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Written by: Victor Sandoval

Ninety percent of the world's pink diamonds come from a single mine in Australia, making them incredibly rare. The complex and mysterious geological forces behind the creation of these stones still need to be fully understood, which makes them so unique. Similarly, the rarity of survival, resilience, endurance, relentlessness, intuition, and perhaps a bit of luck have shaped Natia Lemay, making her—and her art—genuinely unique.

Just eight years ago, Natia Lemay began painting in the basement where she was living. At first, it was a way for her to disconnect and create a physical boundary from everyone in her household. "Don't step over there; that's where the art is." became a familiar phrase. The decision to pursue art was bold and met with skepticism from those around her. Family and friends thought she was making a mistake, leaving a steady job in the insurance industry to focus on her creative practice. They pointed out how she had growth opportunities, health care, stable income, and other things people dream of, and she would be just walking away from them. But Natia felt that her well-being and her children were at stake.

As she conveyed, "I was crumbling inside; I had turbulent relationships, my mother, my father, my family. I was dealing with internal issues I didn't talk to people about. This is when trying to get up every day and put on a brave face for my kids was challenging."

In creating, Natia found a sense of peace and purpose. "When doing art, I never wanted to make a thing. It wasn't like, I'm going to paint a person, or I'm going to paint a tree, it was all abstract. It was letting me meditate, create a safe space for myself, and push paint on a canvas."

This process of self-discovery would eventually lead Natia to the hallowed halls of Yale University, where she would pursue and receive a master's degree in fine arts in 2023.

It all began with survival... Natia's first challenge occurred when she was a mere toddler. Her mother, wanting to escape reality, locked Natia and her brother in their bathroom and put them in the bathtub. The children innocently opened the faucet and filled the tub with scalding hot water. Unable to climb out of the bathtub, Natia endured burns to about 40% of her body. She would spend a lot of her childhood in and out of hospitals, learning how to walk and receiving physical therapy. She found little solace at home and lived in different realities between the structure and safety of 24-hour care and attention in the hospital and a constant struggle to survive outside of it.

Living in a low-income neighborhood, her options were few; at times, she was homeless and lived in a constant struggle. Her first job at 13 was as a busser to help her mother pay rent. Spending time between her father's home and her mother gave Natia a different perspective. Her father taught her how to survive and was honest with her. No matter how harsh the reality was or what the wrongful act was. To this day, she appreciated that honesty no matter how hard it was, and it gave her a sense of safety. Her father also instilled in her an appreciation for art and nature as he would carve soapstones in the living room and teach her how to fish and work the land.

At 22 years old, Natia found herself living in a shelter with her daughter and on welfare. Wanting more out of life, she took her child and moved from Winnipeg to Toronto with nothing but desires and dreams. A cousin eventually provided a temporary place to stay for a couple of weeks, but after sleepless nights, she knew she needed to find her own place. Doing her best to rise out of poverty and give herself the tools to succeed, she worked many different jobs during that time, doing hair, telemarketing, sales, KFC, Taco Bell, comedy club hostess, insurance, etc. Income was always tight.



Photos: Courtesy of the Artist



Nevertheless, to educate herself, Natia would learn all she could from a job, then quit and apply for a new job to further enhance her life. During this time, her surroundings were unfavorable; often, her close ones saw Natia's jobs as an opportunity to explore committing crimes, something she always turned down, articulating her ability to endure pressure in an environment that opposes growth but values integrity.

She explains, "In a hood type of environment, the only currency you have is because you don't have money, you don't have assets, and anything else to give to people is authenticity and realness. People don't trust fakes and frauds; it reeks, and you can smell it immediately."

Eventually, after hard work and dedication, Natia climbed the corporate ladder in an insurance company as a VIP underwriter with an assistant and overlooking a multi-million dollar book of business. This new world gave her an inside look into aspects of wealth she had never experienced before. Recalling those times, she mentioned how she found that coming from a low-income background gave her an advantage in dealing with wealthy clientele because she treated them like any other person, was honest, cared, and could relate to them on a human level and not necessarily be intimidated by the client's assets.

