



Natalie Daise on What We Call Holy

In Conversation *with* Stephanie Burt

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The artist Natalie Daise invited Stephanie Burt, host of “The Southern Fork Podcast,” to visit her studio in Georgetown, South Carolina. What began as a conversation about painting — exploring the beauty of black, gold, rice, and collard greens — evolved into a deeper conversation about safety, violence, and creative power. We invite you to look, listen, and enter Daise’s room where she explores materials, memory, and the “lived life.” Take off your shoes, you are standing on holy ground.

Natalie Daise’s voice and face are familiar to many who grew up in the 1990s. She and her husband, Ron Daise, starred in Nickelodeon’s “Gullah Gullah Island,” a television show that ran from 1994–1998 and became one of the most popular shows for children during the era. It was developed for preschoolers, and it depicted an African American family and other children on an imagined Sea Island, and it included puppets and music. After the cameras turned off, the Daise family returned to full-time life in the South Carolina Lowcountry, and she began tapping into an innate love for drawing and painting, exploring storytelling through brushes, paint, surface, and craft. Images of strong women began to emerge, images of African symbology, pain and praise, family, and symbols of the sacred in the everyday.

Daise earned her master’s in creative studies from Union Institute and University in 2014, and her works span mediums, from school presentations and a one-woman show performance titled “Becoming Harriet Tubman,” to visual arts shows, including as a competition artist at Artfields in 2016, and solo shows at the North Charleston Coliseum and the McClellanville Arts Center. Her solo art exhibition at the Cherokee County Alliance of Visual Artists (CAVA) in Gaffney, South Carolina, that was scheduled for January and February 2021, is on hold due to COVID-19.

The road to Daise’s home and studio is on a narrow lane through straight pine trees in Georgetown County, away from the familiar and fast and got-to-get-somewhere divided highway. Instead, the well-worn asphalt heads to a different destination, one of invitation to detour, to visit, to commune.

Stephanie Burt:

Hello, Natalie.

Natalie Daise:

Hey there, Stephanie.

SB: We are sitting inside your colorful, messy in a good way, studio with plenty, plenty of artwork, both finished and in-progress surrounding us. And it’s cold. It’s a cold morning, but we have the opportunity to have the screens open and have some social distance here. I’m thrilled to have the opportunity to come up and sit with you and talk to you about art. I’d love to focus today on your work in the visual space. Your work is visual art and mixed media and to keep those kinds of fences on it. But I think we have to begin with “Gullah Gullah Island” because that’s where a lot of people are going to recognize your voice who are specifically of a certain age. I was wondering if you could talk about that from an artist’s perspective, what you learned about your own work, and being a multimedia artist through that project. And then maybe what you kind of think about art with a capital “A,” as you moved away from that and into more of this space.

ND: That is a really complex question. There’s a lot of layers in that. When we did television, children’s television, and yes, folk do recognize my voice and it’s pretty distinct. We moved into that from a live storytelling space and we weren’t even really saying “Let’s do TV.” It happened, it just happened. We had no agent, we weren’t looking for that. But what I learned in the process of that, that relates to my visual artwork. That’s a really interesting question. Well, one thing is even on the show, I was myself. I was not a character. I was really just me sort of a characterized version of myself and the character, Me, was a craftsperson and artist. And the reason she was is because I am, and

when I met the producers and they came to my home and in my house, I have turquoise and orange walls and stuff, you know, and they were like, “Oh, this is who you are.” And we sang anyway. So, it really was sort of a different expansion of me. When I turned to sort of visual art was after we finished that. And we moved back to Beaufort, and we thought that I just wanted to sort of regain my life, except for my life was different.

SB: Right, right. Because you had been living in Beaufort, South Carolina, and then for the show?

