

# GLADSTONE

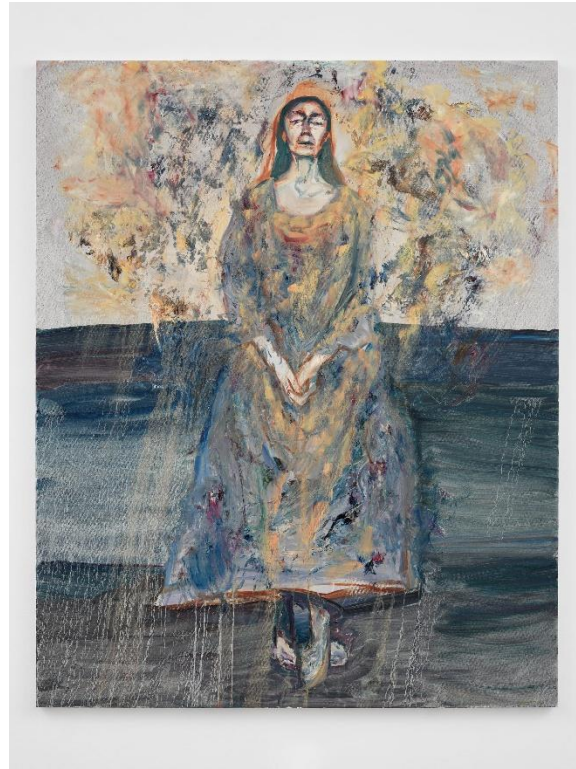
John Yau, "Celia Paul Transcends Her Own Mythology," *Hyperallergic*, June 1, 2026.

## HYPERALLERGIC

### Celia Paul Transcends Her Own Mythology

She puts her own spin on autobiography, exceeding her own cult status as a monastic artist.

John Yau

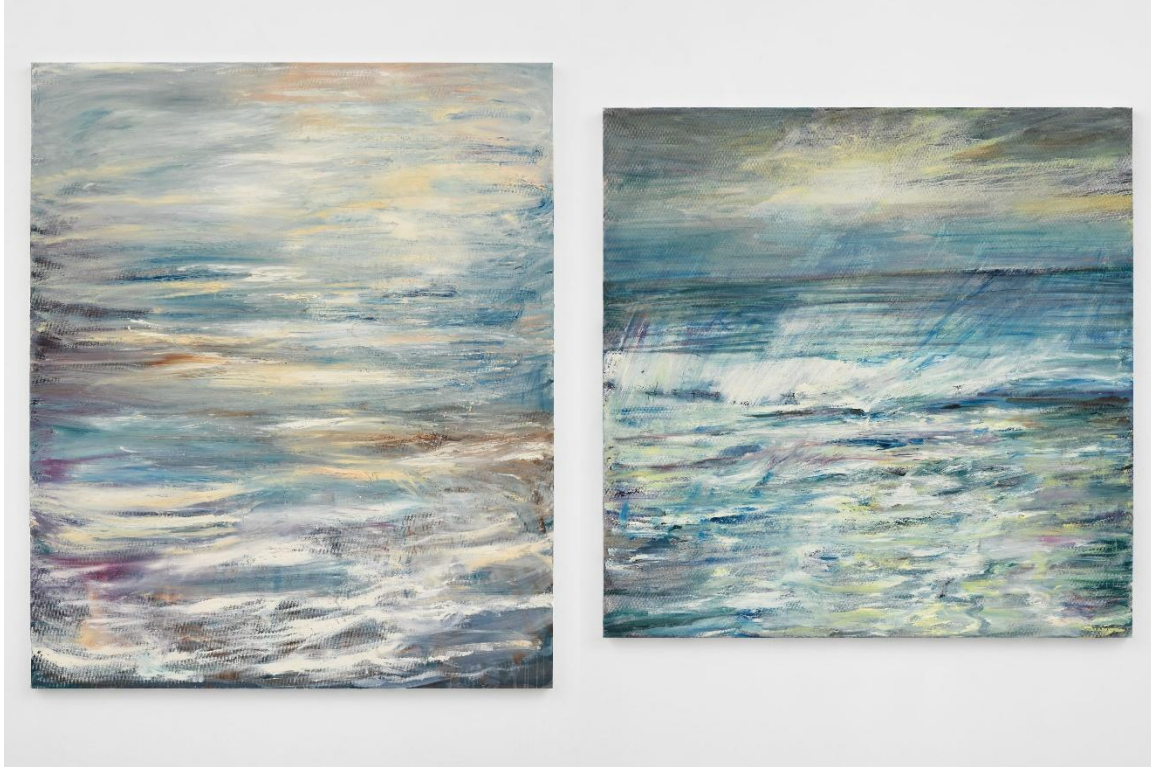


Celia Paul, "Burning Painter" (2025), oil on canvas (© Celia Paul; photo courtesy the artist, Gladstone and Victoria Miro)

