Employing magical realism through oil paint to explore Black identity, Dominic Chambers’ saturated dreamscapes coalesce the mundane and the surreal in captured stillness. In a world hyper-focused on capitalist structures of both macro and microcosms of production, the antithetical nature of stillness provides critical space for self-exploration. Through depicting his subjects practicing restorative moments of serenity, repose, or contemplation, Chambers highlights their transformative potential. For the artist, the connection between the cerebral and the aesthetic in painting and his own practice is crucial; he often cites literary figures such as W.E.B. DuBois and James Baldwin as influences, transmuting and edifying their words into visual prose.

Chambers carves space for expanding perceptions of Blackness within an art historical gaze that has long portrayed Black subjects as antithetical to depictions of leisure, intellectualism, and pleasure. Through the series Primary Magic, Chambers engages the Black body beyond historical signifiers of oppression, trauma, and resistance, addressing inadequacies in the representation of Black experience within Western painting. Chambers’ subject does not perform for the viewer, but instead lives in a liminal state of consciousness, free from perception of judgment or observation where their agency and autonomy is centered. Each unique composition connects and expands on legacies of artists like Kerry James Marshall, Kehinde Wiley, Amy Sherald, and Lynette Yiadom Boakye whose use of color, subject, and spatial composition have deconstructed and reformed the politics and poetics of portraiture. He also pays homage to color field artists, particularly Josef Albers, whose theoretical practice in color theory has influenced Chambers working in bold gradations of monochromatic color.

In Finding a Peace of Mind, the artist situates his subject in a rubescent scene both familiar and otherworldly. A Black, female sitter is positioned reading a book, head resting thoughtfully on an upturned hand. The whole scene is flush with hothouse shades: from the deeper claret color of skin and the textured maroon of hair to the soft coral folds of her shirt. Pinpoints of oppositional color highlight aspects specific to the individual, a turquoise circlet on a wrist, a spark of yellow gold for an earring, and the electric green of the text she reads. She appears to be seated at a table, or perhaps at the edge of a horizon surrounded by the vermillion skies of a sunset at the point of mellowing to dusk. In response to his centralization of the Black body in spaces ethereal and imagined, Chambers has referred to Elysium - or Elysian Fields - described in Greek mythology as sublime astral planes reserved exclusively for those most favored by the gods in life. Idyllic places of eternal rest where, removed from daily toil, inhabitants indulge in an endless pursuit of leisure. It begs the question, does this work present a moment, or an eternity captured in a single frame of reference?

-Keshia Turley, Curatorial Assistant
Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art