ND: We would, we would go and just stay there. You know, being in an apartment in Orlando, Universal, for shooting every year, and then we’d come back to Beaufort. And so I think we thought we could just walk back into our old life, just like it had been. And we couldn’t. But shortly after that, I acquired a little piece of property on St. Helena Island and there was a house on it. And I said, “Well since the house is there, I’ll turn it into a workshop.” I called it Ms. Natalie’s Workshop. The place was like an installation, really. It was this house that looked all run down. And by the time I got done with it with cobalt blue floors and burlap on the walls that I painted, and every room flowed into something else just colorful and beautiful, and people could come in and make things.

And that was it. And basically, I just wanted to go in and make things. But also, I had at the time sort of a business advisor, he’s like, “You gotta, you know, you gotta make money” and yeah, I guess we did. And so I opened this workshop up to the public and people would just come in and make stuff. And I did not call myself an artist. I called myself a craftsperson because artists were people who did stuff that went on walls, but people came initially, I guess because I was Ms. Natalie, “Gullah, Gullah Island.” And, I began actually by doing things like you see that chair right there. I did functional art and that justified it because you could use it.

SB: I understand that, as I am an improvisational folk art quilter myself. So I want to just sew lines and juxtapose patterns together. But if I make it a quilt, then you can use it.

ND: Because now I have justified myself. I can, you know, why I’m on the planet.

So that workshop kind of was my response to stepping away from television and reconnecting with myself as an artist. I mean, I was always, I was a little kid who drew pictures for the little kids in kindergarten. I remember a friend introducing me to pastels and I would do pastel portraits for people. And I taught myself these things. As a teenager, I would do it. And then while I was doing TV, it’s like, I had stepped away from it for such a degree that I had almost forgotten that that’s who I was. Yes, which is weird to say. I remember friends saying, “I didn’t know you did this.” And I said, “Well, I’d forgotten, too.” So through functional art — and I only did functional art: mirror frames, cupboards — I had a friend who was a carpenter and he would build things like, he built the chair.

I would draw, “Build me this, I’ll do children’s furniture.” So I can do children’s furniture and paint, little chairs and tables because that ties in with me as Ms. Natalie from “Gullah Gullah,” and people will say, “Oh yeah, I bought a little table and chair that Ms. Natalie made.” That shop was there for about four years. And then when it closed, I later rented a little space because I needed then to keep painting. And I didn’t have space. It was a 10x10 studio. And so I had to go up on the walls. I had to go up on the walls. It was like canvas and things and art for art’s sake. And faces, which is how I had started as a child, as a young person making art. It was the faces that I wanted to do. It was the way the light hit the guy in the choir loft that was like fascinating to me. So I was in this space, 10x10, and it went up on the walls. I still was not calling myself an artist because there were people who were sharing spaces who had art degrees.

Yes. “Well, if you use the so-and-so method” and I would be like, “Well, see, I just picked up this blue paint because I liked it.”

SB: This was on sale at Walmart.

ND: And some of the paintings that I have done that have received the most attention, you know, I picked up those paints at Walmart because ...

SB: You’re practical. You’re, you know, you’re coming from that craft place.

ND: Yes.

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SB: And there is a practicality about that.

ND: Right. I still, you know, I still will use some of those and I still will. I mean, the story, I don't think someone says, "I want that painting because I believe that she used, you know, Winston Newton." They say, "I want that painting because it speaks to me." And if I used house paint, who cares?

SB: Right, right.

ND: But anyway, that's sort of how that sort of evolved from me as Ms. Natalie. And so if I do stuff that ties directly to me as a children's performer, maybe people might want it.

SB: So that became, that thread, became a little more frayed and a little more frayed, like needing that connection back. But I'm also seeing something. And I would, I have no idea if this is correct. This is just my observation where "Gullah Gullah Island" and that work in the beginning, or that period of your life, was about sharing culture and collaborative work, work with your literal family, that collaboration and that kind of outward push then became something that became more internal exploration. As you begin to, this next phase, of putting things on the walls. Was that an experience that you felt consciously?

