

laura lewis

The In-Between

September 12 - November 8, 2024

For her exhibition *The In-Between*, Winnipeg artist Laura Lewis paints larger-than-life portraits of her queer artist friends to explore psychosexuality, gender, vulnerability, melancholy and identity. Her subject-collaborators are comfortable in their bodies -- they command our attention, looking back at us with confidence and poise. Through Laura's work, the gallery space is given over to queer folk in a tangible way, rendering a diversity of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals and challenging antiquated, cis-heteronormative notions of figurative painting. Informed by Lewis's technical understanding of colour theory, these sensuous works oscillate between broad gestural brushstrokes and finely rendered detail which are metaphors for the construction of identity, conveying a sense of figurative fluctuation or "in-betweenness".

The planned exhibit program furthers the spirit of collaboration in which Lewis creates her paintings and Gallery 1Co3's intention to offer a safe space in which to affirm and empower 2SLGBTQIA+ artists and build community connections. Featured artists Shaneela Boodoo, Mahlet Cuff, Christina Hajjar, Jessie Jannuska, Julian K. and Malaikah Rang'inya have written brief responses to Lewis's paintings of them and several of the artists will participate in a public conversation as it relates to representations of queerness and their own creative practices in the local arts community.

In a time when 2SLGBTQIA+ rights are constantly under threat, it is vital that institutions such as university art galleries boldly assert the integral presence of diverse gender identities and expressions in our society and explore the nuance of varied perspectives offered by queer folk. "The In-Between" responds to campus-wide efforts to commit to actions that help foster a university community that is not only inclusive but anti-oppressive.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Laura Lewis is a queer visual artist originally from Kijipuktuk (Halifax, Nova Scotia) currently based in Treaty 1 Territory (Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada). Her conceptual figurative painting practice explores philosophical questions concerning psychosexuality, the multiplicities of self, and nuances of the human condition.

Lewis graduated in 2018 with a combined degree from NSCAD and the School of Art, University of Manitoba BFA Honours program. She is the founder and facilitator of Critical Painting Perspectives, presented by Mentoring Artists for Women's Art (MAWA). She has participated in artist residencies at the Banff Centre for the Arts and Creativity, and in Civita Castellana, Italy. She was featured in the 2023 Painting issue of *Border Crossings Magazine* (interview by Robert Enright). In 2024 her work was exhibited at various institutions across Canada including Modern Fuel, MAWA, acartinc. and Gallery 1Co3 at the University of Winnipeg.

ABOUT THE SUBJECT-COLLABORATORS

Shaneela Boodoo (she/her) is a graduate of the University of Manitoba with a BFA (Honours) in Design and is also a recent graduate of the University of Winnipeg with an MA in Cultural Studies. She is a second-generation Indo-Caribbean immigrant, born and based in Winnipeg, MB. As an emerging artist, designer, and curator, Boodoo explores the entanglements of themes such as colonialism, displacement, and womanhood.

Mahlet Cuff (b.1998) is an Afro-Caribbean queer femme born and based in Winnipeg Manitoba (Treaty 1). They are a multidisciplinary artist, curator, filmmaker, writer, film programmer, DJ, sound artist and arts cultural worker. Through a primarily lens-based arts practice, they are interested in themes of memory, erasure, Black feminist citational praxis and interrogating their own personal familial archives. They use photography and video as a way to look at the past, as a way to re-envision the present, and to create new futures. Cuff's work has been exhibited in Winnipeg, Toronto, Windsor, New York and Milwaukee. Within their writing practice, they strive to make connections between contemporary art and socio-political issues. Cuff is interested in highlighting works by under-represented artists within the art canon. They have written pieces for *BlackFlash*, *Peripheral Review*, *Cmag*, *Public Parking* and *Akimbo* and Platform Centre for Photographic + Digital Arts. Cuff's interest as a curator focuses on the ways that Black women and gender non-conforming artists are able to use critical fabulation as a way to understand themselves and their histories. She has curated work for Window Winnipeg, Take Home BIPOC arts house, Winnipeg Underground Film Festival, The Dave Barber Cinematheque, the8fest, Vancouver Queer Film Festival, Nocturne Festival, BlackFlash Expanded, and VTape. They have been on film juries for the Toronto Queer Film Festival, Reel Asian Film Festival, Gimli International Film Festival, Breakthroughs Film Festival and WNDX Moving Image Film Festival.

