

ARTSY

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## NATHANIEL OLIVER'S NARRATIVE PAINTINGS OF CONTEMPORARY BLACK LIFE ARE CAPTIVATING COLLECTORS

by Ayanna Dozierl



Nathaniel Oliver, installation view in HOUSING's booth at The Armory Show, 2022. Photo by Calli Roche. Courtesy of HOUSING, NY.

At The Armory Show this past September, the booth for New York gallery HOUSING, devoted to the paintings of Nathaniel Oliver, blew me away. I was immediately impressed by the deft brushstrokes that coat the artist's large-scale, narrative oil paintings of Black life.

His canvas *Hurry, Before it Turns* (2022), for example, features a vibrant arrangement of primary colors against shades of brown. It depicts a narrative of Black people in flight, recalling the world-building, story-driven paintings of mid-century artist and educator Charles White. Oliver, too, captures the aspirations and struggles of Black life amid increased police violence.

I was hardly the only fan at the fair: The booth's small, mighty presentation of four large-scale paintings swiftly sold out by midday on Thursday. Over the past two years, in fact, the emerging artist has made shockwaves through the primary market, selling large-scale figurative paintings priced at \$42,000–\$65,000 a piece.

Oliver's success comes as no surprise amid the larger contemporary art landscape: His virtuosic, narrative-driven paintings of contemporary Black life evoke those of such luminaries as Noah Davis, Ernie Barnes, Kerry James Marshall, and Aaron Douglas. Oliver uniquely captures cultural rage and the aftermath of such events as

the 2020 police killing of George Floyd.

The young artist's work has become a favorite for collectors who appreciate his seriousness and dedication to the craft. His gallerist KJ Freeman describes him as an emerging master in the field of painting. I spoke with Freeman, founder and director of HOUSING, in late September to learn more about what sets Oliver's market apart from those of his peers.

Born in 1996 in Washington, D.C., the artist received his BFA in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2018, and his career has been on a steady incline ever since. The year 2020 was a breakthrough for the artist, who is now based in New York; he received representation from HOUSING that year. This proved a watershed moment for Freeman, as well.

HOUSING showed Oliver in The Armory Show 2021 as part of a two-artist booth with the work of Allana Clarke. The booth was the recipient of The Armory Show's Gramercy International Prize. Freeman described that moment as revelatory. "That moment made him a contender," she said. She noted that it feels bizarre to describe Oliver's work in such a market-oriented way, given her aversion to market talk, though "a great artist is always attached to a great myth."

"Nathaniel has not had the bells and [whistles] that fabricate the [usual] market success story," Freeman said. In other words, he has not profited from the steady group shows, press, interviews, major institutional residencies, and fellowships that usually grant an artist market success.

Yet Freeman also mentioned that institutional acquisitions can be meaningful markers of success for an artist, even if they often go overlooked in the press. What matters for Oliver's continued primary-market success is that collectors, including museums, take notice of his craft. In 2021, Oliver's alma mater, the Rhode Island School of Design, purchased one of his works for its permanent collection, marking his first institutional placement.

As Oliver's success continues, HOUSING has to grow in order to both meet the demand for his work and facilitate the artist's success. The gallery has established a brick-and-mortar location in the Lower East Side of Manhattan and partnered with more established galleries like Karma.

"I like the idea of collaborating and positioning the artist in the trajectory that is right for them," Freeman said. The gallery has also protected Oliver by bringing in a bigger gallery to help sell his work. Oliver co-signed to Karma in 2022, which ensures that his paintings will not be quickly flipped; the larger gallery's financial situation means that it can help stave off secondary-market inflation and keep fueling and prioritizing the artist's primary market.

"It's a faith-based system," Freeman added. At the beginning, the gallerist made the difficult decision of pricing his work at \$10,000, which was above the standard

market for figurative paintings by Black artists. “His work is so phenomenal that you cannot deny the prices,” she said, “but I also had to strengthen the reasons for why those prices were [what they were].” Alluding to the faith-based system of the market, Freeman believes that both her seriousness as a gallerist and Oliver’s dedication to his craft is what ultimately won over collectors to secure his success.

“Many people who buy [his] work are avid collectors who are on museum boards, so there is an understanding of [the value] of his process and work,” Freeman said. She likened his work to a best-kept-secret restaurant—everyone who’s “in the know” knows it’s phenomenal, even if it’s not so highly publicized.

Freeman also noted that media attention for artists is often unrelated to whether or not the artists are doing well. The art world is inundated with “trendy headlines”—Freeman pointed to the recent Sotheby’s contemporary auction curated by Robert Pattinson as an example. “Why is Batman curating contemporary art and why do we know about it?” she questioned. In her view, Oliver deserves more recognition for his phenomenal work.

There is a seriousness to Oliver’s practice that is rare for an artist in his twenties. “Oliver is less interested in the sociality of the arts and more focused about his studio practice. And when an artist is concerned about their craft as he is, collectors, curators, and artists can sense that,” Freeman said. “Our journey with Nathaniel is to protect his autonomy as an artist.”