My buildup to Celia Paul's exhibition *Innervisions* at Gladstone Gallery has been a long one. First, I read Zadie Smith's sharp, smart essay, "The Muse at her Easel" in the *New York Review of Books*, about the relationship between Paul and the notorious figurative painter Lucian Freud. She was 18 and an art student at Slade School of Fine Art, and he was 55 and famous. They had a 10-year relationship, and eventually, a child together. Though she is regarded by many to be one of Freud's muses, she also kept a rigorous painting schedule, working daily.

I then read Paul's marvelous book, *Letters to Gwen John* (2022), about the Welsh painter who lived most of her life in France, engaged in a passionate relationship with sculptor Auguste Rodin, and painted tonal portraits of anonymous women. Wanting to know more about this enigmatic artist and

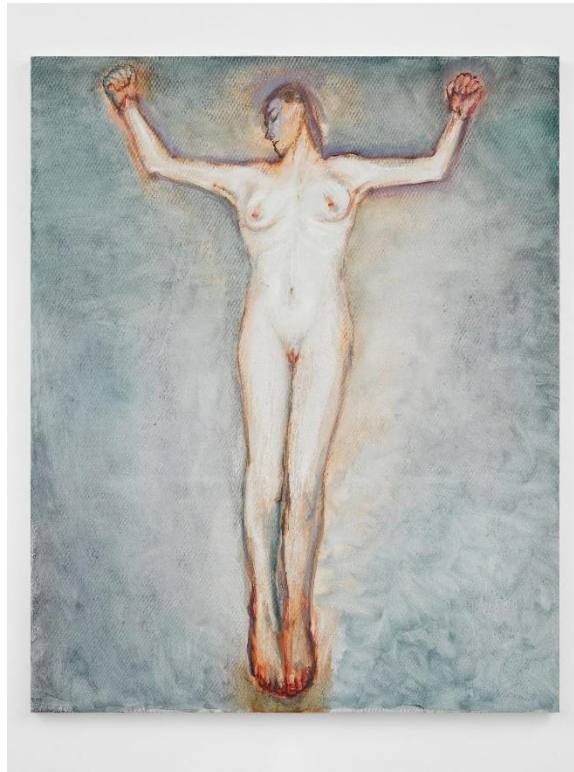
memoirist behind this work, I watched Jake Auerbach's beautifully sympathetic documentary film, *Celia Paul: private view* (2020). In one scene, the artist, wearing an oversized, paint-splattered smock and sitting in a chair, nervously rubs her hands in her lap and says: "I'm not a portrait painter. If I am anything, I've always been an autobiographer and a chronicler of my life and family."



Celia Paul, "The Tempest" (2025), oil on canvas; right: Celia Paul, "Advancing Tide" (2025), oil on canvas

Immersed in all things Paul, I went to the Gladstone exhibition to see if she exceeded her cult status as a writer and artist who lives a monastic life, paints subjects close to her, and lives and works in a top-floor apartment directly across the street from the front gates of the British Museum. Could she transcend this powerful mythology?

The simple answer is yes. The more complicated and useful answer only arrives during a visit to this exhibition. In it, we see Paul put her own spin on autobiography and chronicling her life and family. We also recognize that she goes well beyond her self-described limits in her paintings of the ocean, in which a path seems to wind its way up the middle, recedes in space, and then disappears. But her boldest work is "Cruciform Muse" (2025), her depiction of a crucified nude, nubile woman suspended in the air.



Celia Paul, "Cruciform Muse" (2025), oil on canvas

Searching for more information about this painting and any others like it, I came across a statement she made to Dian Parker about her painting, "Model" (2023), which also depicts a nude being crucified. In it, she explains her thinking around models and muses.

