DURHAM, N.C.

NINA CHANEL ABNEY
Nasher Museum of Art
ON VIEW THROUGH JULY 16

Nina Chanel Abney’s exhibition “Royal Flush,” which surveys the ten years of her career to date, begins with a bang and ends with a digital plink. Upon entering the show, the viewer is confronted with Abney’s MFA thesis work, Class of 2007 (2007), a large two-panel painting showing the artist (the only black person in her year) as a white prison guard and her classmates (all actually white) as black inmates in orange jumpsuits. It’s a witty comment on racial imbalances in the art world, coupled with an invitation for audiences to reflect on the inverse imbalances that exist in America’s prisons. Kitty-corner from this opening salvo—moving from a drippy Alice Neel figurative style to a punked-up ’50s cartoon modernism—is my favorite work, Close but No Cigar (2008). This seven-by-twelve-foot canvas is based on the scene of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination in Memphis. Instead of King on the ground is President Obama, with his brain popping out of his ear. Howling and gesticulating above him are not King’s civil rights colleagues but rather a ragtag troupe of tramps and hipsters in corsets, bunny ears, mustaches, and clown face paint. The painting was made the year of Obama’s inauguration, and is prescient considering the ensuing (and continuing) character assassination of America’s first black president.

In 2009, Abney began searching for a cleaner and flatter style—with uneven results. The weakest works are smallish canvases she made in a paint-by-numbers manner, mixing figures from art history and pop culture to create mock classical portraits, religious icons, and fairy-tale scenes that comment on topical social and racial phenomena. Around 2012, geometric abstraction and a horror vacui of ornamental doodads displaced Abney’s investment in figurative caricature. She began to turn toward a looser, stencil-and-spray paint “street”-graphic version of Stuart Davis’s jazzy modernism, to which she added schematic African American heads crying and yelling. Her trajectory reads like agressive attempt to reverse engineer midcentury American modernism to encompass a more socially inclusive and contemporary range of people and themes. While the products of this revisionist project are visually punchy, Abney has struggled to marshal it toward effective commentary. Her most ostensibly political paintings are the most lightweight on this count. She has garnered accolades for her paintings on police brutality, with Vanity Fair (to the artist’s discomfort) going so far as to describe her as a representative painter of Black Lives Matter. The two paintings from this series at the Nasher (both 2015) play on the racial role reversals she first exploited in Class of 2007, showing black cops barking at and arresting white men. Scattered about are words and word fragments like BLACK, KILL, and RICA (as in America presumably), in addition to numbers and numerous Xs. Paintings on other topics similarly include flat verbiage like YES, WOW, and so. One suspects that Abney is trying to be funny in a Pop art way, but her verbo-visual arrangements ring too tinny to be witty. Many have too little force even to be accusatory.

Happily, adjacent to these paintings is Catfish (2017). In this eighteen-foot-long four-panel work, which refers to online identity poseurs, Abney’s juxtaposition of stilted form and hot subject matter is far more effective. Eight women, their bodies 8-bit Picasso-esque abbreviations and their faces emoticon-era Mr. Potato Head assemblies, pose naked with their asses out toward the viewer. Crossing Les Demoiselles d’Avignon and booty selfie culture, Catfish is perhaps meant as a parody of primitivism’s racial and sexual legacy. More than that, the painting succeeds in putting modernist abstraction in dialogue with digital-age sexuality, comically exaggerating the complicated human desires that can infuse virtual representations even when they are schematic or overtly put-on. Abney has a canny sense for geometric design and art history; I hope she finds a way to apply it as interestingly to political topics as she does here.

—Ryan Holmberg

Nina Chanel Abney: Catfish, 2017, pigment print, acrylic, and spray paint on canvas, 8½ by 18 feet; at the Nasher Museum of Art.
"It's so hard for me hard to choose one artist, so I have two that are very different in presentation, but similar in concept. The first artist that I'm currently looking at is Nina Chanel Abney. Her paintings are graphic, powerful, and surreal. Her current images read like short stories with symbols and colors floating through an abstract space. They interrogate many social and political themes through this lens. Her paintings pack a powerful punch and inspire me to work harder on my own paintings and collages to communicate the political unrest I feel.

My other inspiration is Adrian Piper. I first learned about her during a college art-history class. We watched her video piece Cornered. This was my first experience with video art in a class setting. This video pointedly confronts and shatters the concept of whiteness in an uncomfortable matter-of-fact way. Its as if Piper is delivering the evening news. Adrian Piper is one of my favorite artists because the line between her life and her art doesn't exist. She inspires me because her performances are protests against the expected."

–Ashley Teamer, artist
NINA CHANEL ABNEY Royal Flush

by Samuel Feldblum

NASHER MUSEUM OF ART, DUKE UNIVERSITY
FEBRUARY 16 – JULY 16, 2017

From the outset of her career, painter Nina Chanel Abney draped identities over her characters as changeably as clothes. Her thesis work, Class of 2007 (2007), depicts her school cohort in negative, with Abney—the only black student in the class—as a white prison guard, blonde-haired and blue-eyed, with assault rifle in hand. Her classmates, depicted as black prisoners, don orange jumpsuits and manacles. The conceit is simple but powerful, tying a critique of art institutions to wider social concerns, and jarring subjects and the viewer into an unsteadied sense of self.

The work is on view, alongside the ensuing ten years of Abney’s oeuvre, at Duke’s Nasher Museum of Art; it is Abney’s first solo museum show. The works are broken up into four chronological groupings, which trace both the maturation of the artist’s style and her engagement of changing features of American life from 2007 through 2017.

Other early works of Abney’s marry a similarly raw style with discomfiting subjects. In Close but No Cigar (2008), Abney repurposes Joseph Louw’s stirring photograph of the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King on the balcony of Memphis’s Lorraine Hotel, with King’s companions pointing toward where the fatal shot came from. On Abney’s large canvas, a stricken King-Obama composite lies on the ground swathed in an American flag, his brain plopped fully out of his head. Behind, a frothing mass points wildly, not at the fallen hero, but at a mysterious faceless figure in a yellow leotard and with a bleeding heart—perhaps the assassin, perhaps Hope herself set to wing.