ND: It is actually a sort of a return to my sort of true self. I know you've heard this before and people get sick of it, but I was very much an introvert. My husband put me on stage and when I became a storyteller, I loved it. I loved it. Oh, I love this. But the moment I stopped telling those stories, [gestures swift exit]. This was a place for me to, I mean, I've always loved community. I mean, always, so I've always told in a way, but it was like, my world was this small kind of fundamentalist church world. And then when he gave me the stage, which said, you can tell these stories and you step into yourself there, but to expend that kind of energy.

SB: Right.

ND: For me absolutely requires that I then back away and turn in, or I can't. So this was a reconnection to my introspective spiritual self. That when you're doing TV and you're doing that, and you're a very public person and you're everything that everyone projects you to be, all real.

My absolute need to turn in and sort of explore my inner world. I am very self-involved, which sounds, you know, narcissistic. And that's not, it — there's so much going on in here. That's very interesting to me.

SB: I don't know anything, what you're talking about. That doesn't sound like anybody I know. I forget to turn on music sometimes because I mean, and it's been hours, right? Because I'm like doing stuff in my head.

ND: Yes, yes. So what the internal world is, is really, really interesting to me.

SB: And you have a rich internal ...

ND: There's so much going on in here. And so, my ability to be alone, my need to be alone, my absolute, my survival, which is in a lot of ways, dependent on my ability to sort of explore the inner world.

SB: Right.

ND: And when I don't get to do that, I don't ... See that sounds really dramatic when I say that. But when I don't get to do that, you know, it is evident in how I function. And my visual art is a way of exploring that. And so, and it's not so much that it is because you talked about turning outward or turning inward because I share it.

SB: Right.

ND: I share it, but I have to explore it in here. First, I've got to move through it. I've got to find the images and the symbols that make this internal world visual or in a way that other people can interact with. But it's different than when I'm on stage because once I've shared it, how people interacted is not really directed by me. Right. I don't know what sense that makes, but I know what I mean.

SB: No, I think that that's an important point. OK. So this idea of a spiritual center that then comes through, what's so fun about your work is it's so familiar, but yet it's so iconic as well. And I mean that in the state of religious icons.

ND: Yeah.

SB: Is that a conscious thing?

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ND: Yes. The first time I did that was a diptych of my daughter for a show I was in with a group of artists at the Avery Institute. And I was so excited to be included with the big kids. That's how I felt, you know because I had just started showing my work. It was a show called the "isms" show, dealing with an -ism: racism, ageism, sexism, whatever. And I had been talking to my daughter who was at the time a student at the College of Charleston. And we were talking about, you know, "It's hard for me to go to the club," she said, "Cause, you know, if you're conscious at all, you're dancing to music that's about like raping you, and how can you do that?" And so I started creating this piece and I wanted to do something that was about her sacredness, this, the sacredness of her Black womanhood.

And somehow I began to think about stained glass windows in churches. And so I created this piece that was very much about and included Adinkra symbols, which I use a lot.

SB: Can you explain what those are?

ND: Adinkra symbols are from Ghana, and they are West African symbols that tell a story ... they're West African religious icons. And each symbol has its own meaning, for example, in this piece here, that is a symbol for strength and endurance that's worked into the background behind his head. So I knew that there are some stories that are automatically ... recognizable icons will say this, we're talking about sacredness. We're going to make the connection. But then I would work in West African symbols. I would work in the imagery that I want, that this is what I am saying is as sacred and as holy as ... You are used to applying this type of symbology to this and the feelings and the thoughts about it, but let's apply it here.

SB: Just like the hand series that we're looking at. Can you explain what those hands are? What they're just, rote, doing?

ND: Well, there are four of them here. This one is holding a four-leaf clover, and that actually was, I was walking down the street. I looked down, there was one, I picked it up. I took a picture of it. So that's my hand. The other is pouring. One, my daughter was watering the herbs in the backyard, and my son was holding eggs. So those four. I love the gestures of hands.

SB: But they're backed with ...

ND: With gold leaf. Yeah.

SB: That is, that elevates these hands into more than hands, right?

