

CALIDA RAWLES



Portrait by Glen Wilson. All artwork, including the portrait courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London.

STEVE MILLER: *Musée is a photography magazine and so I wanted to delve into some of the structural photographic aspects of your work and some of the cultural implications as well. I noticed that, on some level, the final work of art, the actual painting is the end point of a performance piece that you orchestrate and document through photographs. Is it accurate to describe your process as a performance piece?* **CALIDA RAWLES:** I think you are right. I never thought of my process, in such a way. And it's true. I know what I want to get from the models. I usually go in with an idea and I try to get that at first in the photo shoot. Then I let the model move around and just see what can happen organically with me going under or above water...moving all around to see the natural inspiration that comes. But I always have an energy or at least the spirit that I want to come through in mind. And it's about finding the right model to give me the look, the expression that goes with the meaning behind the painting that I can illustrate physically in the water. **STEVE:** *You direct a film of a performance and you have an idea of what the script is and, obviously, it's going to mutate depending on conditions.* **CALIDA:** Yes. I like the way you said it. Exactly. **STEVE:** *You take 400 to 500 photos for a shoot, and I'm wondering why so many? How do you sort them? Do you use technical tools like Photoshop to weave them together? Or do you ever get one image that says yeah, this is it?* **CALIDA:** I take a lot because at times it's kind of like... a blind process. I use my iPhone. I don't use a professional underwater camera. The photo itself is a reference that I'm going to use as inspirations and bounce from. The iPhone is nimble and can move with it. But I do plan on using professional cameras for other ideas that I have. I take a lot of photos because I can enjoy the face in one photo, the arm and body in another. I can find so much in the various images. I filter through the 400 or 500 photos over a couple days. I get it down to 100, let's say, then I get those to the best 20. I don't use Photoshop. I connect them in my mind. At times, I put four or five pictures up on a monitor and then I look at areas that I like from this and paint from there. And sometimes the paint or what I do with the paint brush dictates the next movement of how I can connect it to make it look real. I'm working on a piece right now where I love the body but, the water itself, I'm not using because the water didn't do anything for me. I'm looking at various forms of water from different shoots and making up the water around the subject. You could say, it's almost like building a quilt. **STEVE:** *This issue of Musée is about performance. One of the most stunning compositions in your show at Lehmann Maupin was of your husband. It was so beautifully framed in the lower part of that painting that you called Requiem for My Navigator. Performance is one of the focal points in your work. What influences your choices of who you portray?* **CALIDA:** With the Lehmann's show, I was really thinking about black men. How they are seen or not seen. I used my husband as a subject because he is the closet Black man in my life. With my show *A Dream for My Lilith*, I thought a lot about the struggles Black females endure, like colorism and the impact of adultification on young Black girls. My daughter was 14 at the time and thought about how some may not see her as innocent or young. The model becomes less of a portrait and more of a symbol. **STEVE:** *As a painter, it always seems like there's a reason to paint something as opposed to taking a photograph. In your case, you literally described this physical experience of water. Did you ever think about the*



Calida Rawles, *High Tide, Heavy Armor*, 2021. Artwork photographed by Daniel Kukla.



Calida Rawles, *Reflecting My Grace*, 2019. Artwork photographed by Marten Elder.

intersection of using liquid to describe liquid? **CALIDA:** I have not thought about that, but it is interesting. I paint with acrylic, but a lot of people mistake my work for oil. I apply the acrylic in thin layers like watercolor almost. I water it down. I never thought of that connection. It's just been my painting style. **STEVE:** *That's one of the ways you create light. As the light passes through a thin layer of paint, it hits the light of the canvas and it bounces back and that gives you a little kind of transparency and light. You're using liquid to paint liquid light and it's incredible.* **CALIDA:** Oh, thank you. My biggest thing is the light. I think about it. It's the way the light bounces off the water that I love. It looks godly. I enjoy that the light takes the work into a place of other-worldliness and creates a spiritual connection to the figure. I think at the very, very essence I'm interested in the dichotomies in life... the balancing of it all. Like, there are no truly good or bad people. There are acts...moments. There's energy. To me it's all about balancing these things to become who we are. When I look at the water...the waves, I think of trying to make it through something that's so scary. At the same time, in the same environment, it can be so relaxing... feel so good. I mean what better metaphor can I have to describe life? **STEVE:** *How does this is physically immersive experience of underwater sound influence what I see as the silence of your painting?* **CALIDA:** I mean, that's it. When I'm underwater, I can hear the muddled movements. It's this weird silence... this peace. I guess that's why people use the sounds of water to go to sleep. It's so therapeutic and relaxing. It makes me feel really good when I'm underwater. **STEVE:** *This floating transcendence with your figures is part the awe that you have in an artistic tradition which some people call the sublime. You also have this kind of a ecstatic painting with El Greco which might be closer to what I see in your work. In fact, your water allows some of the same kinds of attenuation and distortions to accentuate an emotion. I was wondering how much you were thinking about that using this sort of transcendent experience to elevate the spirit.* **CALIDA:** Yes, for sure. I definitely want to have the emotions come out. I looked for that. Either something in the eyes or in the movement of my subject. The expression is very important. And the water can take it to another level of emotional connection with the viewer. **STEVE:** *From the viewpoint of science, you can't step into the same river twice, because it's never the same. It's always in motion. Humans must be continually plugged into flowing energy and flowing materials. I see all this connectivity in your work. Do you ever think about this stuff?* **CALIDA:** Yeah. Yeah. Oh definitely. The energy flow and the connection to something larger than yourself is how I'm interpreting what you're saying. When I think of water and that it is recyclable. I think of the bodies lost in the water, even through Middle Passage. Where did they go? They dissolved in the water and became sentiment at the bottom of the ocean and then that water gets recycled up and goes around and around, The energy did not leave. The energy that we create is just recycled. And I'm fascinated with that on just the level of the science of water. I love the idea of water having memory and what flowed through it, it's still here. **STEVE:** *There is another aspect of science your work, especially, in the painting Dark Matter. In this one painting, you seem to soften the edge between us and our environment by being dissolved, totally connected and integrated. When we enter as a viewer, we are dissolving into the environment. It's like a new definition of community.* **CALIDA:** I

Calida Rawles, *The Lightness of Darkness*, 2021. Artwork photographed by Marten Elder.

love it. I love that you saw that. I really look forward to pushing what I'm doing further, and yes you could see that there. **STEVE:** *In my mind, looking through these shimmering surfaces and jumping into your painting allows this experience of the connected universe. Does this lack of boundaries open up the world to you?* **CALIDA:** Yeah, I think so. I think it does. Sometimes, I feel like I am trying to figure out the source of it all. I'm trying to make sense out of something larger than myself. I'm not a religious person, but I am highly spiritual. And I try to make sense of why I'm here and what this is about. And when I'm in spaces where it pushes me to think of myself beyond my own station in life or even beyond my experience and go down to the human experience, I get inspired. I'm intrigued. I think about these type of concepts often. I want to inspire people, to feel that connectivity that you mentioned. We're a part of something larger than we can see. I want to feel like this world is beautiful. There is so much beauty in the darkness and even in the sadness and the horrible. It's all at the same time. We're all struggling to figure out how to make this thing work, to find love, happiness, or whatever it is.





Calida Rawles, *On the Other Side of Everything*, 2021. Artwork photographed by Marten Elder.



Calida Rawles, *Requiem for my Navigator*, 2021. Artwork photographed by Marten Elder.



Calida Rawles, *Yesterday Called and Said We Were together*, 2020.
Artwork photographed by Marten Elder.