By 2009, Abney’s painting style had become less wet, her drips more controlled, and both figures and backgrounds flatter. A series of group-portrait style pieces demonstrate a focus on American celebrity culture and a dip into the world of fantasy. In Make it Reign (2009), an male-ish figure with breasts leans back, tongue-out, like a rock-star deep in guitar solo, a stripper pole instead between his/her legs. But in
place of a sexually attentive crowd, two dogs bark menacingly. The substitution of one type of attention for another highlights the fickleness of a crowd’s emotion.

After 2011, Abney’s style again shifted, now combining her flat color fields with muralistic elements to create vibrant canvases that often embedded social commentary. Mad 51st (2012) includes some elements that recur as motifs of many of her works thereafter: Xs peppered across the canvas, staccato words deployed playfully or plaintively—often both—and bright geometric shapes. The work harkens clearly to Stuart Davis’s surreal, energetic landscapes-cum-dreamscapes. Hands and faces float among bright shapes, uttering “oy” and “boo.” One X lies atop a kiss between what appear to be white and black male figures.

In school, Abney studied computer science as well as visual arts; her work after 2011 traces the increasingly chaotic information environment as the digital began to creep more intricately into personal lives. Her early focus on the public gaze as something monstrous presaged the rise of social media to ubiquity. She graduated the same year the iPhone debuted, before social media and attention merchants unleashed the public gaze into the most intimate reaches of private life, before the idealism of early web giants gave way to the need to turn profits through cascades of junk information and accompanying advertisements.

Abney’s canvases became more chaotic and busier to reflect these emerging realities, even as they returned more explicitly to political messaging as well. Untitled (Fuck T*e *op) (2014) revisits, in larger format, the sensory dynamism of city life. In all the colorful excitement, it takes a moment for the six black faces (with white noses and lips) to emerge fully. This was the year that the shooting of Michael Brown sparked the founding of the Black Lives Matter movement. Some of the faces hoot out short words, some cry. The largest has one of the floating Xs slapped atop his mouth; another has an X over his ear. One woman wails in a floating blue circle, red bullet holes dripping angrily beside her. Nobody seems to hear. Noise is everywhere. “Pow” is scrawled out in one nook. “Ow” echoes back.

The newest work in the show, Catfish (2017), revisits Abney’s focus on gender, as women white and black bend over raunchily in four panels, one man standing amid them under the word “wow.” Alongside her usual graffiti motifs, stenciled dollar signs dot the canvas, and pyramids of eyes hover. There is no subtlety to the sex on display; it is gaudy and cynical, a spectacle for our viewing pleasure. And the money flows, and the women submit, and the world keeps watching, always watching.

CONTRIBUTOR

Samuel Feldblum

SAMUEL FELDBLUM is an armchair philosopher pondering getting out of his armchair.
‘Black Lives Matter’ is one of many threads running through Nina Chanel Abney’s art

BY DAVID MENCONI
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DURHAM — A decade ago, artist Nina Chanel Abney had her breakout with a striking piece of agit-art. It was an oversized painting called “Class of 2007,” a portrait of Abney’s class at New York’s Parsons School of Design.

Abney was the lone black student in the class, but she rendered herself as a white, blonde and blue-eyed prison guard – watching over her classmates, who she depicted as African-American inmates.

“I’m still in touch with a lot of these people,” Abney said recently, looking at “Class of 2007” on a gallery wall of Duke University’s Nasher Museum of Art and pointing to different figures. “Nick Van Woert, he’s an amazing sculptor. And Langdon, Dave, Jen. But it got a mixed reaction at the time.”

Abney paused to laugh a bit.

“That was welcome,” she continued. “Especially now, I want to make work that gets multiple reactions, not just one. I’m very intentional about creating work that gets a mixed response, and every interpretation is welcome. I want to start conversations and arguments, for viewers to participate in the work and have their own personal relationship with it.”

“Class of 2007” attracted widespread attention and was part of 2008’s “30 Americans” exhibit in Miami. That’s where curator Marshall N. Price saw it – which led directly to the painting’s current place in Durham as part of “Royal Flush,” a career-spanning exhibit of about 30 of Abney’s pieces.
“She really stood out, which was really saying something given that that show was just filled with luminaries,” Price said. “Nina’s paintings are not only provocative in terms of imagery and narrative, there’s also a historical component to different levels. There’s a protest spirit about it that you see in a lot of work from the ’60s and ’70s, and I love the notion of protest-painting.”

**Going political**

Now 34, Abney was born in Chicago and got started the same way a lot of artists do, copying things she liked. Her efforts grew more serious in high school, finally crystallizing into the politically charged works she began producing in college – brightly colored, coursing with racially charged images both abstract and concrete.

Not long after “Class of 2007” came “Dirty Wash,” inspired by a combination of celebrity gossip and political scandals. Abney painted an image of a friend of hers reacting to a bikini-clad Condoleezza Rice, who was President George W. Bush’s Secretary of State at the time.

Then there’s 2008’s “Close But No Cigar,” based on photographer Joseph Louw’s iconic picture of the immediate aftermath of civil-rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination in Memphis. Abney imagines the scene as a garish burlesque, with Barack Obama, who was still a candidate and not president when she painted it, wrapped in an American flag. The site and year of King’s assassination are represented, Lorraine Motel and 1968.

“My earlier works like these were more narrative, with clues to what they’re based on,” Abney said. “But over time, I shifted to more abstract narratives, stripping away the backgrounds to take away specific meanings to latch onto. That really informed the collages I started to do. Then I got a studio in Times Square, and between that and the overload of information – news and Facebook and everything else – it all started to feel like chaos. There was no one story, but many stories. All of them fragments.”

**Becoming a brand**

In recent years, protests around the “Black Lives Matter” movement have given Abney ample raw material to work with. A lot of her paintings from the past few years depict confrontations between African-Americans and white law-enforcement officers, but Abney declines to do much in the way of explaining.

“She doesn’t give a lot away,” Price said. “But her work is very thought-provoking. There’s always something resonant to take away. We’ve been working on this show for several years, and it becomes more timely with every passing moment. That only underscores its urgency. I think she’s a humanist in the most generous sense of the word, conveying the human condition and the idea that humanity holds its destination in its own hands.”