ND: Oh, definitely. I don't know if you can read there's actually a line from Langston Hughes that circles each one of them: "I found that my own hands can make the world that's in my mind." So yes, there's a holiness. There's a sacredness to our daily gestures, to the things that we are doing, what we call Holy, what we call sacred can be just that. That's the act of living your life that my daughter calls "the lived life" is a sacred and holy thing. And I, in my visual art, I do want to elevate the story of Us, to show that, not to make it sacred. It is. To acknowledge its holiness, its sacredness, its beauty, that act of just her holding that hose and had her thumb on, you know, at the mouth to make this spray over that that was a wonderfully sacred and beautiful thing. And my son, he had actually held the eggs for me 'cause I was doing a different painting, and I didn't use it. I was like, "I want," and then I was looking through my photos and there is that hand of his, this is sort of the strength in this young hand with these eggs in it. And so that, you know, these, this series of paintings I had done of just hands, actually that was the first in the By Hand series, and those are mine.

Hands are wonderful. They will tell as much as a face and there's all kinds of motion in them. And, I mean, they're beautiful things, you know, I look at mine and you know, they're working hands and I love that. You know, they're not, they're not pretty and soft and smooth. They're rough and they're large. And lately, I've started doing my nails and that was just been like a little ritual that I told myself, you know, Nat, why don't you try to do that really more as an act of, "I am going to do this thing that is about nothing but beauty for its own sake, even though I'm going to go in the studio and they're going to get messed up, they aren't going to last, but then I'll do it again." But that's what that's about.

SB: I'm going to have to ask about food as holy symbols. Because it was the collard headdresses that first caught my attention of your current work. As a food writer, you can understand why. Um, but there's also, you're now doing

portraits with rice. And so in that story of Us, can you talk a little bit about that sacredness of food and food production and food history and symbolism?

ND: I'll do my best. 'Cause I must tell you that I don't always think about it that deeply. I feel it. And so you're asking me questions that cause me to think about things a little differently, which is good.

SB: So how do you feel it? Tell me, do you want to start with that?

ND: I will start with that; with how the greens happened, which is what it did. They happened. I'm painting. I want to paint something. I'm staying now or living in this little condo on Pawleys [Island] and it's near Christmas, and I bought a bunch of greens and they're on the table on the little porch. 'Cause, there's no room in the house. I mean the house was so small. I put the greens on the porch and I think, "I need to paint something." And I remember a friend of mine said, "If you don't know what to paint, paint a self-portrait." So I set up my camera, you know, my laptop, and the greens are still at the table. So I left them there, took a photo, decided to leave them in the photo, started painting this self-portrait with these greens, and then became actually way more interested in the greens, which is interesting to me like [more] than the face, and then the greens were my father because I've told this story, he grew greens everywhere we live. He always had collard greens growing. And when I think of collard greens, I think of my father and the greens were, you know, were family, and the greens were community and they were like every black Southern family. I know for sure when they have a gathering, somebody's bringing greens, and I began to think how daddy grew them, and he cooked them and my mama cooked them. And now I cook them. And whenever there's a family gathering that was large — in the pre-COVID days — I cooked the greens. It was known that "Natalie's going to bring the greens." There's this lineage of greens that became ... heritage and story and gathering.

I remember the first Christmas with Ron's family, and there were three kinds of greens: one sister cooked them with meat and one sister cooked them with spice. You know, I cooked mine without meat, 'cause I got vegetarians in the family. But you would not know that they had no

meat 'cause I'm good (liquid smoke and olive oil). So that's what they became.

They became that lineage, and then how they began to morph into more than just greens in a painting. And I've sold many of those. And so some of them you can't see in this room, and some are in the other space. I would do portraits of greens. I'd call it like, you know, "the green close-up" because they're beautiful, they're beautiful. And you can see violet in their leaves and you can see there's just so much in the light shining on them and the edge of them. And so, you know, I'm the person who you might see in your backyard. Like, "Why is that chick taking pictures of my greens in my backyard?"

