

Bria Fernandes things left unsaid



Ain't Misbehavin' (detail)

September 11 - October 31, 2025

Exhibition response by Ekene Emeka Maduka

As a painter, I often encounter moments when an image feels exact yet still holds space for the unknown to emerge. My paintings tend to signal their own completion rather than submit to my full control. Spending time with Bria Fernandes' artwork reminded me of this arbitrary yet transformative part of the painting process. Having first met Bria during our undergraduate studies at the University of Manitoba School of Art, it feels fitting—almost cyclical—to now reflect on the evolution of her practice on the occasion of her Gallery 1Co3 solo exhibition, *Things Left Unsaid*.

The earliest works I encountered from Bria were Baroque-like portraits reminiscent of 17th-century painters like Rembrandt and Caravaggio. They were characterized by layered, painterly strokes; deft renderings of flesh and fabric; and shadowy, atmospheric backgrounds. The series of paintings in *Things Left Unsaid* gathers together the threads of her formative years: her anatomical precision, her deepening relationship with oil paint, and her growing conceptual maturity. Bria describes her love of oils for their slow drying time, their ability to hold multiple layers, and their openness to being manipulated with various materials—qualities that keep the medium dynamic and ever-engaging. After a few years studying at the University of Manitoba, Bria transferred to Alberta University of the Arts, expanding her formal training and refining her technical approach.

In describing the experience of repressing emotions in public, scholar Sara Ahmed captures the way hesitation can obstruct expressions of honesty out of fear of causing discomfort. She writes:

To create awkwardness is to be read as being awkward. Maintaining public comfort requires that certain bodies 'go along with it.' To refuse to go along with it, to refuse the place in which you are placed, is to be seen as causing trouble, as making others uncomfortable. There is a political struggle about how we attribute good and bad feelings, which hesitates around the apparently simple question of who introduces what feelings to whom.¹

Ahmed's vivid framing illuminates sentiments that are otherwise difficult to articulate—sentiments echoed in much of Bria's current work. The paintings in her exhibition often stage internal dialogues between oneself and one's inner voices, set against public or semi-public environments. Bria heightens this tension by exaggerating an active sense of dissociation, blending scenes that

1 Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)," *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, Issue 8.3, Summer 2010 (*Polyphonic Feminisms: Acting in Concert*), 4. <https://sfonline.barnard.edu/feminist-killjoys-and-other-willful-subjects/4/>.



Picnic Trio

appear rooted in reality with visual cues drawn from a cognitive space of anxiety and unease. Through silence and omission, she engages the role of the psyche, visualizing the intrusion of thoughts that emerge in moments of discomfort or withdrawal.

Picnic Trio (2022) offers a particularly striking example. Three figures lounge in an unremarkable outdoor setting, their gazes directed toward an unseen space beyond the canvas. The figure to the right of the central subject is painted in an intense red, while blends of red and blue creep across the central figure and the one to their left. These areas of flat, saturated colour interrupt the otherwise detailed rendering of bodies, producing a disquieting effect. The painting grants visibility to an inner–outer–bodily experience unfolding in a public space—a collision between presence and disconnection.

By presenting multiple iterations of the same characters within a single frame, Bria captures the reality that we are never truly alone with ourselves. She points to the invisible weight of passing thoughts and the shifting boundaries of identity. Returning to Ahmed’s writing, one is reminded of the political cost of self-assertion: “To be willing to go against a social order, which is protected as a moral order, a happiness order, is to be willing to cause unhappiness, even if unhappiness is not your cause.”²

2 Ahmed, 2. <https://sfonline.barnard.edu/feminist-killjoys-and-other-willful-subjects/2/>



Ain't Misbehavin'

Ahmed's perspective becomes an apt framework for reading Bria's interrogation of internal struggle: whether to stand out and risk unsettling others, or to remain silent for the sake of social harmony—at the expense of oneself.

In *Ain't Misbehavin'* (2024), Bria explains that the dog serves as both protector and aggressor. This duality echoes the roles we play in self-interrogation—shifting between judge and provocateur. It also parallels the ways in which Black identity is often subject to public scrutiny simply for existing. James Baldwin's essay *Stranger in the Village*, from his collection *Notes of a Native Son*, resonates here. Baldwin reflects on his time in a remote Swiss village as an African American, describing the relentless, often unconscious, interrogations of his identity in public life, and the layered, sometimes contradictory emotions that accompany such encounters.

