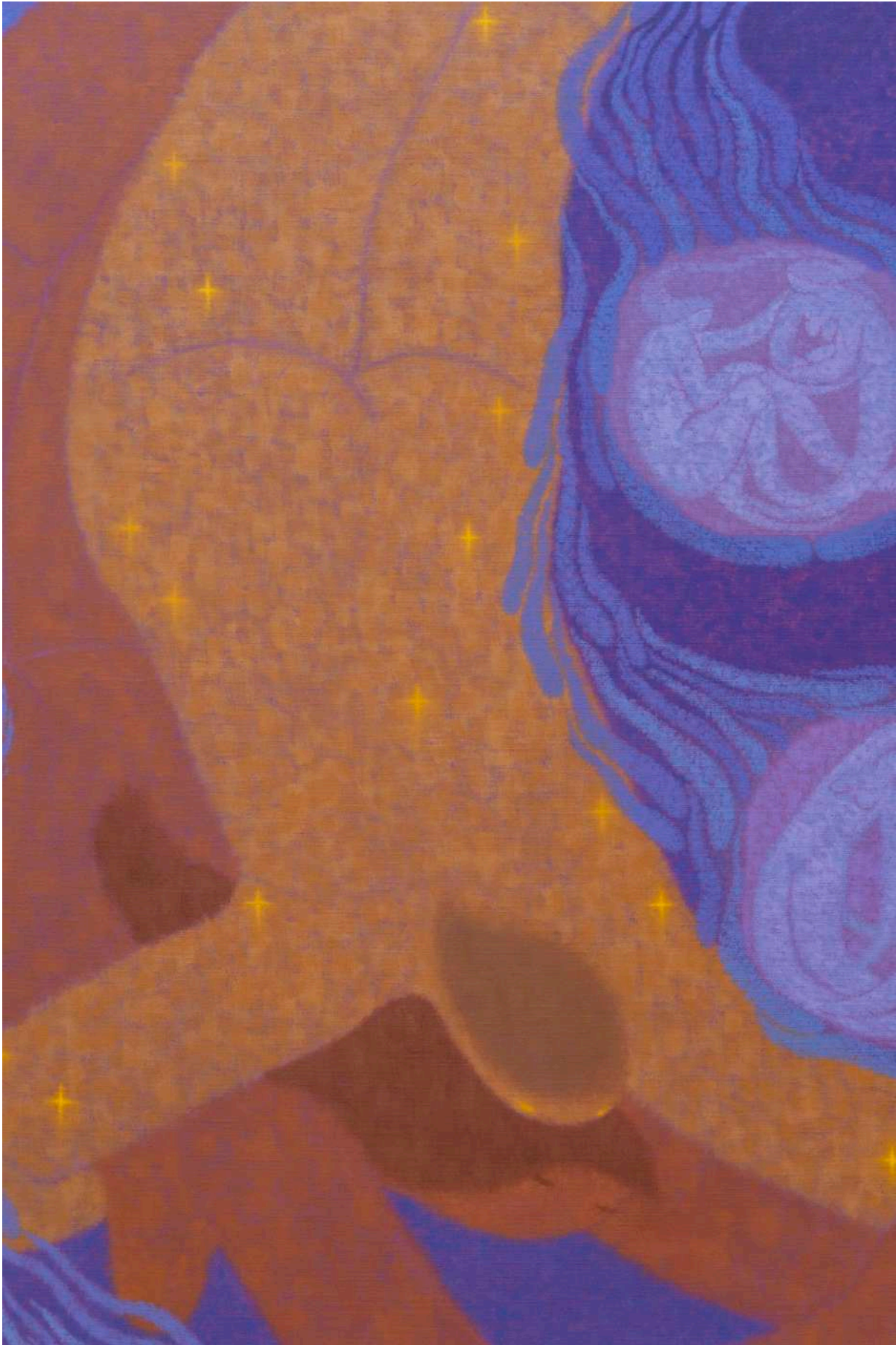
Would you say you’ve always considered yourself an artist?

Yes, I loved to paint and draw as a kid. The repetitive mark-making was therapeutic for me. Every house had a shingle roof and each shingle was a different color.

What pushed you to pursue being an artist as a career?