Beyond painting, Abney has lately started working with computer printouts while pondering a move into photographs, sculpture and even branding. She’s working with a brand manager now, which means her artwork might be coming soon to a product near you.

“I’m trying to see if my work can translate into other media,” she said. “Creating a sneaker, partnering with some brands. Not too many artists are doing both, and there are concerns that too much commercial work dilutes your fine art. But it’s a fun challenge to see if I can conquer both.”
Meantime, Abney is also doing temporary murals, which are every bit as striking as her paintings. She spray-painted one on a gallery wall at the Nasher for “Royal Flush,” dashing it off in a couple of days. And it’s beautiful, if temporary, which doesn’t concern the artist.

“Eh,” she said with a shrug and a smile, “I’ll just make another one somewhere.”

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EXHIBIT DETAILS

What: “Nina Chanel Abney: Royal Flush”

When: Through July 16

Where: Nasher Art Museum, 2001 Campus Drive, Durham

Cost: $5 adults, $4 age 65 and older, $3 non-Duke students. Free for children 15 and under, Nasher members, Duke students, faculty and staff - and everyone Thursdays, 5-9 p.m.

Hours: Closed Mondays; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursday; noon-5 p.m. Sunday

More info: 919-684-5135 or nasher.duke.edu/abney
In this complicated cultural moment the U.S. is experiencing, Nina Chanel Abney knows just how to press the hot buttons of sexuality, gender, religion and race in her paintings—committing her voice to the Black Lives Matter movement. Referring to the current political uneasiness, Abney declares, “This discomfort isn’t from lack of awareness but from avoidance of critical topics.” Peppered with clever doses of spontaneity and satire, Abney’s large crayola-colored canvases and murals have turned the Chicago native into an art star in the making. Since 2007, she has been carving out an energetic presence, with her previous gallery Kravets Wehby, in four successive solo shows and a number of group exhibitions. Class of 2007, a
ery work created for her Parsons MFA thesis presentation, reverberated loudly in the art world. Abney represented her white student peers as shackled black prisoners, and herself (the sole African-American) as a stern-faced Caucasian prison guard.

The spark was lit from there. The influential collectors Don and Mera Rubell included Abney, then 6, in the ground-breaking group show of Black artists called “30 Americans.” The exhibit is currently on view in its tenth iteration at the Tacoma Art Museum.

In 2016 alone, Abney, now 34, has exhibited her work in “Flatlands” at the Whitney Museum; the international group show “Greek Gotham” (curated by Maria Brito); an artist residency, and the solo exhibition “If You Say So...” at Gateway Project Spaces in Newark, New Jersey, among various projects. Abney capped off the year by joining the vaunted Jack Shainman Gallery, entering a family of artists rooted in social advocacy, feminism and black identity, including Kerry James Marshall and Carrie Mae Weems. Gallery Director Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels says, “Abney employs color, a frenetic mashup of representation and abstraction which engages popular culture, mass media and history painting like no other artist in our program.”

In her next power move, Abney is prepping for her first major museum exhibition, “Royal Flush” opening February 16 at the Nasher Museum of Art. There, Abney will present a decade of her work including thirty paintings, watercolors and collages. “The stories Nina tells in her paintings are humorous, poignant and sometimes painful,” says Marshall N. Price, Ph.D., the show’s curator. “I wanted to assemble 10 years of her work as a way to reflect on some of these issues the country is grappling with, and hopefully take the visitor on journey of wonder, fright, and pleasure.”

A wild ride of rage, irony, sex and violence, this show will present all of her animated and audacious characters. Following its North Carolina run, “Royal Flush,” will travel to the Chicago Cultural Center, and culminate in Los Angeles, in two joint exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art and the California African American Museum.
Of course, to view Abney’s recent rise only through the gallery and museum lens is to miss perhaps the most potent component of her practice: mural-making. “I follow the ethos of the street artist, so my work is in response to the community, its inhabitants and the physical surface that I work on,” she says.

Recent murals, including one in Newark near her studio, feature clean geometric shapes, bold graphic text, and genderless black figures, which collide in an urban setting. Meanwhile, in the second edition of Coney Art Walls, an outdoor summer street art museum curated by Jeffrey Deitch, sexy black mermaids interface with a psychedelic geometric composition.

Whether on gallery or city walls, Abney’s work continually invokes Stuart Davis’ frenzied compositions in bold primary colors, alludes to Matisse’s flat and sensual figures, with some of Peter Saul’s political humor thrown in too, while repackaging these references for the 2010s armed with a booming hip-hop bravado. Scrolling through her Instagram, it’s evident hip-hop icons including Diddy, Kanye West, Q-Tip and Swizz Beatz, who included her in the Bronx edition of his No Commission art fair, have reciprocated respect for her work too.

Although political messages have commanded her canvases for years now, Abney admits, “in the upcoming years I would like to see my work become even more of an instigator for meaningful, inclusive and positive change,” she says. “The art that I’m drawn to and find the most impactful has a certain level of ambiguity that forces me to answer many questions for myself.”
At the Nasher, canvases from a new voice


Nina Chanel Abney’s big paintings look like highway billboards: brilliantly clear colors, flat figures and large black lettering. Billboards sell things, and while she is not promoting a product, she is telling stories that are at once humorous and provocative. They address issues of social justice, racial dynamics, politics and celebrity as they play out in today’s world.
Her work shows careful study of such masters as Stuart Davis (1894-1964), Romare Bearden (1911-1988) and Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988) and then becomes uniquely hers as something fresh and original. She is a product of the 21st century with TV and its running script at the bottom of the screen, text messages, social media, newspapers, music: the cacophony of today’s sounds and images. It is that overload she incorporates into her canvases.

The Nasher exhibition includes 30 canvases and is Abney’s first solo museum show; this is after a meteoric rise in the art world. The day after her MFA thesis exhibition at Parsons School of Design opened, she was invited to join New York’s Kravets Wehby Gallery. In that show was “Class of 2007,” 2007; it is her earliest painting at the Nasher. “Class” is big, 114-by-186 inches. Abney stands at the left, dressed as a white prison guard, semi-automatic at the ready. A vertical band separates her from her fellow classmates who are all white but have posed as black inmates wearing orange jumpsuits.