Step Aside Splash (2025) is a testament to Bria's continuing maturity as both a painter and thinker. This work is also a personal favourite. The piece presents its central figure in a moment of true introspection. The bathtub becomes a candid, relatable third space—a nod to the familiar phenomenon of “shower



Step Aside, Splash! (detail)

thoughts.” Within modern life, as echoed in film, media, and lived experience, the private bathroom functions as a rare refuge: a place where thought unfolds outside the noise and anxieties of daily existence. Bria canonizes this intimate space as a safe landing for the Black woman in the portrait—a site where she can reflect freely on both inward and outward perceptions of self. The title, with tongue-in-cheek wit, underscores this point: it calls attention to the absence of any actual “splash.” This absence becomes a metaphor, evoking silence and the intangible weight of anxiousness—an emotion difficult to name yet deeply felt. The work invites viewers to consider not only what is expressed but also what is withheld, probing the tension between presence and absence, visibility and erasure. In taking this approach, Bria directs us toward the subtleties of quiet erasure, challenging us to sit with what is missing, as much as with what is shown. Too often, Black identity is flattened into a singular, monolithic experience. Yet human identity is inherently multifaceted; even within communities that share history and context, perceptions and ways of being are shaped by a wide range of influences. The assumption that Blackness is performed in one prescribed way feeds into the pressures that shape—or repress—self-expression, especially in public.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Bria Fernandes is a Canadian-born figurative painter whose art delves into themes of identity, vulnerability, and belonging, using silence, omission, and exclusion as tools to depict oppression and introspection. Through symbolic imagery and passive body postures, she captures moments of self-reflection, focusing on marginalized communities' unseen emotions and unspoken truths. Working primarily with oil paint and acrylics, Fernandes incorporates symbolic forms that reflect her personal and cultural narratives. Her intricate works create emotionally resonant spaces, inviting viewers to share these moments of contemplation and fostering dialogue about identity, anxiety, and displacement. Born in Ottawa, Fernandes now resides in Winnipeg. She has a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Alberta University of the Arts. Fernandes' art has been shown in the following exhibitions this year: *The Feminine Lived Experience* at The Esplanade Arts and Heritage Centre (Medicine Hat, AB), *UPRISE 2025: The Art of Resistance* at The Untitled Space (New York City), *Black History Month Showcase* with Kanbi Projects via Artsy (online), and *Threads of Kin and Belonging* at the Winnipeg Art Gallery–Qaumajuq (Winnipeg).

ABOUT THE ESSAYIST

Ekene Emeka-Maduka is a Nigerian artist based in Winnipeg. Her interdisciplinary practice includes painting, sculpture, film, and community-based work which generate from emotional, and psychological states related to splintered identity indicative of migrant experiences like hers. Although Maduka's work stems from a conflation of her own fragmentary memories, personal events, or experiences, they are always interlinked to the larger historical, cultural, and social contexts they emerge from. She received her BFA (Hons) from University of Manitoba. Her work has been exhibited and screened locally and globally. In 2023, Maduka was commissioned to fabricate a public art work for the STAGES Biennale by Plug In ICA. Her art is in the permanent collection of The Museum of Africa Contemporary Art Al Maaden (MACAAL). In 2024, she was awarded the Royal Bank of Canada ON THE RISE Award presented by the Winnipeg Arts Council. Maduka has gallery representation with Fabienne Levy Gallery, Switzerland.



Walking Down Limbo Avenue

LIST OF WORKS

Unless otherwise stated, all works collection of the artist. Dimensions are in inches and listed as height x width.

A Shade of Red, 2021, oil on canvas, 20" x 20".

Ain't Misbehavin', 2024, oil and acrylic on canvas, 80" x 69". Collection of The Esplanade Arts & Heritage Centre, City of Medicine Hat.

Come Rain or Shine, 2023, oil and acrylic on canvas, 54" x 67".

In Sunshine Manor, will everything be ok?, 2024, oil and acrylic on canvas, 35 1/2" x 47 1/2".

Picnic Trio, 2022, oil and acrylic on canvas, 40" x 30".

Step Aside, Splash!, 2025, oil and mixed media on canvas, 65" x 84".

Try not to unravel all at once, 2022, oil on canvas, 47.75" x 29.75".

Walking Down Limbo Avenue, 2022, oil and acrylic on canvas, 35" x 35".

ABOUT GALLERY 1C03

Gallery 1C03 is the campus art gallery of The University of Winnipeg. The gallery opened in September of 1986 with the mission to engage diverse communities through the development and presentation of contemporary and historical art exhibitions and related programming initiatives. The Gallery is also responsible for the development, preservation, and presentation of the University's art collection.

EXHIBITION HOURS

Monday - Friday between 12:00 and 4:00 pm from September 11 until October 31, 2025 (closed September 30 and October 13).

AFFILIATED EVENTS

Conversation with artists Bria Fernandes & Ekene Maduka: Thursday, October 9, 10:00 – 11:00 am at The University of Winnipeg.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Gallery 1C03 is located on Treaty One Territory and the National Homeland of the Red River Métis, in Wiiniibak, Manido Abi. We acknowledge these are the ancestral lands of the Anishinaabeg, Anisininew, Ininiwak/Nehethowuk, Oceti Sakowin/Dakota Oyate, and Michif (Métis) Peoples. This territory is also a place of significance for the Denesuline and the Inuit, some of whom have been living here for generations. We acknowledge that our water is sourced from Shoal Lake 40 First Nation (Shoal Lake 39 is also impacted) in Treaty Three Territory, and that most of our hydro-electricity comes from Treaty Five Territory in northern Manitoba. Through the land, we recognize our connection and commitment to working with the Red River Métis, all First Nations Peoples across Turtle Island, and the Inuit of Canada.

GALLERY 1C03

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