Despite her monetary and professional accomplishments, Natia was missing joy inside. In 2017, at 31 years of age, Natia decided to leave the corporate world behind and apply to OCAD (The Ontario College of Art and Design University). She completed her 4-year undergraduate studies and

continued her pursuit of dreams. Despite her surroundings, she applied to Yale MFA in 2021. She got accepted and completed the MFA, all the while taking care of her three children and providing for them, graduating in 2023 at 37 years old. Natia recounts how challenging it was to complete an MFA while caring for three children without much support. However, it provided a place to explore complex themes in her art and find a new world of personal and artistic possibilities.

Natia's unique identity as an Indigenous person from Winnipeg is a constant source of pride and challenge as she navigates the art world. Born to a Black Indigenous father and a mother, who was adopted but had French Acadian and Indigenous roots. She grew up navigating the complexities of her mixed heritage, often feeling like an outsider in both her Indigenous and Black communities. "I didn't grow up around Black people; I grew up in an Indigenous community in Winnipeg," she explains. "The only Black people I knew were my family, who are mixed, like me...I didn't grow up with visible ceremonial indigeneity. That's not how I grew up. We were just people trying to survive." These are some of the factors that give Natia the ability to paint each stroke imbued with a lifetime of experiences - trauma, resilience, and the unwavering pursuit of self-discovery.



Photo: Courtesy of Sanpat Collection

"In a hood type of environment, the only currency you have is your word because you don't have money, you don't have assets, or anything else to give to people. What you have is authenticity and realness. People don't trust fakes and frauds; it reeks, and you can smell it immediately" "



Photo: Courtesy of Sanpat Collection

As you learn about Natia, it becomes clear that her artistic practice is not merely a profession but a profoundly personal probe of the human condition. "I put my guts on a canvas," she says. "They're just there." Natia's journey to this point has been anything but linear. The first all-black painting she made was in 2018 during her undergraduate studies. At that time, she was thinking about visibility. "The fact that because I'm black, nobody ever sees anything more to me. I'll always be put into this box of blackness. They don't see any of my other identities. When I first made it, I was thinking about visibility and invisibility, and I was trying to make a way to paint a figure that was both hyper-visible and invisible because a black square on a wall is super visible, especially up against a white wall. But it's also the figure that sits within it that becomes invisible because all you're seeing is a blackness, right?."

Venturing into individual experiences and her journey toward healing, She uses black paint as a representation of absorption, transmission, and absence. Pulling in different known and unknown influences and how they impact who she is as a person, shaping and defining her. To that idea of absorption, absence, and transmission and the way it relates to trauma as a kid and teen, she comments how, "there were so many things that I thought I could point to and say definitively were the reasons that my life was so hard, lack of money, food, stability, insecure housing, racism, and violence but when I got away from some of these things after checking all the boxes that I thought meant that I was "Successful member of society," I still, internally, was unhappy." This is one of the reasons why most of the research she does for her work is focused on psychology, sociology, and philosophy. This allowed her to dig deeper and heal those things she had not internalized, intuitively reconstructing her inner world and allowing her work to lead her on a healing path.





It was used to confront unconscious and conscious decisions that needed to be pondered.

"When can we decolonize our minds, deal with our consciousness, find ourselves and lift ourselves, and heal the next generation through that process of healing ourselves? Stopping that intergenerational trauma by dismantling and fixing your mind, and then your children will be fixed, and that's how you hold on with future generations that are healthier and no longer have to challenge people on whether or not we deserve to be in a space, we just inherently know it to be true"

Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

Please share more about the themes you explore in your paintings, like the circles, shades of black, and the intimacy of the characters.

The visual elements in my paintings, the circles, shades of black, and intimate portrayals of the figures, are not necessarily conscious choices. They've emerged organically from my genre painting approach, rooted in the Flemish and Dutch traditions. But the thematic underpinnings are very personal - exploring ideas of absorption, reflection, trauma, and the universality of human experience, regardless of identity. I'm not trying to make overtly political statements but to create spaces for emotional connection and self-reflection. The Flemish or Dutch influence in my paintings wasn't a conscious decision. I only had a little exposure to art or galleries before going to OCAD, so it naturally manifested in that style. It wasn't something I was intentionally trying to emulate.



Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

You paint with multiple shades of black, sometimes up to 30 different kinds of black paint. Can you tell us more about this?