In my painting "Model," I have used a photograph of Gwen John posing for Rodin as a template for the head, and the body is dreamt up by me .... Even when Gwen John was most infatuated with Rodin, she continued to paint. She depicted herself in a state of supplication and waiting. By confronting her vulnerability, she subtly subverted her passivity. I think I am doing something similar." Ω

In "Cruciform Muse," the figure's pose of upraised forearms and hands recalls weightlifters lifting barbells above their head, just before the final triumphal upward thrust. Paul's figure seems to embody vulnerable power, nude and victorious. But the relationship between her and the image is complicated, more so after we know that she used a photograph of John for the head in works like "Model."



Left: Celia Paul, “Mirror Images” (2025), oil on canvas; right: Celia Paul, “My Mother, Myself and I” (2025), oil on canvas

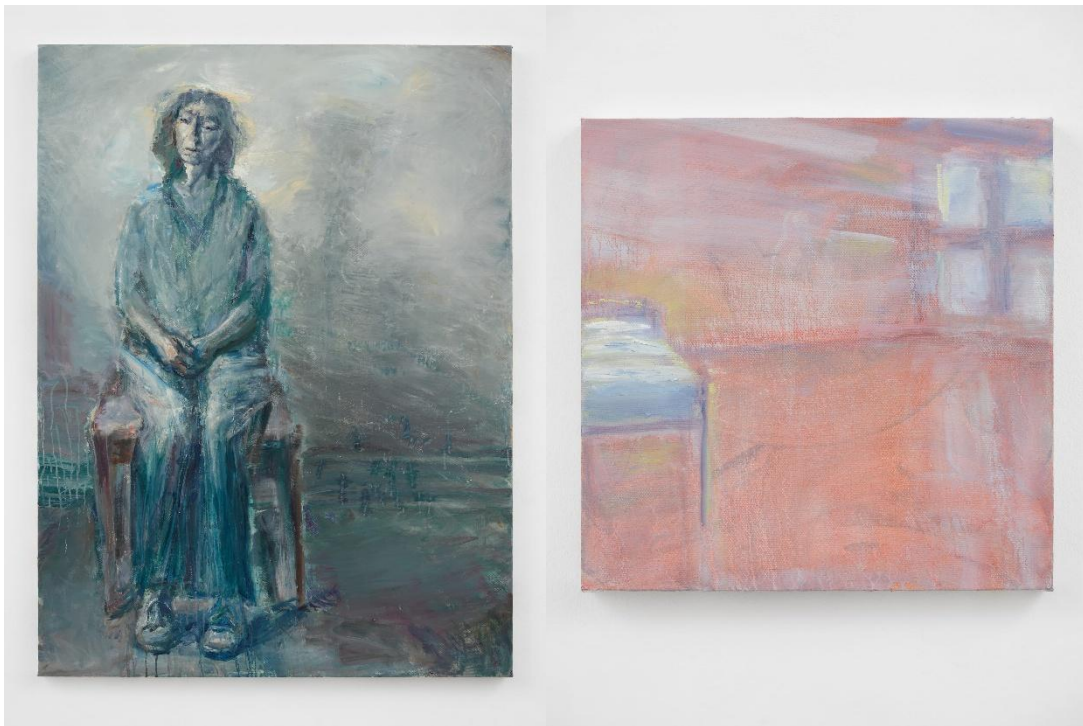
While Paul may start working from direct observation in her self-portraits and paintings of her sisters and mothers, at some point in her process, she turns inward and embraces her solitude. This is when the material world begins to fall away, and things are replaced by absence and the acceptance of the passage of time, an acknowledgement of mortality and infinity. Her back is to the mirror in “Mirror Images” (2025), recalling to this viewer Agnes Martin’s famous statement: “I paint with my back to the world.”

I see this turning away in “Sudden Light Refracting Plane Tree Shadows on my Wall” (2025), in which Paul depicts herself reclining on a Victorian fainting couch, contemplating the broad path of light gray light descending the gray wall. The painting’s surface is marked by thin, zigzagging rivulets of watery paint that have run down the canvas’s nubbed surface, evoking a world in the process of disappearing. This is a painting of a woman contemplating death without turning away.

For Paul, solitude is inescapable, and something we must learn to embrace. The social world is of little interest. Her sitters are dressed in shapeless, sack-like dresses. They look not at each other, but inward. This world is one we seldom want to acknowledge, much less hold and find joy and peace in, but it is one we all inhabit.



Celia Paul, "My Mother" (2025), oil on canvas



Left: Celia Paul, "Kate and Shadow" (2025), oil on canvas; right: Celia Paul, "Room in Bloomsbury" (2026), oil on canvas

*Celia Paul: Innervations continues at Gladstone Gallery (515 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 13. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*