

Arcmanoro Niles

*The City Lights Can't Shine Quite Like the Stars: Got
So Far From My Raising I Forgot Where I Come From*

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Arcmanoro Niles, *We Used To Go Out in a Oldsmobile (For a Moment All We Did Would Never End)*, 2023

Lehmann Maupin presents *The City Lights Can't Shine Quite Like the Stars: Got So Far From My Raising I Forgot Where I Come From*, an exhibition of new work by New York-based artist Arcmanoro Niles. Including some of his largest canvases to-date, the exhibition marks the artist's second major solo exhibition in New York and constitutes a turning point for the artist. Known for his colorful paintings that capture the daily, yet intimate moments of contemporary life through figuration and portraiture, Niles' new works embrace landscape, depicting the artist's own inner world through a series of immersive, place-based compositions.

In this exhibition, Niles meditates on personal loss through an exploration of landscape, drawing inspiration from the colorwork of both contemporary painters like Kerry James Marshall and Richard Mayhew and Old Masters like Caravaggio. In these new works, rendered in vibrant, technicolor hues that construct a signature kind of chiaroscuro, Niles finds himself immersed in nature—in the trees of a remote field, near the shore of the sea, bathed in crisp light peeking through bare trees on a sunny winter's day. "I paint what I know," states the artist. In this body of work, Niles confronts our personal and collective lived experience during the years following the Covid-19 pandemic, at once emotionally nuanced and overwhelming. Through 11 paintings and a single sculpture—the first of its kind in his oeuvre—viewers encounter intimate spaces and memories.

As a child, Niles had a penchant for taking apart household items and turning them into toys; for Niles, pieces of a telephone affixed to an empty deodorant bottle became a tool for time travel. *Praying to a God That Won't Talk Back* (2023), his very first sculpture, viscerally recalls these childlike creations and sense of wonderment. Inspired by Yayoi Kusama's famous infinity mirror rooms, Niles' telescope reminds us of the wonder and innocence of childhood and the magic of imagination. Peek into it and you'll see a kaleidoscope of stars, stretching indefinitely into the abyss beyond. Similarly, Niles' paintings crystallize memory, freezing moments in time through vibrant layers of oil paint, acrylic, and glitter. In *Where Can I Go Where I Won't End up Lost Again* (2023), the tight crop of a bedroom window is seen from a dark interior; outside, bare branches pierce the winter sky, a cool glow seeping into the room.

When approaching Niles' paintings, the mind begins to wander, reaching for distant memories and recalling sights and sounds of the past. His compositions evoke a certain ambiguity, at once recognizable and foreign. Domestic scenes are eerily familiar, gesturing towards our own subconscious psyches. In Niles' new paintings, forgotten memory and inner truth unfold through a scenery rendered in brilliant, pulsing color. The setting sun illuminates a tranquil shore as a wave crashes against the edge of a canvas and a sliver of the moon shines overhead; blooming flowers allude to the changing of seasons, reminding us that time is a continuum and change is inevitable. Depicting light and shadow through an exploration of color, Niles illustrates quiet moments and spaces of reflection—the loss of a friend, a fight with a lover, the birth of a baby, the death of a grandparent. The depiction of such moments, rendered at the intersection of formal tradition and imaginative experimentation, becomes an investigation of humankind's connection to nature, place, and the nuances of memory.

The exhibition's titular painting, *Got So Far from My Raising I Forgot Where I Come From (Spent My Youth among the Pines)* (2023), depicts Niles with his father, encapsulating the myriad of feelings and memories Niles associates with each composition. We see a young Niles laughing at the viewer, his palm outstretched and his father standing behind him, a light pink trailer home and pine trees in the background. The painting references Niles' desire to return to nature while alluding to his intimate and familial relationships. Here and across the exhibition, Niles finds solace in connecting with others through the universal language of art making, seeking to harness its capacity for catharsis and transformation. He finds solace in the mundane and everyday, "painting what he knows" to seek meaning and preserve memory.



Arcmanoro Niles (b. 1989, Washington, D.C.; lives and works in New York, NY) makes vivid, brightly-hued paintings that expand our understanding of traditional genre painting and portraiture. Niles offers a window into seemingly mundane moments of daily life—a child seated at the table for breakfast, a man about to get into his car, a couple in their bedroom—with subjects drawn from photographs of friends and relatives and from memories of his past. The paintings, though intensely personal and autobiographical, engage in universal subjects of domestic and family life while also making reference to numerous art historical predecessors, including Italian and Dutch baroque, history painting, Color Field painting, and ancient Egyptian sculpture. Though drawing from many styles and genres, Niles is particularly inspired by the paintings that 16th-century Italian painter Caravaggio created of daily life through representations of his family and friends. In depicting not only people close to him but the places and times they inhabit, Niles creates his own record of contemporary life.

