

# NAOMI GALLAY

“In her representations of the human form, Naomi Gallay transcends the boundaries of classical portraiture and gestural abstraction. Paint, applied in angular patches, develops into a visually pleasing series of works that capture a languid yet elegant mood.

Gallay’s work is really pleasing to look at: beautiful colour palettes and bold geometric shapes become refined youthful figures who are often reclining, sunlight illuminating their facies. Yet under these deceptively placid painterly surfaces lies a commentary on social constructs, on identity and race. Gallay explores our perception of race through her use of abstracted forms and tonal contrast—often using multiple skin tones to create the complexion of one figure. To make works that speak to the socio-cultural moment without feeling forced or overly political is no easy feat, and Gallay succeeds at doing just this.»

## ABOUT

In 2016, Gallay received her BA from the graphic design department at ECAL (Ecole Cantonale d’Art de Lausanne), but it was during her 9-month stint in California, working as a graphic design intern, where she developed a strong interest in the visual culture of branding and became fascinated with the west coast colour palette—soft blues, greys, golds, and purples—as a means of creative expression that could be used in her artwork.

Indeed, there are traces of her graphic design intelligence evident in her compositions—bold colour blocking, patternmaking, and an ability to put together an evocative palette. In 2015 she was awarded the Jean Knechtli Scholarship, which honours artists under 30 years old. In the 3 years since graduating, she has already exhibited her work in Switzerland, California and France.

While her work recalls the constructed compositions, flattened picture planes, and abstracted geometries of Paul Gauguin or David Hockney, Gallay skilfully re-engages with this legacy of gestural abstraction by remaking it as socially conscious portraiture. She distils her figures down to an essence, a mood, of the human form. She leaves out contextual detail and instead focuses on portraying the psychology of her subjects.

Her portraits focus closely on faces and fragments of the (mostly) female body rendered in geometric-like shapes in a diverse palette composed of a multitude of skin tones ranging from light to mid to dark. Often only one or two faces fill the space of the canvas and the visual detail is kept to a minimum, so that what the audience is left with is the suggestion of the grace of women reclining in the sun (Day Off) or the natural grace of a man deep thought (Thoughts). One of the most striking elements of her figural representation is her ability to capture movement as well as the unexpected shadows created by that

movement: the way a hand floats in front of a woman’s face and then casts a shadow over her chest (A Bigger Painting).

Gallay places great value on colours and says that selecting them is a very much part of her work process, and this passion for colour is very evident. Her ability to capture tonal contrast of light and dark in her self-described west-coast palette demonstrates a real talent for evoking a mood through colour. There are also works that focus on movement, such as ‘Winter Time’, which depicts the turned back of a young woman as she is disrobing. This unconventional view suggests the impersonal—and yet strangely intimate—quality of modern life.

In Gallay’s perception of the world humans are characterized by a hybridity race and creed and they are absolutely serene in that symbiosis. The voyeuristic, almost cinematic compositions suggest a narrative, enticing the viewer to imagine the events that may have occurred prior to the scene we now view, and what will happen next. Gallay explains that through her work she aims to create space for the viewer’s ‘imagination by not telling the whole story’.

You won’t see photorealist detailing in her work, yet she captures a certain atmosphere of humanity—those quiet moments of reflection—when humans are just being. Her exploration of race and identity is delicate and refined, which makes the act of looking at her work deeply meditative. Whether lounging in the sun, sitting deep in thought or looking out to sea, the figures in Gallay’s work reminds us that no matter their identity or race, in the end, we are all living breathing people illuminated by the same sun.

Credits: Patrisha Zabrycki, art critic based in New York.