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ARTIST'S QUESTIONNAIRE

Nina Chanel Abney Imagines a Queer Black Utopia

The artist's new body of work depicts life outside of the city, in a rural idyll free of the white gaze.

By Erica Rawles

Nov. 19, 2020

By the beginning of this year, the artist Nina Chanel Abney's studio, a 1,500-square-foot space in a multiuse building in Jersey City, N.J., that she's rented since 2018, had begun to feel like a storage room. Stacks of boxes filled with books and products she'd made, as well as paintings — both her own and ones she'd purchased — lined the walls, and the countertops of the kitchenette were barely visible beneath the countless cases of spray paint piled on top of them. When the pandemic hit New Jersey in March, and the state went into lockdown, Abney — who also lives in the building, in an apartment a few flights below — became even more aware of her spatial confines. And so, in May, she bought a bike and a rack for her car and began taking road trips to rural areas outside of the city to find some relief from all the time spent indoors. Inspired in part by these excursions, Abney's new body of work conveys a sense of expansiveness — one that she also found in the form of an additional studio that she rented in the same building this fall. This larger temporary space, with a view of the Manhattan skyline, gave the artist enough room to finish the 22 paintings — ranging from 2 feet by 2 feet to 8 feet by 8 feet — that are currently on display in “The Great Escape,” a solo exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York.

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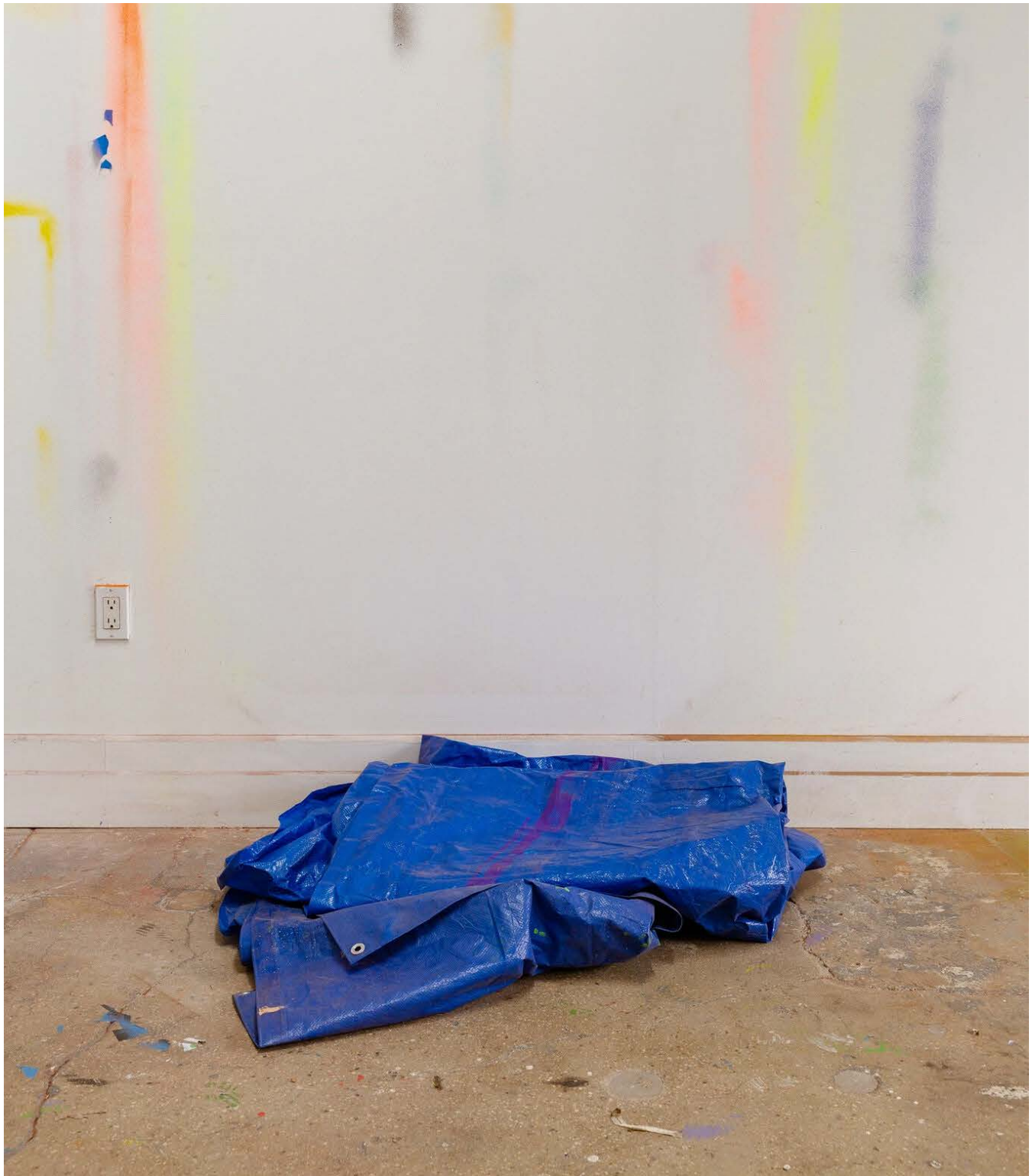
Abney, 38, is known for large-scale paintings with densely layered compositions and fragmented narratives that touch on topics including politics, race, policing, sexuality and celebrity. Graphic, angular figures that resist categorizations of race and gender appear against boldly colored backgrounds overlaid with large geometric shapes and fields of vibrant patterns, as well as symbols and numbers, creating a mesmerizing, often disorienting, array of imagery in a single canvas. But while past works have been informed by the idea of, in Abney's words, “information overload,” her new paintings feel notably more serene, in terms of both their subject matter and density. “They have a lot of breathing room,” she says.





