

# JHANA MILLERS WHARE TOI TE WHANGANUI- A-TARA

## ~We light up the night sky with our chatter~

Those who cultivate a relationship with the earth and sky, including many queer and BIPOC folk, consider the charting of planets across the solar system to be as meaningful as watching birds migrate south for the winter. Understanding the movement of the stars and planets across one's mortal, and much more temporary, existence helps us to interpret the longer cosmic journeys that form suggestive shapes in our life. We begin to understand ourselves as stardust existing as coordinates of each other. And that the transitions that affect life forms as large as planets do have an impact on our overall demeanor.

A person's astrological birth chart paints a detailed self-portrait of where all of the major celestial coordinates in the sky are at the moment someone is born. These planets and stars are arranged into corresponding zodiac signs and tropical houses, first divided into twelve (e.g. Leo, Gemini) by Babylonian astronomers over 2000 years ago. Reading the stars is an ancient philosophical practice, as well as a shortcut to getting to know an LGBTQIA+ while waiting for a puff of someone's mint flavoured vape outside of a nightclub.

Claudia Kogachi is a Sagittarius sun entering her 29th sun rotation—and into the very first ~home-coming~ of Saturn that she will experience. It takes around 29.5 years for this planet to complete a full orbit around the sun and return to the same place in the sky that it was when you were born. This is called the Saturn Return, a pivotal rite of passage. Your return marks an intense period of deep self-reflection, growth, and transformation through challenge. The astrological event signals a time of immense rebirth for the artist and her creative practice.

Saturn is a planet that symbolises discipline, responsibility and structure. Claudia's Saturn is in Pisces, a star sign represented by fish who are known for their watery imagination and vividly dream-like flow. It's an interesting place for Saturn to transition into, this union being described as having "your fantasies flow seamlessly with reality."<sup>1</sup>

This description rings true of Claudia's lifepath as an artist, and of her paintings. Her canvases blend autobiographical realism with the fantastical quality of her own imagination. For Claudia, life is as equally malleable as fiction. Caricatures of herself, her family and lovers appear in real and imagined scenarios, across domestic scenes, emotional pull-and-tugs, and varying states of being. In previous works, she has gripped a tennis racquet against her mother, painted her partner together as infamous movie spy lovers, and scratched itchy particles of dandruff out of thin strands of hair. The images are softly cartoonish in their depictions, but they're never insincere.

Her latest exhibition, *Of Strands and Stars*, has been painted in acknowledgment of her Saturn return, which will return to Pisces next March 2025. When I ask her about it, she laughs wryly and reckons hers "has come a little early". The exhibition is an introspective inquiry of her present self and relationships, at the eve and flow of change. I read it as an ode to the friends she's fallen in love with having, as well as a survey of herself. Exploring personal relationships through paint isn't an uncommon theme for the artist, but there's something newly tender and compelling about this series of artworks. It feels like a deeper contemplation of life, and one where she's casting a wider net to represent her existence.

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<sup>1</sup> Saturn in Pisces: Contemplative, Purposeful, and Grounding, <https://www.tarot.com/astrology/planets/saturn-in-pisces>

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Previously, Claudia has mostly chosen to depict relationships with her direct maternal family and romantic partners on canvas. In *Of Strands and Stars* she has extended the purview, presenting herself in a wider radiance of friends. It's not just her own star that she is painting but a constellation of lives that layer the night with bright speckles. I immediately gravitate to a large painting of a club night, recognising several friends and personalities within the crowds in this picture. Pulses beat and hips gyrate against shimmery purple strobe lights. Claudia is not alone in these paintings—she is surrounded by a company of brown bodies, queer and trans essences, an artistic web that gives its own gloss and sheen to the night. Belonging to one another in a community forms a strong type of self identification, and a new type of portraiture for her art practice. The details she represents in her paintings likewise expand to encompass the distinct variety of figures she is depicting. I notice that hair comes alive in these paintings from sweat-drenched fringes, ringlets, cornrows, silken straight locks to the waves and curls of beards and armpit hair.

In other portraits Claudia is represented within a group of four. These figures paint each other's nails, shoot hoops and talk amongst each other. Her friends shimmer and comfort, giving her a listening ear. The paintings possess a cheerful energy that sits in stark difference to her trio of solo portraits presented in large format. These seem to signify the necessary element of taking your own individual journey through life.

In one portrait, the author has painted herself submerged in pond water. Long thin strands of hair drift like outstretched seaweed. Koi fish break through the water's surface to gather observantly around her body, while the figure's gaze is unfocused, meditative and sombre. In another, Claudia's present self comes face to face with an imagined older self. While still carrying the tattoos of her youth, her reflection has long silver hair representing her years, sags, wrinkles, and hajichi hand markings. We don't see the younger figure's face, but the older figure's gaze is firm, kind and knowing. The remaining solo portrait sees her nude figure mounted atop a winged horse that is walking down a bricked path, away from where she has been and towards a place unknown. I see the artist's sun sign strongly represented in this painting: Sagittarius is a sign represented by the centaur and is known to wander down deep philosophical roads. Claudia remarks that the figure in this painting feels sad and uncertain to her, but nevertheless the woman painted at the threshold of change still manages to hold our gaze underneath her bleached eyebrows.

Saturn's planetary orbit "ensures that each human faces the trials they need to grow."<sup>2</sup> Everyone's journey and trial, everyone's movements through the stars are different. A Saturn Return confronts you with a mirror, where you must be willing to see into both the dark blue of night alongside the lights that may guide you. Both the balance of dusk and day are present in *Of Strands and Stars*. As much as painting is traditionally a solitary practice, I get the sense that the artist is not alone down the roads she is led by.

Text by Van Mei

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<sup>2</sup> Signs & Skymates: The Ultimate Guide to Astrological Compatibility. Dossé Via-Trenou, Neka King. Hachette, 2023.