The message is clear: As the only student of color in her class, she decries the lack of diversity at the graduate level and also points out the overwhelming majority of African-Americans in American prisons. A year later the gallery gave her a solo show, which caught the attention of major collectors Donald and Mera Rubell. One of the paintings they bought was “Class of 2007.”

By 2008 she is still painting big and her themes are about celebrity, mixing rock stars and politicians. She has said she is fascinated by the fact that celebrity is not just more interesting; it is more important than politics and merges well with race issues. For example in “Randaleeza,” 2008, she depicts the former secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, wearing a white bikini. Also in the painting is a friend, Randall, being attacked by dogs, which is a reference to the football player Michael Vick, who was involved in illegal dog-fighting. The scenario is totally impossible, but it does focus on how distorted is the distinction between celebrity culture and the political realm. As I was looking at this and thinking, I had never seen Condoleezza Rice in any sort of painting, much less one that frames a berserk world on a huge signboard.

Sarah Schroth, the director of the museum, happened by and stopped to talk. Schroth said devoting one entire part of the museum to such a young artist was certainly a new thing for the
Nasher, but when she talked with some of the Duke students, they told her the work really spoke to them. She also told me that Abney’s studio has a TV blasting and rock music going and all that gets turned into her paintings. Then she added when the Rubells put Abney into their collection her star rose to unbelievable heights.

Another painting about celebrity is “Close but No Cigar,” 2008. She based the painting on the famous photograph by Joseph Louw, taken at the Lorraine Motel just after the shooting of Dr. Martin Luther King. She reimagines the painting with President Obama, wrapped in the American flag, as the assassinated King and adds masked figures and yellow gloves, which are part of her iconic vocabulary.

One of the galleries is devoted to a series based on the fairy tales “Beauty and the Beast” and “Forbidden Fruit,” from “Alice in Wonderland.” In “Beauty in the Beast,” 2009, there are two white women in black face. One holds a black baby and one holds a piglet. Her take on this is the media’s questioning the sincerity of Madonna and Angelina Jolie, who adopted African and African-American babies.

In 2011 Abney begins to incorporate geometric forms, letters, words and emoji-like faces into her work. She also adds collage and cut out paper as a new technique. Although the size is more modest, the surfaces are still stuffed with imagery. At this time she also expunged color from her paintings, giving herself a technical workout, much like Picasso, who returned time and again to classical painting and its discipline before moving onto new challenges. This young woman works tirelessly and the number of paintings and the quality of her work attest to her devotion to her art.

On one of the gallery walls in a general text, we are told the artist is moving away from an earlier loosely painted quality toward increasing flatness and “abstraction, harbingers of her mature style.” The idea of a “mature style” for a young artist, just 10 years out of art school, set me thinking about youthful talent and how it can burn out if it is not nurtured. From her web site bio, she has been unbelievably successful with a number of solo gallery shows, some of which sold out. She is also in major museum collections like the Brooklyn Museum and Washington’s Corcoran. The Rubells included her in their Miami exhibition “30 Americans” and, although she
was the youngest in the group, she had one whole room devoted to her work. That show came to the N.C. Museum of Art when it was touring the country.

Now, she has a solo museum exhibition. There is no question Abney is talented, but if I were her advisor I would encourage her to slow down, dig deeper into her soul, build on her solid base, and do not wring herself dry.
True innate artists can see ahead and beyond the current moment: circumstances that are not yet fully present manifest in their works. Anticipation, thus, seems to come naturally to them. One artist who epitomizes this is Nina Chanel Abney, who was born in Chicago in 1982 and received her MFA from Parsons School of Design in 2007, and seems to be have been holding a crystal ball ever since.
The in-situ 30-feet mural took Abney three days to paint and it is the first and last work that the visitors to the show get to see. It represents and embodies many of the concepts and formal elements that the artist is currently exploring: gender, race, female empowerment, guns and language on a completely abstract background layered with geometric figures.

Curated by Marshall Price, Royal Flush is the title of Abney's first solo museum show at The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, which previewed on February 15 and opened to the public the next day. The exhibition looks back at the past 10 years of the artist's career.
Extremely versatile and talented both at the level of concept and execution, Abney can equally and brilliantly tackle a hand-painted mural, like the 30-foot wall that welcomes visitors to *Royal Flush*, or a large-scale digitally printed canvas using a technique whose result is called “ultrachrome pigmented”. The show, which is organized chronologically, is able to convey pivotal moments in which the artist made eloquent changes to her visual vocabulary without ever losing her essence or voice.
When I asked Abney if this is the first time she has confronted her work in this way she laughs and answers: “Some of these pieces I saw at 30 Americans (a show organized by the Rubell family with works from their own collection showcasing important African American artists of the last three decades), but this is the first time I’m seeing many, many of these works since the time they were sold 9 or 10 years ago. There are things I see and think, ‘oh man, this looks old!’ But then I find something else I want to revisit, elements I used before and may want to explore again.”
Her now notable MFA thesis piece “Class of 2007”, 2007 plays a trick on the viewer who doesn’t know the background: Nina has painted every one of her classmates but has changed their skin colors. Turning them dark-skinned, all of them wear an orange jumpsuit, incarceration-style. Nina has also painted herself - she’s on the side, on a separate canvas, blonde and dressed as a guard with a rifle in her hands. Being the only dark student in her class, at the age of 25, Nina put an incandescent spotlight on the lack of diversity in higher education programs in the United States as well as the disproportionate number of imprisoned colored people - often for minor crimes - that populate prisons in this country. As if the topics weren’t loaded enough, the diptych is about 15 feet in length by almost 10 feet in height. It is impossible to look the other way.

“Near and Far”, 2015 is Abney’s first diptych created digitally and printed with advanced technologies.
finding her own style, which now consists of angles, layers, graphic and complex backgrounds that have become unique and characteristic marks of her work. Nina has always had a such strong voice, although she insists it took her some time to find and refine it. What seems to be always present however, is a sense of humor, a candid way of looking at issues that are heavy and serious which she accomplishes using words, vibrant colors and cartoonish figures that bear funny expressions. Like the meltdown of the financial markets in 2008-2009, the victory of Barack Obama as the first black president, and the strange but utterly mystifying underpinnings of celebrity culture, somehow anticipating how much they would dominate our daily lives through a bombardment of messages and images not only through traditional media but also through all platforms of social media.