Stacked buckets of acrylic paint, which Abney used to create the solid backgrounds of her new body of work, "The Great Escape." Donavon Smallwood





Traces of spray paint remain on the artist's studio walls, showing where her in-progress canvases once hung. Donavon Smallwood

To create them, Abney also took inspiration from Black queer social life, exploring the possibilities of Black autonomy and reimagining a setting in which such a world might exist — in the country, absent of both heteronormative ideals and the white gaze. “I feel like people might expect me, based on my previous work, to be going in one direction because of the election,” she says. “But I’m switching it up.” Rather than engaging directly with the news cycle, Abney offers a parallel story of sanctuary and community via abstracted landscapes across which Black people build and enjoy a world of their collective making — figures cycle, pick flowers, chop wood, bake a pie and feed chickens. “I was thinking about people leaving the city,” says Abney, “and what it would mean to own a bunch of land and kind of start your own thing.”

If the scenes in these works are more pared back than in past paintings, Abney is consistent in her instantly recognizable graphic style, which she has honed over the past eight years. The approach, she says, has its origins in “First and Last” (2012), a diptych of two collages that she made, by adhering paper and acrylic cutouts to a paper background, for an exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem honoring the groundbreaking American artist Romare Bearden. It was the first time her practice included a collage technique, breaking away from a more traditional painting process. “Collage really piqued my interest in how to layer flat shapes or flat elements in a way that could give the illusion of perspective,” she says. “I think from that point on my work visually took a major turn.” In “Femme Games” (2020), from her new series, Abney creates a woodland setting with layered brown fragments that depict tree trunks and branches, blocks of blue with wavelike strokes that evoke water, and striped rectangles that resemble picnic blankets and beach towels. On the same visual plane, a group of lively characters sit around a pregnant figure, their expressively angled limbs and hands suggesting vibrant conversation, their activity fully integrated into their environment.