It was instinctual. I always hoped to become a professional artist, and honestly, I worried I wouldn’t be happy pursuing anything else. I was completely obsessed with the idea for decades, but I didn’t know whether it was attainable until I moved to New York and met other artists who were just as unwell as I was. Over the years those artists became my friends, and each taught me something valuable. After a late night in the studio, we’d all meet up and split a bottle of wine and fries. We’d draw on a paper covered table with crayons. Those moments felt like success to me, bouncing ideas of each other and getting worked up over materials—talking shit about acrylic paint late into the night. So, nothing pushed me to pursue an art career—my choices were to give it my best shot or be morbidly depressed, and my art community has kept me going.

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Your work has an aesthetic that feels earthy and organic, almost as if it relates to the spiritual elements of nature. Can you talk about this side of your work?

When I walk around, I tend to zoom in and hyper-focus on things I find beautiful or strange. I could spend an hour in a bleak little park and think about it for weeks, create a whole narrative in my head. I try to relate with what I see, which feels like an innately feminine way to experience the world. There probably is something spiritual there but I can't name it, which is why I'm a painter and not a writer.

Congratulations on your recent solo show at Massey Klein Gallery, titled "Sonnet". Can you tell us about the body of work in this show and how they connect to the concept of a sonnet?

Thank you! It's my second solo with Massey Klein and the first exhibition of paintings, and I get to utilize the full gallery space this time. This particular body of work depicts surreal and symbolic dreamscapes where two female protagonists explore time, memory, and desire through their romantic and spiritual connection. A sonnet is a poem with 14 lines and my exhibition includes 14 works—10 paintings and 4 drawings—so each one is an integral part of the whole. I composed these images when my personal life was filled with abundant love and joy but also loss and grief. Creating them was a way for me to filter out life's noise and write a love letter, both to my fiancée and to myself.

Who are the figures in your recent works? Are they mostly self-portraits?

The two large figures are symbolic representations of me and partner. The paintings explore a particular stage of intimacy in a relationship—when a couple begins to build a life together. My persona as an artist appears in the work, specifically a fullness I feel creatively and maternally.

By finding inspiration for these images in romance I've scratched the surface of artist and muse, but it plays out from a lesbian perspective and from a place of familiarity and mutual respect (I'm an artist, she's a writer). The smaller figures represent a few things: previous versions of self that need guidance, or safe passage; you, the viewer; sometimes they appear more literally as ovum, or stand in as seeds of creative thought.

There is an air of warmth and connection in your recent works. Do your relationships influence your art practice at all? If so, in what ways?