As Abney and I continue our walkthrough, we spot a group of paintings where she started to subtly abstract the background and strip away the context. While there are still figures reminiscent of her early works, we don’t fully know where they are — this was another critical step toward her current direction. Layered collages allowed Abney to work with a juxtaposition of elements as well as newer ways of composition - overly saturated paintings (from the time her studio was in Times Square and she needed to deal with the information overload that had swollen her senses), more muted and smaller-scale black-and-white works. Everything is logically organized like DNA molecules, leading on to the next set of large-scale canvases where Abney began to digitally print
her work. “Near and Far” 2015 is a large diptych where Abney first employed the use of a mechanical medium. Even though it was the beginning of a new era for her, where advanced printing techniques are combined with spray paint and acrylic paint brushstrokes, nothing is separate or abruptly disconnected from the works before or the works after. There is a seemingly perfect continuation of what she does and how she does it.

Identity and gender issues are also present in many of her paintings, as in the monumental “Catfish” 2017, where a four-canvas piece filled with women in suggestive poses looks at art history through the lens of Boticelli’s “La Primavera” and hip-hop album covers while dealing with gender stereotypes and sexism. Untitled (XXXXXX), 2015 shows police brutality and race conflict, except the “transgressor” is blond and the policemen are black. Multiple colored doves fly around the scene, making the narrative in the painting ironic, funny and preposterous.
The monumental four-canvas piece “Catfish” 2017 combines many of the techniques that Abney has been mastering for the past 10 years: a digitally-printed ultrachrome pigmented print, acrylic and spray paint.

The strength, power and urgency of this exhibition is something that should be seen by everyone. Luckily, Royal Flush is a traveling show that will first be at the Chicago Cultural Center in the summer of 2017, followed by Los Angeles’ Institute of Contemporary Art and the California African American Museum next year.
After our walkthrough, I mentioned to Nina that historically we are living in such a complex socio-political structure that it is almost given to us to want to avoid complacency and to create, inspire, react positively, push boundaries. In that context, I wanted to know what Nina’s wish is for the visitor, what would be the ideal takeaway? This is a question that she doesn’t want to answer, but I press further and she says, “I’d like people to ask questions to themselves about race, gender, and identity. I hope my work provokes thoughts, raises awareness, and poses interrogations.”

A Royal Flush is the best possible sequence in poker, the highest rank. Nina Chanel Abney is holding on to this hand of cards and won’t let go anytime soon.

*Nina Chanel Abney: Royal Flush*

February 16 to July 16 2017

The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University

2001 Campus Drive

Durham, NC 27705
Nina Chanel Abney’s ‘Royal Flush’ opening party, a celebration of black art and culture

By Nina Wilder | Wednesday, February 22

The crowd at the Nasher Museum of Art last Thursday was bustling and spirited, a diverse commingling of students and residents from the farthest reaches of the Triangle area. Exhausted parents chased restless children through the lobby, snippets of conversations about art and politics floated freely above the fringe and people milled about the hallways of art, stopping frequently to snap pictures and ponder them silently. The droves of people were there to partake in the opening party for “Royal Flush,” an exhibition of artist Nina Chanel Abney’s work over the last ten years.

Abney, who is 34 years old and hails from Chicago, Illinois, creates art that should make you feel uncomfortable—her commentaries on race, sex, religion and sexuality eschew conventional modes of storytelling in art that we’ve become accustomed to. Instead, Abney opts to bombard the viewer from the outset with images, words, numbers and colors that have been collaged in a manner that’s both coherent and overwhelming. Her work stems from an era wherein information is disseminated across smartphone screens and news cycles with unrelenting fervor, the incessant barrage of information a clear inspiration for both the style and content of her art. Marwa Yusuf, a Ph.D. student at UNC-Chapel Hill who was in attendance at the opening party, noted the forcefulness of Abney’s style.

“What drew me to her work—I hadn’t heard of her before coming [to the event]—is definitely the themes, but also the colors,” she said. “There’s something about the colors that’s just so bold, but in a way that’s not boldness for boldness’s sake. There’s a coherence with the theme.”

While Abney’s artwork may be frantic and busy, her intentions are clear—whether it’s by painting a police officer with the word “OINK” adorned on his chest or depicting former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice as part of a famous celebrity couple, Abney ensures that the viewer will be forced to engage with themes ranging from police brutality, the objectification of women’s bodies and the prevalence of celebrity culture. And in a millennium where unarmed black men are killed by law enforcement daily and treating women like second-class citizens doesn’t bar you from the presidency, Abney’s criticisms are more than significant and relevant—they are unavoidable.

“These [pieces] are all very dense, and I think that [Abney] communicated in a way that’s not subtle,” Yusuf said. “I think that’s how it should be—at least our conversation about these topics needs to be loud and clear.”

Tackling such upsetting and moving subject matters doesn’t have to be a dismal affair, though—Abney is wickedly sharp, her sense of humor woven seamlessly into the pieces and often belying the seriousness of what she’s depicting. But humor is a weapon that can be wielded to make traumatic events more emotionally accessible, as noted by UNC-Chapel Hill Ph.D. student Katie Merriman, who attended the opening party with Yusuf.

“I think her use of farce is really helpful, because often times trying to overlay a sense of seriousness about an event that involves violence takes away from the ability to talk about the emotional and the psychological impact of such an event,” Merriman said. “To kind of throwback at people who just want to talk about information and numbers and instead say, ‘How could this happen?’”

“When we think about things that are political, this is not how we think about them,” Yusuf added. “But there are desires, there is humor, there are all of these social practices that sometimes get ignored when we talk about politics. So it broadens the scope of what is political and what’s not.”

To categorize Abney’s work as merely protest art or another form of activism for Black Lives Matter is to diminish the ambitious portfolio that she’s carefully curated. Abney’s art is a visceral celebration of blackness and identity that’s both critical and joyous, proof of the nuanced beauty that can arise in response to systemic oppression. The bright, irreverent canvases draw you in with their chaos, humor and shocking images, but when you pull back, Abney’s voice seems to say: I am black, I am proud and I am powerful.