But then they begin to, morph from, you know, like a bouquet of greens. When I did my master's thesis, it was called, "Rag Quilts and Collard Greens." And so when I got my degree, my husband gave me a bunch of collards, you know, like a bouquet, and then they just started to morph. When I did the "Collard Queen," which is probably one of my best-known pieces, I knew that I was going to do a Collard Queen. I had my daughter, who's been a muse, pose with greens. I had, you know, I thought like beauty queens, et cetera, et cetera. And then one day, you know, you're working through stuff without knowing you're working through stuff. I said, "Oh, she's dressed in them." And I painted a full length nude. I see this wonderful sculpture of the strong woman and I paint a full-length nude. And then I dressed her green by green, by green. So if you were able in that painting to remove the greens, you would see a full-length body underneath, completely painted. And then I sculpted the dress around her and it took me in a whole different direction. And then I can't even tell you how like sometimes it becomes headdresses.

SB: That's a really good point to call me on that, and so I think that's a clarification. I'm looking at this from the outside perspective. But too, artists are like scientists and they have a question and you answer it in a non-verbal or sometimes some — in an artistic way through the creative process. So you don't know what the answer is until you can look back and see. So it's better for me to say, can you talk to me about the exploration of greens in your work?

ND: Thank you. Because that's what this is. This was an exploration. I have a friend — artist — who said to me

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once, “Art was a problem I could solve.” And that is very much what I am. I am. You could say you were a scientist. I am, I’m an explorer of material, and there are ideas and things bubbling up in my head. And sometimes the idea is driven by the material. Sometimes the idea is driven by something I’ve seen. Sometimes it’s just something that’s evolved. Sometimes it’s words. Sometimes it’s a feeling.

I’ve got a painting in my head right now, um, that was driven in part by a material. I saw paint called The Blackest Paint. There’s no paint blacker than this. And I thought, well, what would I do with that? I’ll buy it. And then I hadn’t even gotten it yet. And I was looking at a portrait in my hall, in the hall of my house is one of my collard green paintings, one of the early ones, and it’s my parents’ wedding. And they are so young and my mother is holding her bouquet. I painted it as collard greens. My father’s boutonniere is collard greens. And my mother who has dementia is living here now. And she would step out and say, “Why am I in that painting with your husband?” Like, “No, that’s not my husband, Mommy. That’s your husband.” And I realized that, you know, her memory of that is gone. And then I thought about that blackest black paint. And I thought, “Oh, Raven is stealing my mother’s memories. And now I have to explore this. I have to explore this with Raven. I have to explore this with this ‘blackest black’ paint, which is like a black hole in the canvas.” And it was the rabbit hole of my mind and this black is black paint and my mother’s words and the portrait in the hall.

SB: Right.

ND: And so then, there was this line of inquiry that went in this way. It was that there’s this swirl of experience and memory and material and the light hitting something in a certain way and hearing something. And somehow, one day, they become something, and then I follow it.

SB: But that — to circle back — that’s a very individual, personal journey.

ND: Yeah.

SB: But then you mentioned, once the piece is out in the world ...

ND: Yeah. It’s something else.

SB: It’s something else. Will you talk to us about that experience of having people experience your art?

ND: Hm, You ask some very interesting questions ...

SB: You can skip them.

ND: No, that’s cool because it’s interesting to me to explore the question that I have not been asked. At first, when I did the show at Avery, I was like, “I’m with the big kids.” You know, the response to that diptych was really surprising to me because I was there with people who I considered way more experienced, so way more, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But the fact that people stood in front of those and said, “This is speaking to me,” was a revelation that the thing that I felt resonated on some level with others. And it wasn’t just about, “Well, is this the artistic technique? What are those strokes like?” Because I don’t really know about that. It was about, “This feels this way to me.” And as such, it felt like an extension of my storytelling. It became an extension of my storytelling because even when you are on a stage telling stories, what leaves your mouth is not necessarily what is received by the people who are sitting there and their perceptions and their experiences alter what’s happening. And so it’s the same thing that people stand in front of a piece of work, or they order a piece of work and it is resonating with something that’s in them. And that’s also very satisfying, you know?