A signature aspect of Niles' work is his use of vibrant oranges, pinks, purples, blues, and greens, which he layers, color after color, to create a saturated glow. The brown skin of each figure is rendered with a gold-like tone, their hair a glimmering halo of purple, orange, or hot pink glitter. Initially working in more traditional realist modes, in 2015 the artist began to create paintings with highly vivid color as a response to his frustration at not being able to achieve the depth of tonality he saw in the skin tones of his family and friends. Once he began to incorporate oranges and pinks into the background scene, he was able to achieve a depth and energy in his work that solidified his methods and shifted the way every painting has looked since. During this period, Niles also began to incorporate what he calls "seekers" into his work. These seekers take the form of small, gestural characters and more fleshy, gremlin-like figures that represent our most basic human impulses and desires. "Seekers," says Niles, "are more impulsive, chasing whatever they think will make them happy in that moment,

with no fear of consequence, while the human subjects are more vulnerable and open with their feelings.” The seekers both move the viewer formally through the painting and invite us to imagine what events might have occurred before or after the scene depicted, hinting at the inner motivation for each figure.

In addition to the seekers, Niles’ titles often suggest the underlying narrative behind the seemingly mundane scenes. In *Longing for Change (I’ve Given Up on Being Well)*, 2019, Niles portrays himself lying face down on the carpet with a bottle of liquor on the floor next to him. In the lower left corner, two line-drawn seekers are portrayed engaged in oral sex while, off to the right, a gremlin-like seeker is cutting his leg with a knife in an act of self-harm. This self-portrait portrays the artist at a low moment in his life that the title suggests sparked the need for change. In works like *Go Home to Nothing (Hoping for More)*, 2018, Niles depicts himself in a bar surrounded by friends. The only one not engaged in conversation, the scene suggests a sense of loneliness and perhaps desire for stability with a family/partner of his own. The gremlin seeker occupies the bottom left corner of the scene with a knife pointing towards himself, while the line-drawn seekers occupy the outer edges. One female seeker has her arm draped over the artist’s shoulder, suggesting his impulses and desires are the things currently keeping him company. Niles’ oeuvre offers an insightful documentation of the artist’s life and the passing of time. Like those of his early predecessors, each painting invites us to consider the time in which it was made, as well as our own histories. Through his use of color, painting style, and formal composition, Niles imbues his subjects with a saintly aura, acknowledging the significance of life’s mundane moments and positioning them within a larger art historical tradition.

Niles received a B.F.A. from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA in 2013 and an M.F.A. from New York Academy of Art, New York, NY in 2015. Solo exhibitions of his work have recently been organized at Lehmann Maupin, London, United Kingdom (2022); Lehmann Maupin, New York, NY (2021); UTA Artist Space, Los Angeles, CA (2020); Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York, NY (2019); Long Gallery, New York, NY (2017); and Guild Hall, East Hampton, NY (2016).

His work has been featured in numerous group exhibitions, including *Black Melancholia*, Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY (2022); *A Place for Me: Figurative*

Painting Now, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA (2022); *Fire Figure Fantasy: Selections from ICA Miami’s Collection*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, FL; *From The Limitations Of Now*, Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, OK (2021); *Young, Gifted and Black: The Lumpkin-Bocuzzi Family Collection of Contemporary Art*, Lehman College Art Gallery, Bronx, NY (2020), *Gallery 400 at the University of Illinois*, Chicago, IL (2021), Lehigh University Art Galleries, Bethlehem, PA (2022), and Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, Davis, CA (2022); *Afrocologies: American Reflections*, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT (2019); *Punch*, Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles, CA (2019); *On Refusal: Representation & Resistance in Contemporary American Art*, The MAC Belfast, Northern Ireland (2019); *Problem Solving: Highlights from the Experimental Printmaking Institute*, Mechanical Hall Gallery, University of Delaware, Newark, DE (2018); *Portraits of Who We Are*, David C. Driskell Center at the University of Maryland, College Park, MD (2018); and *Mutual Interest No. 3*, Shanghai University, Shanghai, China (2014).

His work is in numerous public and private collections, including the Aishti Foundation, Jal El Dib, Lebanon; Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, NY; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX; David C. Driskell Center at the University of Maryland, College Park, MD; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY; The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA; The Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, FL; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA; Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art, Asbury, NJ; Pérez Art Museum Miami, Miami, FL; Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ; Pond Society, Shanghai, China; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY; Yuz Museum, Shanghai, China; and Zabludowicz Collection, London, United Kingdom.

Artist portrait by Jason Frank Rothenberg.

**LEHMANN MAUPIN**

Rachel Lehmann and David Maupin co-founded Lehmann Maupin in 1996 in New York. Since inception, Lehmann Maupin has served as a leading contemporary art gallery with locations in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. For over 25 years, Lehmann Maupin has been instrumental in introducing international artists in new geographies and building long-lasting curatorial relationships. Known for championing diverse voices, the gallery's program proudly features artists whose work challenges notions of identity and shapes international culture. Today, the gallery has permanent locations in New York, Seoul, and London, as well as team members based in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, and Palm Beach. In recent years, with growing opportunities in new markets, the gallery has opened seasonal spaces in Aspen, Palm Beach, Taipei, and Beijing.

NEW YORK

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