Reflective of this recognition of blackness and black culture were the festivities that occurred during the opening party, emceed by Durham resident, NCCU and UNC-CH professor and musician Pierce Freelon. The performances included Duke student saxophonist Edgeri Hudlin, poets from Freelon’s Afro-futurist makerspace for black youth called Blackspace and Duke student and spoken word artist Ashley Croker-Benn.

Any music played was made by black musicians and any poem performed dealt with black identity, all in the presence of Abney’s paintings, encircled by the difficulties and victories that accompany being black in America. It was an emotional outpouring of identity and culture that complimented Abney’s work well, an urgent reminder that compassion for others and a yearning for change are essential.

Nina Chanel Abney’s “Royal Flush” will be on display at the Nasher Museum of Art until July 16. The exhibition is a 10-year survey of approximately 30 of the artist’s paintings, watercolors and collages.
THE TALENT

NINA CHANEL ABNEY NOW SHOWS WITH JACK SHAINMAN

BY Andrew Russeth

POSTED 11/28/16 11:32 AM


COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY
With the opening of Art Basel Miami Beach less than two days away, New York’s Jack Shainman Gallery announced this morning that it will now show the superb young painter Nina Chanel Abney and have her work on offer at the fair, which runs Wednesday through Sunday at the Miami Beach Convention Center.

Abney, who was born in Chicago in 1982 and works in New York, has garnered attention in recent years for large-scaled, brightly colored, tightly geometricized figurative paintings whose subjects range from punchy riffs on art-historical tropes (bathers, religious iconography) to disturbing depictions of police brutality against people of color. The flat shapes of Stuart Davis and late Henri Matisse are a potent inspiration.

Previously represented by Kravets/Wehby in New York, where she had a solo show in 2015, Abney has also had recent exhibitions at Monique Melouche Gallery in Chicago and Galeria Rabieh in São Paulo, and was also featured in the Whitney Museum’s “Flatlands” exhibition earlier this year. In 2017 she will have a solo show at the Nasher Museum at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. Book your tickets now!

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“Flatlands”

During the rise of modern painting, flatness was considered a virtue, a quality denoting the pure essence of the medium. In 1890, artist Maurice Denis noted that, whatever else it was, “a picture...is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.” The mid-20th-century critic Clement Greenberg considered flatness the sine qua non of serious abstraction. However, “Flatlands,” a tight selection of millennial painters, toys with an alternate definition of flatness as an expression of 21st century anomie, conjuring “a sense of space that is dimensionless and airless.” Though the curators point to theatrical scenery as an example, they could be describing the Internet and social media.

The works here—by Nina Chanel Abney, Mathew Cerletty, Jamian Juliano-Villani, Caitlin Keogh and Orion Martin—resemble a kind of Surrealism strained through Pop Art, a mix of sharp contours and taut surfaces channeling content that's less about a metaphysical truth rooted in the subconscious than it is about consciousness as artifice. While the work may sometimes recall Max Ernst, René Magritte and Salvador Dalí, it is the product of minds colonized by Andy Warhol and the web.

Juliano-Villani’s works are filled with whirlwinds of cartoon references, skinned with unbroken tracts of color like animation cells. Lately she’s added airbrushed layers of chiaroscuro, bringing her images more in line with custom van murals. One painting depicts a figure made of orange traffic cones, resembling an unlikely marriage of the Iron Giant and an inflatable air dancer in front of a tire store. It’s seen picking its way through a landscape of stacked rocks (ancient cairns? wind-sculpted hoodoos in the New Mexican desert?) vandalized with graffiti in a desolate setting. The scene’s meaning is impenetrable, which is probably the point.

Likewise, Cerletty's straightforward depiction of an aquarium is opaque in both senses of the word. The fish evince no sign of life, looking like they're suspended in Lucite instead of water. Though Cerletty plays around with a number of genres and styles, his métier is a kind of realism deliberately delivered dead on arrival. Here, his subjects are not only fixed in place, but asphyxiated as well.

Both Keogh and Martin borrow the shallow space of trompe l'oeil still life for their work. However, Keogh’s impassive synthesis of anatomical drawing and technical illustration—depicted in boldly outlined, graphic forms—recalls John Wesley, while Martin's creepy renderings of common objects (a woman's boot, a wooden washtub) are more in keeping with the Sadean spirit of Neue Sachlichkeit.

The most ambitious piece here is Abney’s wall-spanning canvas, which seems to meld an Edenic grove with the front parlor of a cathouse in a friezelike arrangement of female nudes, each contorted into a pornographic pose. Dotted with words like YES and NO and strategically censored in places by the letter X, the painting makes unmistakable allusions to Pablo Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon but is closer in appearance to Henri Matisse’s cutouts. Though brightly colored to the point of ebullience, the piece is tonally analogous to the thousand-yard stare of an adult-film actress who's been in the business for too long.

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Some 10 years ago, the notion gained currency that the world was becoming “flat”—that is, a global economy devoid of boundaries with a culture to match. But the work here suggests these artists take an opposite view of the zeitgeist: not as limitless landscape but as a metaphorically two-dimensional realm of stunted possibilities and deferred hopes.

BY: HOWARD HALLE

POSTED: TUESDAY JANUARY 5 2016
‘Flatlands,’ Where the Familiar Becomes Hypnotically Strange

By KEN JOHNSON  JAN. 28, 2016

The idea of “deskilling” has incited considerable chatter in the contemporary art sphere in the past decade. In economics the term refers to the technically undemanding labor performed by most modern industrial workers. In art discourse it identifies the deliberate rejection of traditional craft in the service of conceptual provocation and expressive freedom.

While today’s art abounds in insouciant, apparently slapdash, clumsy, lazy and otherwise deskilled works, not all artists have deskilled themselves. Many are those who you might call — not pejoratively — semiskilled. Their techniques come not from the grand tradition of realistic representation extending from Velázquez and Vermeer to 19th-century academicians like William-Adolphe Bouguereau. Rather, they draw on methods associated with commercial illustration and design in order to play with public signifiers and personal poetics.