SB: So it makes this third place. Right?

ND: Yeah!

SB: How does race figure into that? Because I’m sitting across from you as a white woman, looking beyond you every so often at the painting — that is my favorite painting of yours — and realizing halfway through this conversation that it’s you, which is making my heart palpitate a little bit and not ever realizing that it was your face that I was attracted to in your work.

ND: What does race have to do with it? From the creative ... from inside my world, nothing and everything. I’m a Black woman. I paint what I feel, what I see in my experience, what I want to elevate, what I want to celebrate. That’s Black. Me, mine. My daughter is often a muse, my husband,

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my children, my life, my experience, my story, my history. So yes, all of that. It's not that I have never painted a person who wasn't Black. I have. And it's funny, like when I first started, [points to an angel figure] like she's blue,

SB: She's blue.

ND: And I was at that time exploring and playing with telling a story that wasn't directly tied to a specific skin color. And yet everything about her also tells you that she's of African descent perhaps, except for she's an angel. She's an angel. She can be blue if I want her to be.

I remember once when I first had my studio in St. Helena, I was making these little figures, little cutout crafts, of course, because they were fireplace screens and a woman came in and asked one of my employees, "Well, does she? Why does she always do Black people?" And, uh, why not? I'm so confused about your question. Um, why did you have — ask that guy why he only does white people, please ask him. And it's not that he only does white people because he doesn't like Black people. Maybe he just does white people 'cause that's what he sees and notices and feels and cares about.

SB: Right.

ND: Here you go. But I will say that the people who buy my work are not all Black people. People who buy my work are people who resonate with the spirit of the work, and the spirit of the work is its own thing that I may not even truly understand. So, you know, that's all I know how to say about that.

SB: It's been a year.

ND: Yeah, man.

SB: A year of, I would say sequestering a lot and this and I have watched you paint the floor on the studio through Instagram. I have watched you place grains of rice in a circular pattern around someone's head and call it, um, what do you call it?

ND: A rice mosaic.

SB: And you call it peaceful.

ND: Very.

SB: And I would not have that experience doing that. So it's been a space where you have had a forced sequestering, a forced freedom to really do something when there's no plan ahead of you. So coming out of this, hopefully, one day we will come out of it, it's got to have affected your art to be able to just play and create from that space. Do you feel excited about where your work is going?

ND: Yes. You had talked to me at one point about my work with gourds, which was kind of accidental. Those two boxes still have some gourds.

SB: And they're huge. They're the size of a Rubbermaid container each.

ND: Yes. I had bought a bunch of them, 'cause I was going to do this Shekere workshop with these teachers. And then I realized that wasn't going to work. There was no way we were going to do that in four hours because it always takes more time than you think. Yes. So I saved them. I kind of forgot about them. And then this summer, you know, the spring, when I was home, I opened the boxes and was like, "Oh, what should I do with these?" And I did at that time, I just had unlimited time. My mother wasn't living here, I had unlimited time to just sorta ask myself questions about them. That was just really fun.

I wasn't going to set any, you know, people like to come out of this pandemic, having done. "No, leave me alone." What I want to do is just come out alive. That's what I want. And I'm going to play with this. I have no expectation for it. I don't know what to do with them, but whatever I want to do with them, I can. And then they led me down this really wonderful path. And each one led me to another one. And like the first one I did was pretty intricate ... I carved it and made it look like greens. I carved each leaf with a Dremel. I was all in it. And then, I did a small one. My daughter said, "Make me one." So I did one. And then I started thinking ... these are vessels, these aren't just gourds, they're, they're vessels for something. And then I began to explore that. And I had spent — I started the new year in West Africa with my family in Sierra Leone, and that also was in the mix. And I'm working with natural materials like these gourds and whether I was going to paint them, was I going to leave it naked, was going to

carve it? What's going to be inside? I began to play with paper-mâché and clay and natural materials and Palm nuts I brought back from Africa, and that was so cool.