For me, the color black not only represents the idea of absorption and the unconscious, but it's also a bit of satire, just like a genre painting, representing every day with a little bit of critique. I am aware that the thing people will always see first is my blackness. I'm reduced to a surface, just like a painting is a surface. Nothing in the work is inherently tied to a "black experience," but it is often categorized as black art. So, for me, because it's black. It's like, you want black art. Here it is!

You volunteer with Covenant House. Can you tell us about that nonprofit work and how it connects to your art practice?

My volunteer work with Covenant House is something I'm passionate about. As someone who has experienced homelessness and instability, particularly as a young mother, I feel a deep connection to the mission of supporting at-risk youth. While it's not directly tied to my artistic practice, it's integral to my life and values. It is a way to give back and support others navigating challenges similar to what I've faced. The work I do there helps ground me and reminds me of the resilience and strength that can emerge from adversity. My mother was an unhoused teen and stayed at the Covenant House in Toronto, it feels full circle that I now can contribute to this space that was once a haven for her.

What enabled you to pass beyond all the negative forces in your life?

Without my kids, I think it would have been much easier to succumb to a negative place if I didn't have other people who depended on my happiness. Something that I realized is that my mother had a lot of unhealed traumas that manifested in many ways, which had genuine impacts on the way she did and didn't show up for her children. I understand why she turned to drugs, alcohol, and stuff to allow herself to live every day; she was doing the best she could. I could see myself going down that path, self-soothing through drugs and alcohol to self-medicate and put on a smile for other people. And I'm like, I can't, I don't want to be my mom, I don't want to neglect myself to pretend that things are fine, because kids are smart, they know. You can pretend you're happy, you could pretend a relationship is great, but kids know when things are messed up.



Courtesy of the Artist



Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

Natia Lemay

Ultimately, what do you wish you could have learned as a child, or do you wish your kids and other children could learn from your experiences growing up?

I think ultimately what kids take away from life is not so much about how much money you make, but what kind of an example you were. People can have parents who are surgeons and live in big houses, but they never see their parents, or when they do see them, they have a Scotch in their hand, numbing themselves to fall asleep. Although money makes life easier, I would say that quality time, care, attention, and a parent's happiness are far more important to a child's quality of life.

“Every step I have taken has been less about strategy and more about figuring out how far I can go”

Do you believe in the power of manifestation as a result of your life journey? Are you a big proponent of it?

The undercurrent of not knowing what it will be but knowing where I am is not the right place has led me through many moments in my life. Moments where I knew I didn't know the right path but felt that I wasn't on it have driven me to make bold choices: apply to art school at 32 or move from Winnipeg to Toronto with nowhere to stay, no money, only a suitcase, and a kid. That type of awareness has pushed me and propelled me in many ways, even going to Yale.

I only truly realized what Yale meant when I got there because I didn't come from a place where higher education was in the conversation. I didn't understand the impact and the weight that an institution like Yale had on the world; for me, I only knew that this school is where great artists go. So, I applied because I wanted to be a great painter.

Every step I have taken has been less about strategy and more about figuring out how far I can go. Manifesting through desire, through seeking something more and because there are many things that are unknown to me, I am unblocked in many ways.

"When you experience a life where you're constantly struggling to the point where from birth everything is a challenge. Everything is hard, everything you must work harder for. When you have that as your experience your entire life, taking challenging steps doesn't feel incredibly difficult for someone walking through mud and carrying rocks with them the whole time. When they just keep doing it. They have to keep at it, it's just part of doing it... My development as a human was acknowledging the fact that those weights will never go away, and I just must keep moving forward with them...some expect at some point, those weights are going to go away, and life is just going to get easier, and the steps are going to be simpler. But I'm like, it never actually gets easier. It's just whether or not you're willing to continue carrying those weights."



Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

Natia's art is a testament to survival, resilience, and the unyielding spirit of an artist who, despite all odds, has carved out a place for herself in the world. Her work is not just about creating—it's about transforming, healing, and giving voice to the experiences that have shaped her journey. Through it all, she has remained steadfast in her belief that authenticity, integrity, and relentless perseverance make her and her art exceptional. The act of continuing, despite everything, is where her true strength lies, and it is this spirit that infuses every layer of her art and every step of her journey transcendent.



Photo: Courtesy of the Artist