“Flatlands,” an engaging small show in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s nicely proportioned lobby-level gallery, presents a dozen works from the past three years by five young (all born since 1980) semiskilled painters. As the exhibition’s organizers, the Whitney assistant curators Laura Phipps and Elisabeth Sherman, observe in an online essay about the show, the artists in “Flatlands” “share an interest in the surface of their works, an attention to the design and finish that is reminiscent of the concerns of pattern or product design.” Fortunately, the show is more interesting, visually as well as conceptually, than this dry characterization seems to promise.

Mathew Cerletty’s highly finished paintings deal cleverly in contradictory illusions. The Magritte-like “Night Puddle” depicts a wide field of lush grass under a dark sky and a full moon. An irregular opening in the grass reads paradoxically as both a watery puddle and as an irregular window to the sky. In “Shelf Life,” Mr. Cerletty fills a 4-foot-by-5-foot canvas with the fourth wall of an aquarium populated by bright little fish, green plants and a glowing purple rock, all against a beautiful, deep-blue background. Mildly psychedelic, it smartly equates the actual painting and the illusory fish tank as hypnotic visual objects.
With a silky-smooth touch, Orion Martin creates mysterious, psychologically charged images that call to mind works by the German Pop-Surrealist Konrad Klapheck and the Chicago Imagist Art Green. “Bakers Steak” depicts a green-glass-shaded brass lamp and a centered quartet of illusory brass rings seeming to perforate the picture. White flowers on serpentine green stems emerge from the darkness within and beyond the rings as if from the painting’s own unconscious. “Triple Nickel, Tull” features a Victorian-style, high-heeled, knee-length boot against a blurry, architectural background. With all its laces and lace holes carefully described, the boot intimates a Freudian, fetishistic vibe.

Jamian Juliano-Villani paints wildly heterogeneous montages of images drawn from all kinds of sources, from scientific illustrations to comic books. “Boar’s Head, a Gateway, My Pinecone” depicts a modern apartment in which a spectral figure draped in black with an animal skull head, a much enlarged blue sea horse and a pine cone are impaled on a giant metal skewer. It’s funny and bizarre like a surrealistic scene in a David Lynch movie. “The Snitch,” in which a scary, long-legged, puppetlike figure constructed from orange-and-white traffic cones strides through an underwater rock garden, could be a child’s nightmare.

The neatly outlined compositions on two large canvases by Caitlin Keogh resemble pages from a morbid coloring book for grown-ups. “Intestine and Tassels” depicts the outline of a woman’s torso with a rendering of the human digestive tract inside and a rope with tasseled ends encircling the shoulders. “Vines,” in which colorful flowers and vines are laid on top of a book open to a picture of a rib cage, similarly meditates on life and mortality.

The show’s biggest, most visually and socially assertive painting is Nina Chanel Abney’s 18-foot-wide “Hothouse.” Made mainly of flattened, stenciled forms in high-contrast colors, it pictures what appears to be a scene in a strip club. Seven women and a man, all nude, provocatively pose amid a flurry of symbols and letters representing an environment of commercialized lust. It’s a terrifically energetic, feminist update of Picasso’s brothel painting “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon.”
It’s noteworthy that all these five painters have B.F.A. or M.F.A. degrees from high-caliber studio art programs. They come from a system that encourages students to reinvent art for themselves and to figure out whatever skills they need to convey with maximal efficiency whatever they have in mind. In that sense, most M.F.A. holders are self-taught. Far from outsiders, however, the good ones are, like the artists of “Flatlands,” acutely wised up semioticians, savvy players with the tropes, memes and cultural politics of the Age of the Internet.

“Flatlands” continues through April 17 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort Street, Manhattan; 212-570-3600, whitney.org.

A version of this review appears in print on January 29, 2016, on page C28 of the New York edition with the headline: Dealing in Contradictory Illusions.

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How Nina Chanel Abney is Championing the Black Lives Matter Movement with a Paintbrush

It only took one painting for gallery owner Marc Webby and his wife and business partner, Susan Kravets, to sign artist Nina Chanel Abney for a show at their Chelsea gallery. It was her now-famous large-scale painting from her M.F.A. thesis show at Parsons titled Class of 2007, which depicted her fellow classmates, who were all white, as black inmates, while Nina, the only black student in her class, painted herself as a gun-toting white prison guard with flowing blonde locks.
“I did have a couple students ask me if I was mad at them,” says Abney, 33, still surprised almost a decade later. “I said, no, it’s nothing personal. Just like when I put people in my paintings now—it’s not you, it’s just a face.” Wehby sent an S.U.V. to collect the work, which was enough to impress the young artist at the time. “I feel like we can sell these,” Abney remembers her now long-time gallerist saying over cookies she had baked specifically for the fateful studio visit. “I looked at the thesis show as my only chance to get the attention of a gallery,” she admits. “If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have known what to do. How else was I going to get someone to see my work?”

Wehby was right. Within days, every piece sold. Class of 2007 was purchased by the famed art collectors Don and Mera Rubell based on a photograph of the piece, an amazing feat in and of itself, especially in pre-Instagram days. That work, and several others, found its way into 2008’s inaugural exhibition of “30 Americans,” a group show that the Rubell’s website claims focuses on “the most important African American artists of the last three decades.” The exhibition took place in the Rubell’s 45,000-square-foot gallery in Miami, formerly a D.E.A. confiscated-goods facility, a building that once contained millions of dollars’ worth of an entirely different luxury commodity that caters to a similarly bourgeois clientele.