I was in this museum in Freetown and they had all these masquerade costumes and one was a Creole costume made of gourds and Q-tips and toothpicks. And it was so amazing. I was enthralled with it, this thing that was out here in the world that, you know, when these masquerades people can put them on and they move around and I just was feeling this kind of, how things move out into a space. And that is what happened with the gourds. I loved that just unlimited time to play with that. That was just, I could just come out here and I didn't know what was going to happen. I had a neighbor next door who would say, "I hear this noise." It was a drill. It was, you know, jigsaw. It was, you know me saying, you know, 'cause you don't even know I'm gonna open this gourd. Is it going to be a good gourd? Is there going to be a spot in it? And then I started stitching gourds, which is, I don't even know how I ... Ooh, 'cause I'd seen somebody who would sew sweetgrass onto a gourd. So I can't do that. But what if? My favorite question. What would happen if? So then I began to drill holes into them and stitch them. And then that was like this soft thing, like, like cords stitched through this gourd. And, you know, it's like each thing leads you to something else. It's your lab, it's your explorative experience. It is the process of exploration. That is the most exciting thing.

I don't come into the studio and say, "What can I make to sell?" I come in and say, "What will happen if I do this?" Right now, I'm playing with gouache. I've never used it before. And that's because I've been talking about doing a children's book with someone. And for some reason, my daughter says, "Why didn't you do that?" I'm like, "Oh, yeah. And I think I'll use the material. I'll use them. I'll use a medium I've never used before. That'll be fun." But because I've seen how that color, that saturated color, is really cool.

SB: Yeah.

ND: And my daughter said, "Well, Mommy promise yourself that if they, if you get the book, you won't say, 'Well, if I can't do it in gouache, I won't do it. Just promise yourself that you could step back to another medium.'" But that thing of, "I wonder what happens if I do this?"

I wonder how this will work?" is very exciting. It's very exciting.

SB: Let's talk about a specific piece that is on the easel right now. There's a lot of pieces — you jump around right? And work on pieces as they speak to you. That's what you explained to me when we were walking through here. But you have one specific piece that is really like, tripping your trigger right now.

ND: Yeah. I want to talk about it. It's called "The Room." I think. There's a lot going on in it. It's different than a lot of my work, but it's trying to tell lots of different stories. It's trying to tell stories of protection and safety and the way women can be the strong ones who protect and, and keep ourselves safe. And so it was based on a story my daughter wrote about a place called The Room where women of color, Black women specifically, could go to be safe. And in her story, women throughout history from before enslavement, from after, could find themselves at any time in this space together, because time doesn't matter in that space. And so I began working on a painting to kind of flesh out that story.

It had really started as a musical theater piece, a storytelling theater piece, and that got canceled, and is still kind of living in me. So I painted, you know, Breonna Taylor, I painted Sandra Bland. I painted other women of color who have died by violence because they were not kept safe. I painted myself, I painted my daughter. I painted Harriet Tubman because she's my patron saint.

SB: And she is in royal blue.

ND: Yes she is in royal blue. And, I can't remember her name — the young woman [Brittany Hill] was holding a baby ... when she was shot. But everyone in that room did not die by violence because that's not a requirement to get to that room. A requirement to get to that room is to want to. And so everyone there — like I'm in that room and my daughter is in that room and others are in that room. But there's also a coyote in that room and it's curled up next to the woman who's resting back there. And I kind of want to talk about this coyote because of my experience with a coyote. I was riding my bike on a wooded trail, ran into a tree, had to walk the bike. And as I was walking the bike, I saw what I thought was a dog come out of the

woods and onto the trail. But it never looked at me, which is weird because a dog will look at you. It didn't look at me, but it stopped. And I stopped, and I'm thinking, that's a weird-looking dog. And we both were just standing in the trail without the dog, I thought, looking at me, and then the dog moved off into the trees. And I thought that dog moves funny. So as I continued pushing my bike, I thought, wait, that's not a dog. Oh, that was a coyote.