Nina Chanel Abney's "Femme Games" (2020). © Nina Chanel Abney. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Abney's style and interest in storytelling can also be traced back to one of her earliest fascinations: animation. Growing up in Harvey, Ill., a suburb of Chicago, she would make drawings of the cartoon characters she watched on TV, and she later chose to study studio art and computer science at Augustana College in Rock Island, with aspirations to become a graphic designer or animator. "I didn't really realize then that you could make a career out of being a painter," she says. After graduating, she worked on an assembly line at the Ford Motor Company in Chicago while applying to graphic design grad school programs, but after getting rejected by every school on her list, she decided to pursue a master's in fine art instead, earning her degree from Parsons in New York. A painting from her M.F.A. thesis show, a 15-foot-wide work titled "Class of 2007" (2007) — in which Abney depicts herself as a white prison guard and her white classmates as Black inmates — caught the attention of the New York gallery Kravets Wehby, which became the first to represent her. Her debut show there sold out within a few days and, soon after, a selection of Abney's paintings were included in "30 Americans," a traveling exhibition that premiered at the Rubell Family Collection in Miami in 2008 and featured work by 30 prominent African-American artists, of which Abney was the youngest. In 2017, her first solo museum exhibition, a 10-year retrospective organized by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, N.C., traveled across the country, and her paintings are now included in collections around the world.



Nina Chanel Abney's "Buoyancé/Seas the Day" (2020). © Nina Chanel Abney. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Abney has also ventured beyond the canvas, most recently transforming characters from her works into 3-D figurines — such as her limited-edition collectible vinyl toy “Baby,” which she released in October through her website — and interactive animations, including the augmented reality artwork “Imaginary Friend,” which debuted in August on an epic scale, just above the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., and remains accessible, in a smaller version, through the app Acute Art. It is perhaps unsurprising, given this spate of recent projects, that Abney describes herself as a “workaholic” who gets bored easily. Indeed, much of her practice is about trying new things and finding ways to challenge herself as an artist. While making the pieces in “The Great Escape,” she especially relished the difficult task of working in spray paint while maintaining her clean-lined style. She employed a combination of hand-cut paper stencils and painter’s tape to create crisp edges and rendered only the solid backgrounds in acrylic. “If I don’t have a brush, then I’ve restricted myself in a way that makes it fun,” she says.

Speaking from her home on an early October morning, Abney answered T’s Artist’s Questionnaire over Zoom.





"I was already working with acrylic because you get very saturated, flat color and it dries fast," says Abney. "But spray paint dries even faster and I don't have to mix colors, which would prolong the process for me." Donavon Smallwood





A stool with a tray holding spray paint and rolls of tape stands in front of two of the artist's new works. Donavon Smallwood

What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what's your work schedule?

I wake up around 7:30 in the morning and, if I'm feeling motivated, I might work out. Then I check emails — that's probably the first thing I do. You're not supposed to but I do. Then I go up to the studio. I like to work during the day so I can get the natural light. Earlier in my career, I would work very late at night, till like 4 in the morning, but now I like to work during the day. I'm typically in the studio from 9 or 10 to around 6, but now it's longer because of my show. If I don't have a show, it's a very different schedule. I have different periods. There will be times when I'm working nonstop for a long time — for months — and times when I'm doing absolutely nothing, you know? Like a break. After I work in the studio, I come back to my place. I might watch TV. I watch a lot of "Housewives" on Bravo.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

A lot? I've been trying to set more boundaries for myself. But between Instagram, my cellphone, email and my studio being upstairs, there's always an opportunity to do something. I don't want to admit how many hours. Let's just say 10.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

Little drawings of Mickey and Minnie Mouse, stuff like that. My mom might still have some.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

I look for imagery — source imagery — on the internet. I'll say, "Oh, I think I want to do a piece of people gardening," and find a ton of pictures of people gardening, and that's how I start.

How do you know when you're done?

I can't even explain it. It's a feeling of content, almost a nervousness — like I can't add anything or else I'm going to mess it up.



One of Abney's hand-drawn stencils on the floor of her studio. "I started using stencils for numbers and letters and small shapes," she says, "But progressively, I got more interested in using them to make an arm, a hand or an entire figure." Donavon Smallwood

How many assistants do you have?

