

Michelle Msami

# BECOMING

curated by Esther Jungnickel



Art on Demand

**11.2**

June 14 – November 15, 2025

Michelle Msami is a painter from Botswana who now resides in Abbotsford, BC. Her works reflect on the female experience of spiritual introspection, sacrifice, justice, and vulnerability through the depiction of two elements: the body and fabric. The fabric at once alludes to the opulence of European Baroque painting and lacks definable symbolism or structure, as it folds and moulds to the body; any identity or meaning can be attached to it. The expression and pose of the figure in each composition draw the viewer to participate in the conversation each painting introduces.

In *BEG4ME*, Msami captures vulnerability. Working with fabrics and semi-nude figures, the artist conveys a feeling of being exposed. Desperation is felt in the woman's eyes as she looks up towards something above her, causing the viewer's gaze to go beyond the boundaries of the canvas. As the woman is on the ground, clutching onto the piece of fabric, her facial expression communicates a sense of distress. She longs to be saved, to be protected, but there is no one to answer her call. In the society we live in, women are hypersexualized, degraded, and demeaned. Here, the figure vanishes, helplessly, into the darkness. Her voice comes across as echoes, as issues of misogyny are spoken about, but rarely addressed. This is especially the case for Black women and women of marginalized groups—their experiences of injustice are overlooked, only gaining attention when it affects the wider community.

In *LONG.LIVE.\$ELF*, a figure in the lower portion of the composition looks towards a higher version of themselves. When you move away from what is comfortable, you are given a different perspective that allows you to notice certain habits that are not conducive to who you want to become. How do you sacrifice what is familiar for a higher version of yourself that is still unclear? The figure is speaking to herself, acknowledging where she comes from, while letting go of the traits that will limit her; she becomes enlightened, cleansed by the light. There is a duality in the use of color—blue representing that enlightenment, red representing sacrifice and martyrdom. Although the two figures are not facing one another, the colors represent the dynamic of the relationship between them. The figure on the bottom, robed in gold, is grounded in earthly desires. Looking into the light, however, she is forced to trust herself while navigating the unknown and striving for higher values.



In *FIRSTBORN'S TOKOPHOBIA*, Msami explores her fear of pregnancy. The subject lays on the dark floor with her hand placed over her abdomen, indicating she is with child; her gaze fixed on the viewer. The chair and white fabric fix the context as that of a deserted hospital. Laying on the ground, the woman has an empty expression indicative of being the recipient of neglect by doctors and nurses. Research has shown that a disproportionate volume of medical malpractice in Canada is inflicted upon Black and Indigenous women. Reports of women losing their lives and their babies because of systemic racism ignite fear within Msami and the wider POC community. In her own culture, there is an expectation for women to have children. People will ask, "When are you getting married, when are you having kids?" without considering how the medical system is treating women in vulnerable circumstances. The artist's experience being a mother figure for her own siblings informs her perception of the daunting responsibility of becoming a mother to her own children.

In *The Underground's Revenge*, Msami questions the semantics of

revenge and justice. Her contemplation took form after reading *Notes from Underground* by Dostoevsky, in which the narrator gives voice to a deeply self-critical, cynical character, whose suffering stems from his inaction and self-consciousness. As he lives in a hidden place, he observes the outside world, projecting his internal feelings of failure and shame onto others. As he desires revenge, he is overwhelmed by guilt and self-doubt, increasing his internal obstacles that solidify his inertia. Msami questions why modern society vilifies revenge while praising justice—although they both manifest in the same way. This is depicted externally in the interaction between the figures.

Each work is a visual call for empathy—demanding not just passive observation, but an active reckoning. Msami does not offer easy answers; rather, she creates space for dialogue, resistance, and reimagination. Her paintings are a call for visibility, healing, and truth. This causes her work not only to be relevant, but necessary in challenging the assumptions that permeate our contemporary social and political systems.

Esther Jungnickel  
Art on Demand 11.2 Curator

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Michelle Msami (b. 2000) is a visual artist born and raised in Botswana. She resides in British Columbia, where she attends the University of the Fraser Valley, studying for a Bachelor of Fine Arts with a major in Visual Arts. She has explored and experimented with painting, photography, sculpture and short films, evolving to be a multidisciplinary artist whose main medium of expression is painting. These mediums have assisted her in her creative practice, to conceive ideas, integrate them and learn from them. She has shown her works in galleries in Botswana and Canada.

**Front Cover:** *FIRSTBORN'S TOKOPHOBIA*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 in.

**Inside:** *LONG.LIVE.\$ELF*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 36 in.