And when I got home, I went to Google. It was, and I was telling my husband, he was very concerned about me being out in the woods with coyotes because they're dangerous, but this coyote could care less about me. We were both just out in the woods. And I was a few days later at a carwash sitting next to this guy and mentioned a coyote. And he said, "Whenever I see a coyote, I shoot it. Coyote, bobcat. I shoot it." I said, "Why would you just shoot it?"

"Cause they're trouble. I just shoot 'em."

And I thought about that coyote. It was just minding its business. And then I began to think, my son is Coyote. We are Coyote. And there are people who see us and simply assume that we are dangerous and should be put down and don't question it at all. And so, I gave Coyote a safe place in this room and Raven, because, you know, there are many African stories of us changing shape and becoming invisible and taking different forms. And so in this room, we may have taken the shape of Coyote or Raven and shown up in the room like that. And I don't know why I want to talk about that, but I think it just feels important to me. There are symbols on all the walls in this room that say God's safety and protection, and maybe it's just my desire to create a place. And there's some words included. "I go to prepare a place for you," which is a Bible verse. You know, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place, I'll come again." All the folk hoping that you know, we get to heaven, there'll be this safe place. And then I didn't see the movie "Harriet." I couldn't watch it because I do a show on Harriet and I didn't want it in my head. But the actress who plays Harriet sings this song in a video my son showed me. And at the end, she sings: "I go to prepare a place for you." Harriet Tubman doing that. And so I think that this piece is my desire to create a safe place in a world that does not feel safe. And to be honest, I wanted to tell this story and now I don't know why, because it's very emotional for me, but I have not felt

safe in the last four years. And I want there to be a safe place. And it's just a painting, but I want there to be a safe place. That's what's happening here and we may not use this, but that's what's happening here.

SB: And can you talk about why it's under the water?

ND: Water, origin. That's where we come from. That's where we are, that's what we cross, and in African cosmology, there is Yemaya, the goddess of the ocean. She's the goddess of all that or "Mother Water." And she's the head of that. And there's this story that she looks after her children. And there is that story that during the middle passage, that those were aboard, and she came for them! Water connects us, water is our origin, regardless of your spiritual or religious belief, if you come from the Christian origin of, and you know, God stepped out and there was nothing but water and spoke and land appeared regardless of that, there's water. And so that, that idea that that's a safe space, that she has created the space, that she's created this space, that there is this place.

So that's that. And I'm going to tell you that I wanted to talk about the painting, but I didn't know this would happen. I didn't know this would happen when I talked about it, I just knew I wanted to talk about it.

Sometimes people will say to me, that when they hear my voice, they feel safe. And, sometimes when they see my work, they feel safe. That is a very good thing. That is a very good thing. When someone says, "You did this video, you were talking about your art, and when I heard your voice, I relaxed."

SB: Yes.

ND: That is a very good thing. Yeah.

SB: But that juxtaposition of you creating safety, on canvas, and for others, while simultaneously, not feeling safe.

ND: You do what you can. You do what you can. I journal every day, pretty much. And I use whatever tools I have at my disposal to create a safe place for myself. The studio. My work. My work creates a safe place for me.

My grandmother was a very positive influence in my life.

THE BITTER SOUTHERNER

And she always was like, “Well, just count your blessings. Start at ‘A’ and go to ‘Z.’” And sometimes that’s what I’m doing in my journal. A. Air! I can be grateful for that; I can remember that right now. B. I had a banana for breakfast!

And so, if we talk about how talking to someone helps you understand what you do, I am understanding as I speak to you that my art creates a safe place for me.

SB: Differently than your voice.

ND: Differently than my voice, yes. Yes. So that’s good. That’s good for me to know. So cool.

SB: Thank you, Natalie.

ND: Thank you for asking some interesting questions here.