

My practice began as a visual diary in my early teens. It wasn't intentional. There was a canvas in the basement that my dad intended to paint on, but like some of his coolest jackets, I took it, bought two jars of black and white acrylic paint and made it my own. I had a lot of time and space growing up as an only child to observe myself and others closely. I had a lot of questions too, surrounding identity, sexuality, womanhood and that strange feeling of somehow being disconnected from both myself and those around me. *The realization that I am my body, but that my body is something other than me.* The existential angst of a teen certainly manifests itself in many ways, for me it was through painting and that one time I shaved half my head. Painting came to me in the form of a female and she started to provide guidance and answers. Through abstract markings I could sift through what it might mean to be in this body and through representation of the form, these explorations would have a home. Painting quickly grew to be my closest sibling; a twin shadow in tandem with my evolution throughout this life, she moves when I move.

Through my paintings I tell the interior stories that inhabit the underworld of a woman's body and soul and dictate her outward presence and self perception within the world at large. Embedded in the universal phenomenon of *othering*, these internal stories are the amalgam of experiences, both current and inherited, by individuals and groups classified as not belonging to society's elusive norms. When we're either being cast away for who we are or casting away ourselves for fear of who we are, the result is a world crowded with division, anxiety and rejection in all forms and on every level. For woman, this divide travels back in time to the root of her existence, for the moment she is born she is an other to herself; operating on a cycle that does not personally concern her but that which is housed in her- her body belongs to the species, she to her body and her body to the world. This alienation of self sinks deeper for the woman of color, adept in molding to the myriad of environments within a world constantly looking to her as pure inspiration- simultaneously resting on her shoulders while seeking to repress her at all costs.

Who Am I When No One is Around? suggests that even in the privacy of her own home, when the shapeshifting is no longer required, her true identity is still lost on her. Hand in hand, she holds dear a shadowy figure, perhaps her own, grasping for an answer to her query.

Othering plays a particularly fatal role in the lives of black male bodies especially in America. The perpetual dehumanization of her sons, fathers and brothers result in an omnipresent celestial aching that lingers like a phantom limb in her self actualization. She looks up to the ever changing clouds and dreams of something better for the *Brothers (in the sky)*.

The Day I Went Mad or The Sphinx epitomizes a year in my life when my world started to expand rapidly and suddenly everything I knew about how to operate became outdated- and we all know what happens on an outdated iOS. An error occurs. Access is denied. Faceless and exposed, you have lost yourself and the help line is automated. When a woman continues to operate under outdated value systems, her soul becomes starved and she goes mad. She cannot see and she cannot hear; she loses ground. But what I have learned is that there will always be a clear hand, a portal of sorts providing a pathway back home and a desire to return. She is still the sphinx, the guardian of her temple- the one to solve her own riddle. And so, I ventured in.

What are you Looking For? My Ego walked out the Door... is a painting I started a year ago, at the beginning of what would be my darkest hour and subsequent ego death. She paced around the corridors of her psyche in search of something familiar- something or someone who could be me. I picked up some self destructive habits and some great ones too. But overall, it was a cloudy, dense place and she couldn't live. I stopped painting. It wasn't intentional.

About a year later, I started to come out of my dark place and my desire to paint peaked like a light at the end of the tunnel just around the time Cassius approached me about pairing one of my paintings with his single, 'Brown Skin Girls'. *Unsettled* from 2014 became the face of this project. Interesting, I thought, how she's resurfaced and brought new life with her... I saw this as a chance to build up the courage I had lost, the courage that is key to creating anything and to just let her live. I had wanted to realize this self portrait, a photo taken after I'd challenged myself to get into shape in under a month. I had cut the calories, I did the workouts, I took the pics and proceeded to my local iHop for my usual for the months that followed. The abs didn't stick, but the photo did. My hair looks great, full and curly, the stance is vulnerable yet strong, but my eyes, they lack luster. And so, I decided to reimagine her as this sort of new version of myself: Lauren 2021, with kind eyes.

As the days passed, I became transfixed with making some sort of immaculate self-portrait and more and more hesitant to put anything down on canvas. I wanted to paint an ideal vision of myself I had in my head, but there was just one problem: I am not her. I am not the idea of myself. I am not the girl from the photo, who looked strong but was secretly hungry. I'm not who I was yesterday and I'm not who I might be tomorrow. My mother insists that she can't see her hair, and I like that, because she isn't her hair. She isn't even a defined body. She is neither the projection nor the perception of herself. So who is she? She's energy. A merge of the elements- of the substances we are made of. She's a remembrance that we are supported by the Earth and lifted up by the sky and that we are never truly alone. She is everyone, entitled equally under the laws of nature to grow and thrive. She is the whisper that pulls you back and says you can keep going now, there is more out there. She is the face of benevolence, the spiritual landscape that connects us all and the hand that will always hold yours on the path back home to your soul. She is *The Resurrection*.

I have long struggled to put into writing the work I feel guided to create. It is my greatest hope that you now have a clear understanding of what goes on inside my experience. It's with great honor, love and joy that I get to share my work with you in this way for the first time. Thank you for bearing witness to *Her, Unfolding*.

~ Lauren Kelisha Muller ~

New York, 2021

SPECIAL THANKS TO
Kente Royal Gallery
Saint Cassius
Vinyl Crown

Brianna-Lynn Burwell - Creative Director & Events/Video Producer
Carmelo Varela - Video Director/DP
Tyrone Rhaab - DP & Video Editor
Kris Rosa - Graphic Designer
Daysha Luz - Assistant Video Producer

Andrea C Parra - Set Designer
Ron Bell - Carpenter
David McLeod - Install Technician
Michael McLeod - Install Technician
Brian Suber - Install Technician