I have one studio assistant — sort of. I've always only had one and sometimes, because of how I work, it's not much help. It's all intuitive, and now I'm not even painting as much. Before, my studio assistant would paint solid background colors for me. Now, they do a lot of digital things for me: digitizing my paintings so I can then use the figures from them for cartoons, products and other things like that.

Have you assisted other artists before? If so, whom?

No, but before I got represented by a gallery, I did interview with Mickalene Thomas to be her studio assistant. During the interview she ended up giving me a list of residencies I should apply for. Things moved pretty fast and, later, we were in the 2008 "30 Americans" show together. I don't know if I would have been a good assistant for Mickalene. Now, being friends with her, I know that she's very precise, and her work is so intricate. I feel like I would've messed up and gotten fired.

Do you work that way?

Oh, yeah. I feel like I'm a fun artist to work for because it's a very laid-back environment — we're listening to music, podcasts, joking around — it's very casual. But I'm also very particular. I think my studio assistant might get annoyed with me sometimes for feeling like I'm watching over his shoulder.

What music do you play when you're making art?

Right now, I like H.E.R. and Sir — that whole vibe has taken over my Spotify. Sometimes I listen to my playlist so many times that I need to switch it up, so I listen to audiobooks, too. There's also an app, Clubhouse, that I got introduced to recently. It's like podcasts, but it's basically live conversations. You can enter into all these rooms, like chat rooms, but you can't direct message anyone. There are all these different, interesting conversations that people are having and you can join in.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

Maybe when other people said it. Or maybe I equate the word "professional" with it being, unfortunately, tied to money.

Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?

I don't usually eat when I'm working.

Are you bingeing any shows right now?

I'm not bingeing it, but I'm watching "The Real Housewives of Potomac," and I'm watching "Power Book" on Starz. I was trying to get into "Lovecraft County," but I don't really like scary movies, so I didn't want to watch it by myself.



One of the reference images Abney used while painting her new works. Donavon Smallwood



A large bundle of discarded painter's tape sits against a studio wall. Donavon Smallwood

How often do you talk to other artists?

I have some close friends who are artists, so I talk to them all the time.

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

I'm on Instagram, I'm hanging out with friends, I'm on the phone. Anything. I procrastinate a lot.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

It's maybe kind of cheesy, but I wrote personal notes to my close friends when I sent them the toy that I released. I found myself a little teary-eyed finally taking time to reflect on the long journey that I've had and on my friends, who have been there for me from the beginning. Putting out a toy and manufacturing it yourself is not an easy task. I think I was more emotional out of gratitude.

What do you usually wear when you work?

I have a jumpsuit that I'll wear, or sweatpants and a T-shirt — things that I don't mind getting dirty. And I like to wear the same pair of shoes: a very dirty pair of Vans or Crocs. My floors are concrete, and if I'm standing for eight hours, I'll go with the Crocs.

What do you pay for rent?

Too much.

What do you bulk buy with most frequency?

Spray paint and a ton of tape. People always look at me like I'm crazy when I'm in Home Depot with a shopping cart full of painter's tape.

What's your worst habit?

I feel like I'm easily distracted. Maybe that's it. Or looking at my phone. My phone's probably my worst habit.

Do you exercise?

Yeah. I don't like to, but I do.

What are you reading?

I listen to audiobooks, if that counts. I'm currently listening to "The Body Is Not an Apology" (2018). I just finished 50 Cent's book "Hustle Harder, Hustle Smarter" (2020). I have a ton of audiobooks on my phone — Jerry Saltz's "How to Be an Artist" (2020), a book called "How to Break Up With Your Phone" (2018), "Boom" (2019) a book about the art world and some by bell hooks. I switch it up. I might get tired of one and then I'll rotate to the next.

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

I have a bunch, but Henry Taylor and I did a trade when I was in L.A. for my show at the I.C.A. in 2018 and he painted me, so that's probably one of my favorite paintings right now.

This interview has been edited and condensed.