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Artist Vanessa Raw Reflects on a Year of Firsts with Curator—and Sometimes Muse—Destinee Ross-Sutton

The British painter sat down with CULTURED ahead of her debut U.S. solo exhibition at Miami's Rubell Museum.



Vanessa Raw in her studio.

In Vanessa Raw's paintings, nude women recline in idyllic surroundings, intertwined with nature and each other. The tableaux, free from any objectifying gaze, conjure sublime pleasure: There's a sense that whatever happens in the painter's world is pure.

I first encountered the British-born artist's work at [Frieze London](#) in 2023, where she had her breakthrough debut, selected by Tracey Emin as part of the fair's [Artist-to-Artist section](#). Raw's gift for blending sensuality with lush, Edenic settings drew me in immediately. I even managed to acquire a work from the presentation for myself.

My experience with [Raw's](#) work was so affecting that I included the artist—an Olympic triathlete in a past life—in “Unapologetic WomXn,” a group show focused on expressions of female sexuality that I curated during this year's [Venice Biennale](#). Soon after, she asked me to pose for two new works—*Storm in the Morning Light*, 2024, and *This is how the light gets through*, 2024—the second of which was created during a residency at the [Rubell Museum in Miami](#). Both pieces will be on view as part of Raw's first institutional show and U.S. solo, opening at the museum in time for [Art Basel Miami Beach](#), and will travel to the institution's DC branch in 2026.

To mark the exhibition's opening, I had a conversation with Raw—conveniently tacked on to the end of our second posing session in Miami this fall—about how far she has come, the inspiration-sparking rituals that fuel her practice, and why she brings the women from her life into her work.

Destinee Ross-Sutton: This is your second successful career. You spent 11 years as a professional triathlete competing internationally. Does that have any impact on your work as an artist now?

Vanessa Raw: Maybe. Triathlons taught me how to keep pushing and searching for answers every day—which I was always doing because I was always injured. The physicality of it all crosses over. I've always had this need to test what I am capable of; I truly don't think any of us knows. I still run as often as I can. It keeps me sane, inspires me, brings me back to a flow state if I lose it, and reminds me of the beauty of nature.

Ross-Sutton: Mera Rubell, the cofounder of the Rubell Museum, said that she and her husband [Don] were blown away by your ambition and discipline. They were thrilled to provide you with a residency to support you in creating this solo presentation—and your largest work to date, *This is how the light gets through*, 2024. You created such a compelling body of work in a short period of time. What do you hope people [take away from] this show?

Raw: A feeling of connection, presence, and love—and perhaps a feeling of belonging. Other than that, I'm not sure I want to direct anyone in any particular way. I try to paint as intuitively as possible, so often the elements are multifaceted in their meaning—sometimes in ways I'm not conscious of.

Ross-Sutton: What are your influences?

Raw: *Women in the Picture* by Catherine McCormack was one catalyst for this work. Centering women's pleasure is so necessary—historically women have been the object rather than the subject, and it's their pain and the violence toward them that's been centered. Another big influence is nature. In Margate, I tend to run in the middle of the day as a break. I absorb as much of the colors and textures as I can before I return for a second session in the studio. There's also a need to experience myself fully—to work through memories and transform them into something positive and in my control. I want to feel connected in an often disconnected world.

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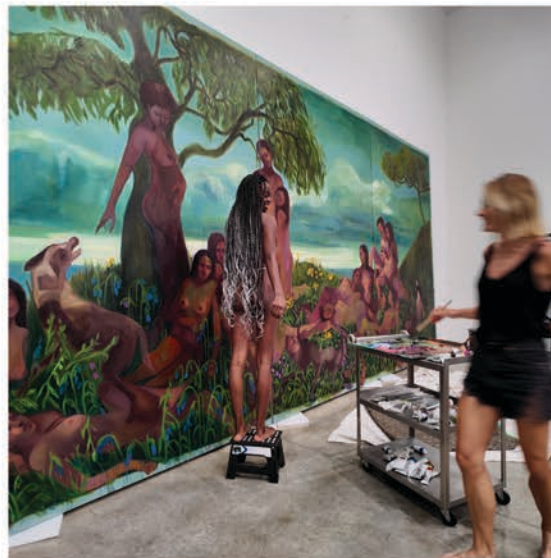
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Destinee Ross-Sutton and Raw at the Rubell Museum in Miami

Ross-Sutton: How do you center yourself in light of all the attention you've gotten?

Raw: Well, I don't feel like anything has changed, really. I'm painting every day and my critical brain is as strong as ever. Maybe when you're this critical, other peoples' opinions don't affect you much. It's great that people like the work, but it feels more like a relief at the moment. As corny as it sounds, I'm painting intuitively, so I can't necessarily take the credit. As long as I'm doing that, anything good in the painting is coming through me rather than from me. Any crappy bits are probably my ego resisting the painting.

Ross-Sutton: Margate seems to play a substantial role in how your career has progressed.

Raw: It's been amazing for me. I'm so grateful to have Tracey [*Raw's studio is in Tracey Emin's TKE Studios*] and Carl Freedman Gallery. I absorb bits of the landscape on my runs—sometimes whole scenes—and the women [in my work] are mostly artist friends from Margate.

Ross-Sutton: I discovered your work at Frieze London in 2023, where Mera and Don Rubell first acquired it. That, combined with the experience of seeing Tracey's work at the same fair, was the catalyst to curate "Unapologetic WomXn: The Dream Is the Truth" during the Venice Biennale this year. I'm grateful I was able to include your work *Nothing to Lose* in that show.

Raw: The exhibition looked amazing! Each artist was so carefully selected; it was an honor to be part of it. I was busy making my first solo show for Carl Freedman Gallery [*"On Earth We Weren't Meant to Stay"*] and it was right after working on the show at the Rubell Museum, so I had to miss it. You have posed for many artists—Amoako Boafo, Kehinde Wiley, Tim Okamura, and others. And you posed for two of the works in my Rubell show. Why did you agree to pose for me?

Ross-Sutton: There are a few reasons. First, the idea of catharsis—finding joy in a challenge. I had an almost instant feeling of nerves and discomfort, so I decided to see that as something to embrace. I like that your subjects exist in their own universe that almost doesn't rely on a viewer. Their focus is on each other; they enjoy this Eden-like natural intimacy within the work. There's power in the work's softness, which encourages the same thing within my own femininity. I relaxed into it. I imagined I was with my friends at the beach. It was a beautiful experience for me—I found something to reinforce the idea that nudity isn't just sexual—and I found power in that vulnerability. Despite how contentious a topic female sexuality and women's bodies are, your work maintains a sense of purity. What are you imagining as you create these worlds?

Raw: As a woman painting women, I'm automatically creating work for a female gaze. I imagine and situate my subjects in places of safety, and I genuinely feel love for the women I paint. I hope that shines through. When I use found imagery, there's a transformation process from male to female gaze, which transforms the feeling associated with the image. I take back the power.