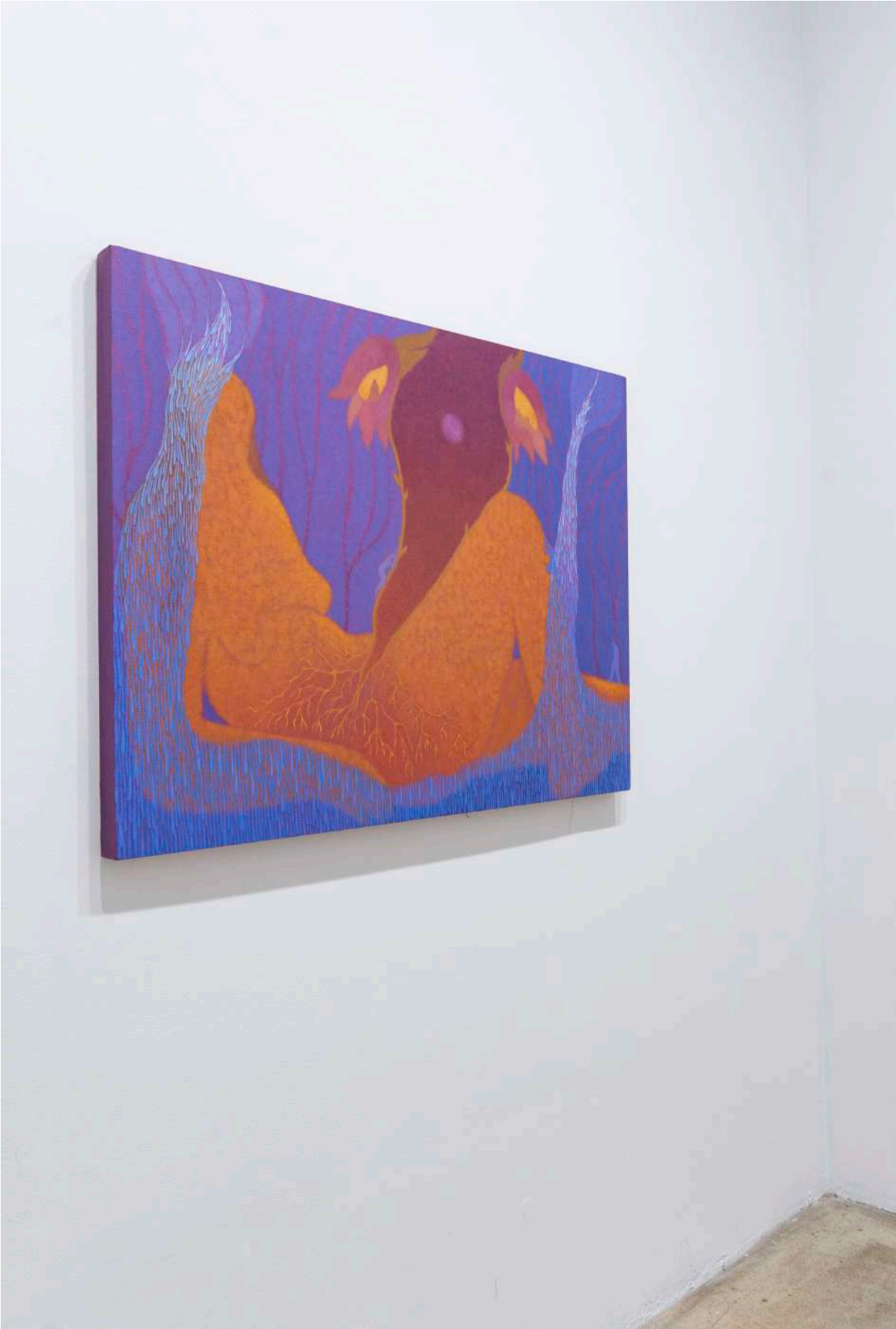
In addition to what else I've shared, there are a lot of babies in my life right now. I'm not a mom myself, but being with them has highlighted my perception of mother-daughter relationships, and also influenced the way I think about time. Rocking a baby to sleep, for example—it feels conclusionary, yet my day is far from over.

I am quite drawn to your use of color. What materials do you utilize to accomplish the hazy, glowing affect often found in your works?

Currently I'm committed to oil paint on linen, and wax pastel on paper. The glow affect is an illusion achieved through color relativity and applying overlays of pigment (versus blending). That, and I don't wear my glasses when I work!

In the spirit of reflection, what was a particularly life-changing opportunity or moment for you as an artist?

When I met Ryan and Garrett, the directors of Massey Klein Gallery, I'd recently had a series of discouraging studio visits with people I looked up to. There was one person in particular who told me my work would be more interesting with sex and violence. Now it's laughable because my work couldn't be further from violent and I'm clearly more interested in sensual over sexual, but at the time it was tough because I really wanted to feel seen.



Ryan and Garrett came in and asked good questions and looked very closely at my work—any artist will tell you it's rare for someone to spend time viewing their art in this fast-moving, capitalist nightmare we all live in.

From that first studio visit, I felt they “got it.” They’ve also “gotten” my evolution. Not just conceptually but materially, too. When we met, I was working exclusively with colored pencil; three years later I decided to return to oil paint, which had been my primary medium prior to the pandemic/my grad school-induced material rebellion. Massey Klein couldn't have been more supportive. I've heard so many stories about artists feeling locked into a particular concept or medium, and I'm grateful that hasn't been my experience.

What is one thing about yourself that others may not see as related to your art practice, but actually is?

I'm a good person to have around in a crisis. Artists are problem solvers. And not only that, I also recover at rapid rate when I fail, tons of experience. Locked out of your apartment? Call me.

What is your dream project, if time and money were unlimited?

I'd quit my day job and work full time in my studio. I'd pursue a passion project that would be unlikely to sell but extremely cool to look at, say a painting or drawing that wraps around an entire room.



ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MASSEY KLEIN GALLERY