Christina Hajjar is a Lebanese artist, writer, and cultural worker based in Winnipeg on Treaty 1 Territory. Her practice considers intergenerational inheritance, domesticity, and place through diaspora, body archives, and cultural iconography. As a queer femme and first-generation subject, she is invested in the poetics of process, translation, and collaborative labour. Hajjar edits *Herizons Magazine*, *Carnation Zine* and *qumra journal*. She won a 2021 Broken Pencil Zine Award, 2020 PLATFORM Photography Award, and an honourable mention for the 2021 Emerging Digital Artists Award. Hajjar's writing has appeared in *BlackFlash Magazine*, *C Magazine*, *The Uniter*, *CV2*, *Prairie Fire*, and *PaperWait*. Learn more at christinahajjar.com.

Jessie Jannuska is a Winnipeg-based visual artist and art workshop facilitator who received her BFA from Brandon University in 2018. She is mixed Dakota, Ojibway, and settler. Her family is from Canupawakpa Dakota Nation. Her chosen media include beadwork, acrylic, watercolor, mixed media, crankies, and murals. Jannuska's work explores her Indigenous culture through a cathartic lens by blending realism, contemporary beadwork style, and symbolism representing Indigenous spirituality and healing. She utilizes themes of Indigenous female empowerment, commentary on Indigenous issues, and often features strong female role models. Her most recent award was the CAC Research and Creation grant in 2023.

Julian K (he/they) is an interdisciplinary artist and writer based in Treaty One. His work explores inadequacy, queerness, trans identity, failure, and play! These ideas are often explored through humour and pushing the boundaries between personal and public.

Malaikah Rang'inya (she/ they) is a queer multidisciplinary performance artist currently based in Treaty 1 Territory, Winnipeg. Her work explores relational aesthetics through interactive public performances, installations, poetry, ritual and decorative arts. Weaving ideas of the self as the canvas, she seeks to bring healing to herself and her various communities through her practice. She has performed and exhibited at *Partial View: A Cartae Open School Exhibition* at *aceartinc.* in 2019. In 2023 she collaborated with Eve Tagny and Sappfyre Mcleod for Tagny's exhibition *As yet to be established* at The Centre for Culture and Artistic Practices (C-CAP) in Winnipeg. Rang'inya also frequently performs at local queer institutions such as Club 200 through both drag and dance. She is a stage manager for Synonym Arts Consultation's GORGE fest, an annual celebration of the legacy and future of 2SLGBTQIA+ art and drag, based in Winnipeg. Rang'inya has collaborated with numerous local artists for over a decade on countless projects including films, photoshoots, and public performances.

Subject-Collaborator Responses

There's something about being immortalized forever in a painting that makes you really think about what led you to this moment. One day you're thinking: "Should I buy this top from Amazon?" and the next, you've caught yourself contemplating how that top that you barely wear, but somehow did on that day, might be perceived by future generations within the contemporary art canon.



In short – who am I here? Do I feel like this is an accurate depiction of me?

Well, this isn't my saccharine, calamitous insides exposed to the world. It is also not my amused smirk, nor my sardonic grin. It is however, the studded, shining, immovable exterior – the girl who wore red lipstick for the first time when she was 17 and never took it off. The one who calmly realized she was queer when she was 10. The one that has been compelled to clomp around in combat boots since she was 14. The same one whose long fingers get tangled and moves them just as awkwardly as when she was 8, captured almost perfectly here in this image. The girl that I can say these things about, matter-of-factly, buoyant on the surface.

Ah. I see. I know her now. This is the one that is poised, hardened, but still luminous. Every tearstain, every realization, every outermost moment brought me here, to her. And I say – I really love this one, I do, but I can't wait for another side of you.

-Shaneela Boodoo

Everything stays right where you left it

As I revisited my journal, I delved into the diary entries from the time when the image capturing my essence was taken. The words “I am blank, I am blank” echoed, a mantra to reassure myself of my worth beyond mere appearances.

I was trying to convince myself of what I am not, a way of self-soothing the amount of uncertainty so present in my life.

The portrait before me, veiled in grief and pain, failed to reveal the beauty I now recognize in that version of myself. I reminisce on this version of myself as I was growing out my hair which is a long and grueling process. While the process is slow I seemed so sure of my queerness with this short haircut and felt that I was as fluid as I could be. There is frustration, anger and sadness in my eyes that I was



wanting to come across as stoic. With my strong gaze and pursed lips reflected back at the viewer, I am held together by the memory of who I once was and who I am wanting to become.

Now, as I gaze upon the portrait adorned in lush baby pink, I embrace the shape-shifting nature that accommodates my inherent softness. The softness that carries all the vulnerabilities I encapsulate

as a Black queer genderfluid femme. The vulnerabilities of shame, heartache and undesirability to coexist with embodying pleasure, sensuality, and feeling powerful. I yearn to reconnect with that version of myself, if only physically, yet I am grateful for the captured interpretation that serves as a timeless reminder of the love I hold for my past self.

