

Nineteen Eighty-Five: Natia Lemay Goes Beneath The Surface in her First NYC Solo Show



Natia Lemay (2023). Photo Courtesy of Arielle Gray.

Natia Lemay: *Nineteen Eighty-Five*

Yossi Milo Gallery

May 11 through June 17, 2023

By **BYRON ARMSTRONG**, May 2023

From May 11th to June 17th, 2023, Yossi Milo Gallery will show the work of New Haven, CT-based emerging artist Natia Lemay in her first solo exhibition: *Natia Lemay: Nineteen Eighty-Five*. The Yale MFA candidate has a busy year ahead, boasting summer group shows at Venus over Manhattan and Charlie James Gallery in LA, as well as an invite to the Chanel Artists dinner after donating work to the 2023 Tribeca Film Festival. *Nineteen Eighty-Five* calls back to the artist's year of birth, where, according to her artist statement, "*Lemay's paintings and sculptures are the results of this investigative process, allowing the artist to recuperate lost memories, and trace a path of trauma and dispossession beginning with settler colonialism and leading up to the present day.*"

In his essay, *The Decay of Lying: An Observation* (1889), Oscar Wilde declared “Life imitates art far more than art imitates life.” Lemay’s work in *Nineteen Eighty-Five* provides supportive evidence of Wilde’s theory through her recollection of living in 26 different homes. Discussing the themes of the show ahead of the opening, Lemay explained how her lived experience as an Afro-Indigenous child caught in a familial cycle of abuse is reflected in every painting like a self-portrait. “It’s a reflection on a violent childhood when I didn’t have the language to ask what was happening, but had an awareness that things were not how they should be,” explains Lemay from her Yale studio, where the artist is wrapping up her graduate studies. “So for me, this whole body of work was a form of healing where I recreated my feelings in those spaces, and then after I completed each painting, reflected on it.”

This process included critical research and theory that allowed her to explore complicated intersectional family dynamics, and better understand how those challenges impacted her without even knowing it. It shows up in her *Flowers for Mom and Dad* (2023) floral series which will be on view at the show, a series of four paintings that express her relationship with a drug-addicted parent. Looking specifically at *The Unwanted Gift pt. 1* (2023), which is far from an on-the-nose depiction of heroin addiction and abuse, Lemay chooses to hide drug paraphernalia in the flower. Two poppies spring from a “Pic-a-Pop” bottle, a popular Manitoba-based soda company Lemay enjoyed as a child, and are a nod to both her family’s history of wartime service and for Lemay — who is Canadian and raised in Winnipeg — nostalgia. “It looks like flowers and only people that would actually know what the paraphernalia looks like can find it,” says Lemay, who also points out a connection between heroin being an opioid derived from flowers.



Natia Lemay, *The Unwanted Gift pt. 1* (2023), oil on panel.

Her figurative work also follows the same pattern of obscuring the otherwise obvious, speaking to how old memories work — often fragmented, with specific highlights usually remembered through a form of tunnel vision that focuses on the moment and the emotion it evokes, versus specific imagery. “I’m more interested in the emotional quality of those spaces and how when you’re looking at this figure in this space, you kind of feel the anxiety, tension, and loneliness without being too direct because I don’t think it’s necessary,” Lemay says before adding, “anyone that’s grown up in cycles of poverty and violence already knows what that is and doesn’t need to see it again in a painting.”

As an Afro-Indigenous artist, Lemay is cautious about the way her trauma, Blackness, and Indigeneity are represented in her work, both for herself and the broader community. As someone who grew up with an illiterate father and both parents struggling with addiction, Lemay deliberately strays from the sort of easily accessible trauma porn that plays to outside audiences attracted to those narratives. “I grew up in abusive households, started working at 13, and raised my siblings in a very rough place. Let’s be honest, my life story is like candy to a lot of white collectors,” observes Lemay, who admits to being strategic about how she reveals her work. “I wanted to talk about the things that made me who I am, good or bad, in a way that didn’t re-victimize me or my community since those kinds of depictions aren’t entertainment to us. I don’t look at art or watch films that portray violence or drug abuse because I saw that enough as a kid, so I’m very careful about how I paint these subjects.”



Natia Lemay, *You'll Get a better Look at The world, and The World Will Get a Better Look at You* (2023), oil on canvas.

sculpture drawing from several famous executions, including the hangings of 38 Dakota Indians in Mankato, Minnesota ordered by then-president Lincoln in 1862. Much like Bryant, the outrage was swift as members of the Indigenous Dakota community protested the exhibit for its rehashing of intergenerational trauma. Even Kara Walker, an African American artist, took more than her fair share of critique over *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014), a massive Egyptian sphinx reimagined as a mammy trope made of bleached sugar installed inside a former Domino Sugar Refinery in Brooklyn, NY. It was a monument of sorts to the Black people who were enslaved and crushed under the weight of Europe and “The New World’s” insatiable lust for sugar, as well as a jarring representation of how Black women’s bodies have been dissected by the white gaze throughout history. But, it was challenging for viewers, who seemed split between it being a work of genius or further degradation of the people it was meant to monumentalize. Where Lemay’s story is concerned, debates over censorship appear to be of less concern than the well-being of the community being represented by and engaging with her work.

To understand Lemay’s reticence to give power to the pain inflicted on herself and her community, one could point to the uproar over artist Dana Schutz’s *Open Casket* (2016) displayed at the 2017 Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Schutz, a white woman, depicted the mangled remains of 14-year-old Emmitt Till, lynched by a crowd of racists in 1955 Mississippi for sexually offensive overtures made toward Carolyn Bryant, another white woman who admitted some 60 years later her accusation was a lie and never had to answer for it. Sam Durant’s *Scaffold*, shown in the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2017, was a fifty-foot

“I’ve thought a lot about how Black, Brown, and Indigenous bodies have been fetishized in art and how there was this myth of what our art should look like, especially in the art market,” says Lemay, cognizant of being on both the Black and Indigenous sides of that equation. She has a disdain toward what she perceives as an obsession American galleries and collectors have with “traditionally native” materials and their sourcing, a way for native artists to have to mythologize their Indigeneity. She points out that her daughter is both Mi’kmaq and Cree, her stepfather was Ojibwa, her birth father was mixed black and Mi’kmaw, and she has resided in several places — displacement and mixed communal living is a reality she points out many Indigenous people share. “So I don’t think it’s necessary for me to be painting on hide with braided sweetgrass to be a native artist,” Lemay bristles. “I made shit out of random objects in the street, which is historically part of the native experience — using what is accessible responsibly — so why do I now have to grind my own pigments? Our experience has been around the loss of traditions, and the act of reclamation is dynamic, changing, and doesn’t need to be rooted in any one thing.”

As for Black artists in America, Lemay sees an obsession with the figure as another limitation. “They want the black body on the wall and don’t want to look at abstract or more experimental work. I have friends and peers here that are black artists but do abstract work, and they don’t get anywhere near as much attention as someone like me because I paint the body,” Lemay acknowledges. “Even with me, people miss the intersectional layers in my work because they just see the Black figure and assume it’s all about Blackness. It ironically proves the point that people can’t see below the surface and tend to put you in a box.” Having this awareness has influenced Lemay’s use of Black in her paintings. The color is a psychological space with weight and is difficult to photograph, which is strategic. “It’s another way of protecting my story because the work requires viewers to see them in person and spend time with each piece so that it’s taken seriously.”

Where Natia Lemay’s work is concerned, every painting tells a story. There’s only one question remaining.

Is the art world ready to see beyond the surface to understand the full narrative? **WM**