MICHAELA YEARWOOD-DAN

A Woman of Will

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beatification is a choice
I wake now
a woman of will
who touches her own body
finding all of her wants
& all of her teeth intact

– Victoria Adukwei Bulley

"Redeemed and restored, love returns us to the promise of everlasting life."

– bell hooks

Boesky Gallery is pleased to present *A Woman of Will*, an exhibition of new paintings by Michaela Yearwood-Dan. For her third solo exhibition with the gallery, Yearwood-Dan transforms the gallery into a sanctuary for reimagining the collective practices of love, care, and liberation. *A Woman of Will* coincides with Yearwood-Dan's first UK solo institutional exhibition, *The Practice of Liberation*, which debuted at The Whitworth in Manchester in April and will travel to the Towner in Eastbourne and the Arnolfini in Bristol.

For *A Woman of Will*, Yearwood-Dan conjures the cool, sacred atmosphere of a cathedral. A suite of 13 small paintings—one for each of Jesus' apostles, including Mary Magdalene—line the walls of the gallery's small front room, evoking the intimacy of a side chapel. Throughout the airy gallery, large-scale paintings—lush, gestural abstractions in vivid cobalts, gold, and maroons—evoke sunlight streaming through stained-glass windows. Diaristic meditations and small objects—ceramic petals, glass beads, glitter, gold leaf, paper scraps, and neatly-tied ribbons—adorn the paintings' surfaces. Small bronze-lustered, hand-built ceramic vases—filled with dried flowers—dot the deep burgundy walls between paintings, the faint floral scent reminiscent of incense. Throughout the space, ornate, ceramic-tiled wood benches—made in collaboration with sculptor and furniture designer Theodore Vass—serve as pews, offering respite for quiet contemplation.

Yearwood-Dan attended an all-girls convent school in London throughout her formative teenage years, and Catholicism—the rites and rituals, the opulent aesthetics, the teachings of sacrificial love, embodied in the term *agape*—had a profound impact on Yearwood-Dan. At the same time, the young artist was also learning how to analyze and critique literary, historical, and religious texts through a profoundly feminist lens. Rigorously educated, in large part, by nuns—the Faithful Companions of Jesus, whose Ignatian values emphasize education and social justice—Yearwood-Dan began to grasp the disconnect between the church's teachings on love and acceptance and its actions, particularly with regard to its legacy of colonialism and the erasure of women and queer people. In response to this contradiction—which lies at the very heart

of the institution that educated her—Yearwood-Dan searched biblical texts for evidence of an inclusive, community-oriented practice of love, one that dignified women and queer people. She found this evidence in the creation of the myth of Mary Magdalene, a trusted apostle and respected leader in the early church, later reimagined by male clergy as a repentant whore, in the queerness implied in the relationship between Jesus and the apostle John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," and in the lives and stories of the saints.

For *A Woman of Will*, Yearwood-Dan borrows Catholicism's familiar aesthetics—which shaped her own understanding of spirituality—and reimagines them in her own image. Casting the Bible as a literary text and its writers as unreliable narrators, Yearwood-Dan creates for herself new possibilities for contemporary spirituality. Calling on Mary Magdalene, one of the original women of will, Yearwood-Dan invokes a host of willful voices—Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Lil' Kim, Nina Simone, Charlie xcx, Bonnie Raitt, Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, as well as her own—embedding their words into her paintings, a chorus ringing out through the exhibition.

A Woman of Will borrows its title from a poem Victoria Adukwei Bulley wrote in response to the work Yearwood-Dan made for *The Practice of Liberation*, which speaks of liberation itself as the source of beatification. Wresting the power of the rites and rituals she grew up with from the clutches of patriarchy and imperialism, Yearwood-Dan summons buried queer and feminist histories and invites them into communion with pop stars, poets, and theorists. "[Yearwood-Dan]," curator Gemma Brace writes, "intentionally places herself in conversation with this cast of narrators, drawing us in different directions, questioning our own meaning and memory. Tellingly, she turned to art for its unreliability, foregoing a world of 'absolutes' for art's multifarious nature, and it's these very contradictions and tensions that jostle within her work." Building a sanctuary for the practice of agape, *A Woman of Will* captures the love about which bell hooks writes so eloquently: the love that leads us toward liberation.

ABOUT MICHAELA YEARWOOD-DAN

Michaela Yearwood-Dan: The Practice of Liberation—the artist's first solo exhibition in the UK—debuted this year at The Whitworth in Manchester and will travel to the Towner Eastbourne and Arnolfini in Bristol. The artist's work is found in the permanent collections of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY; Nasher Museum of Art, Durham, NC; Dallas Museum of Art, TX; the Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA; the Jorge M. Perez Collection, Miami, FL; among others. She has been featured in exhibitions at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH; Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, AZ; the Green Family Art Foundation, Dallas, TX; Palazzo Monti, Brescia, Italy; and the Museum of Contemporary African Art, Marrakesh, Morocco, among others. In 2024, Yearwood-Dan was commissioned to create a body of work in response to Claude Monet's *The Water-Lily Pond* (1899) for the National Gallery London's bicentenary celebration. In 2022, she produced her first public mural installation for Queercircle, London, UK. She has participated in a range of fellowships and residencies, including the Palazzo Monti Residency, Brescia, Italy, and Bloomberg New Contemporaries in Partnership with Sarabande: The Lee Alexander McQueen Foundation, London, UK. The artist received her B.A. from the University of Brighton in 2016; she lives and works in London.