-Mahlet Cuff

Drag is my permission to express femininity, play with gender, and tap into everything that I had to “give up” in order to be taken seriously as an AFAB transgender youth of the early 2010’s. I was made to feel there was very little acceptable space between male and female. I felt some of the darkest and most unsafe moments in my life when I was early into transitioning and did not “pass” as everyone’s idea of male. The fear of engaging with femininity was real as it could only further invalidate my identity to others, even the people who meant well. It hurts to know a fundamental truth about yourself - only to have it be met with disbelief, debate, and bargaining not to change.



The space created by Laura, and my decision to pose as Deb, truly made for an accurate portrait of my queer identity – beautifully bearded, curvy, and a cause for question.

One more thing: Deb smokes, Julian doesn't.

-Julian K.

Being part of this process has been a reflective experience for me. In 2021 Laura gave me free rein to express myself authentically during the photo shoot. I chose to wear colours and textures that I thought would be visually engaging, like the ostrich feather garment and my Bantu knots. Even the magenta lipstick was a last-minute decision that added another element of complexity to the painting.

The final result was a close-up that captured the essence of what I envisioned: vibrant, deeply saturated colors that showcase my personality without feeling

muted. Seeing myself painted larger than life was both jarring and exhilarating. The painting freezes an intense part of my personality, causing me to confront myself in a way I can't escape. It's a bit uncomfortable but also empowering, knowing what others see when engaging with this confident version of myself. This piece is a true collaboration that encapsulates both our visions beautifully. It's rare to see a portrait that doesn't feel like a performance, but instead captures an authentic, unguarded moment. The intense gaze, something I didn't realize I possessed, adds a confrontational yet honest element to the piece. It feels like an intimate moment of poised tension.



-Malaikah Rang'inya



Depicting us in classic gay denim on denim, Laura's soft pink hues melt me deeper into my partner's embrace. Our love is immortalized. Our love may travel to more places than we will—an ultimate act of PDA. I wish for more expressions of queer love everywhere. (Queer as in Free Palestine). In this embrace, I notice every subtlety in our body language. I know she is protecting me from this world, even when my affection is more forward. She receives me; our bodies are in harmony. Laura paints the textures of our flow. I imagine swaying peach flowers among us, like luscious sword lilies, and sunsets that streak magnificent colours across the sky. I think of the legacy

of arab lesbians and their old kissing photographs still circulated proudly online. If there were a queer family tree, it would lead to the same conclusion that defiant femininity is my lifeblood. The sensuality of this fact drips off the canvas. I press my vulnerability into my girl and we seep out the ember's glow. I wish to hold her, but I already am; the fire grows.

-Christina Hajjar



As an adult, I have begun healing my childhood trauma, finding confidence in myself and my plus-size Indigenous body. Posing for Laura's painting helped on my journey toward better self-care, personal growth, and happiness. To me, this painting captures a pivotal transformation within myself. I have overcome being trapped in a negative mindset that never envisioned me living beyond my twenties to becoming a proud Dakota/Ojibway woman walking the Red Road. I'm beginning to slowly embrace my queer identity.

-Jessie Jannuska

LIST OF WORKS

Artworks are listed in order of their appearance, beginning with paintings along the east side of the gallery and continuing clockwise. Dimensions are in inches and listed as height x width. All works collection of the artist.

Deb (from Winnipeg), 2024, oil on canvas, 72" x 96".

Embrace, 2022, oil on canvas, 72" x 60".

Jessie in Blue, 2022, oil on canvas, 60" x 120".

Mahlet in Mauve, 2023, oil on canvas, 60" x 72".

Malaiakah in Ostrich Feathers, 2023, oil on canvas, 72" x 60".

Shaneela in Burgundy, 2023, oil on canvas, 60" x 72".

EXHIBITION HOURS

Monday - Friday between 12:00 and 4:00 pm from September 12 until November 8, 2024 (closed September 30 and October 14).

AFFILIATED EVENTS

Workshop: Queering the Figure: Reinterpreting Realism Through Abstraction:

Tuesday, October 1, 2:00 – 4:00 pm. For 2SLGBTQIA+ people.

Pre-registration required on Gallery 1C03 website.

Discussion with the artists: Thursday, November 7, 4:00 – 5:15 pm, Room 2M70 at The University of Winnipeg.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Gallery 1C03 is located on Treaty One Territory, heartland of the Red River Métis, and ancestral lands of the Anishinaabe, Ininew, Anishinew, Dakota Oyate, and Denesuline. We acknowledge that our water is sourced from Shoal Lake 40 First Nation.

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Gallery 1C03

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