“I always said I wanted to be a famous painter. I just never knew what that really meant,” she says in her studio at the Gateway Project, a relatively new gallery and studio complex in Newark, New Jersey’s Gateway Center, where she is an artist in residence. Her works there will soon be transported to the Kравets Wehby Gallery in Chelsea for her fourth solo exhibition in the space, titled “Always a Winner,” opening October 15. Then, on October 18, she will once more display her work alongside the likes of Kara Walker, Nick Cave, Robert Colescott, Kehinde Wiley, and Jean-Michel Basquiat—to whom the artist is frequently compared—for the traveling exhibition’s ninth incarnation, at the Detroit Institute of Arts. “Art is no longer about revolution, it’s about evolution,” says Don Rubell on the phone from Miami. “Nina is well on her way to becoming a great artist. The level of development is astonishing. It’s a prophecy that speaks for itself.”
Abney was born in 1982 in Harvey, Illinois. Growing up, her biological father was not entirely in the picture. Her two aunts, her grandfather, and her mother, Karla, who was something of an artist herself, lovingly raised Nina. “One day I found her oil paints in the basement, so I started to play around with that,” recalls the artist, who as a child liked to mimic Archie comics, Disney characters, and the Berenstain Bears. “I remember [my mother] telling me about this painting she did of Dr. J (Julius Erving, the hall-of-fame N.B.A. player), way back in the day. She was proud of that one.”

Abney’s mother soon married a man who had a daughter around the same age as Nina. The genial stepsisters spent much of their young lives bouncing around from one Montessori school to the next, often as the only black students in their class. On one surreal afternoon, while driving home from school just across the border in Indiana, Abney’s mother was pulled over by a local police officer. As the uniformed man’s face entered the frame of the driver’s-side window, Nina instantly recognized it, or more accurately, recognized her own face in his. The cop was her biological father, a man she had never met until that moment. The “Lynchian” encounter was fleeting, but it had a lasting effect on the artist (she wouldn’t reconnect with the man until earlier this year. Abney claims they are currently attempting to build a relationship from the ground up).
After a fire damaged her mother’s home, they moved in with her aunt in Matteson, Illinois, and attended Rich South Campus High School. “We were always the only black girls, so high school was the opposite,” remembers Abney. “I was excited, but also a little nervous. Though we were very much ‘in-tune’ we would still get teased with that whole ‘talk white’ thing.” Nina navigated this by taking requests for portraits of famous black figures in pop culture as a sort of friendly icebreaker and also, as a means to maintain a classically trained eye. “People asked me to do portraits of, like, Tupac or something,” recalls Nina with a dismissive laugh.
Though Abney had won some awards for her work in middle school, high school was where she began to take things a bit more seriously. Mr. Mayer, a teacher and lasting mentor, pushed her into A.P. art, a portfolio incubator of sorts, which led to a duel major in studio art and computer science at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. Abney cites a campus-wide walkout protesting a lack of black faculty members as a turning point for her as an artist interested in tackling political themes. “Hey, what is this, the colored section?” she remembers fielding from a white professor, while sitting with her black friends in the back of class.

She decided to take a year off. After graduating, she took a job on the assembly line at Ford Motor Company, recommended by her mother who worked at an unemployment agency, and where, coincidentally, Marc Wehby’s father was a project coordinator. “They give you a huge packet of things you can’t do, like wear deodorant. It would make craters in the paint. One job was wiping the entire right side of the cars down with an alcohol swab. The good part was I didn’t have to interact with people too much or get dressed up, but it got old fast,” says Abney.

After watching a female co-worker’s leg get crushed in a freak accident, she knew it was time to take a leap of faith. For a year, she painted every day after work, and was eventually accepted to both the Art Institute of Chicago and Parsons School of Design. She chose the latter. “I don’t know if I would have been as motivated if I was at home and just had to commute. Also, I knew I needed a sense of independence.” She moved all of her belongings into a fourth-floor walk-up in Jersey City, after what she refers to as “the U-Haul trip from hell” (aren’t they all) and the rest is history.
“Always a Winner” will feature three diptychs, one triptych, and one four-panel painting, all vibrant, unique labors riddled with cryptic geometric shapes, numbers, phrases, figures, and a handful of conspicuous police officers, mostly white, in sky-blue uniforms, twisting black limbs and shouting at black faces, a playfully ferocious effort to keep the Black Lives Matter life raft afloat while bringing some much-needed excitement to Chelsea. “People who are familiar with my work know that I’m always picking hot topics,” she says, adding that the work also addresses “how something could be hot and then fizzle.” But don’t go prodding for a backstory, she wants the work to stand alone: “I’m not going to give you one story, because I’m more than one thing,” says Abney. “Whatever I feel like painting, I just paint it. For me, nothing is off-limits.”
Powerful Political Art: Nina Chanel Abney’s Black History Paintings

New show is an immersive feast for the senses

By Ryan Steadman • 11/03/15 12:15pm

Why, 2015, by Nina Chanel Abney. (Photo: Courtesy of Kravets Wheby)

What we think we see in Nina Chanel Abney’s current painting show at Kravets Wehby Gallery in Chelsea is police brutality against African-Americans, both extreme and casual.

But look closer at this show, up through January 3, 2016 at 521 West 21st Street, and you’ll see more. Much more.
Ms. Abney impressed with her jazzy yet nuanced paintings from the moment she emerged in a 2007 group show at this same gallery, and despite some high-profile accomplishments—her work was immediately snapped up by the esteemed Rubell Collection and she’s currently in the historic “30 Americans” exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C.—the reserved 33-year-old has kept her head down and refined her craft with an almost fierce dedication.

The fruits of her labors are quite evident in this her fourth New York solo exhibition: an immersive series of multi-paneled works that form a tightly-knit environment of image, color and text. It’s an effective recipe that blends gravitas, suggested narrative and immersive atmosphere, much like Rothko’s Chapel does, despite Ms. Abney’s less than Ab-Ex leanings.

Ms. Abney’s large-scale works—titled What, Why, When, Who and Where—pervade the space; they give you no exit option, but they also invite you to move around them freely and connectedly.

She clearly excavates the brash and spry acrobatic style of the early American Modernist Stuart Davis (as well as the bouncy cut-outs of late Matisse) but with an urban twist that borrows “construction cone orange” and graffiti marks that echo the garish energy of the concrete jungle. Thanks to a practically unmatched work ethic, Ms. Abney’s graphic execution has become flawless over the years: a synchronic surface of colors and crisp techniques.

Because of this she achieves a uniformity that is important, as it lets the viewer entertain these works as one circuitous story.
When, 2015, by Nina Chanel Abney. (Photo: Courtesy of Kravets Wheby)

It prompted one viewer to say “it’s the #blacklivesmatter show,” an explanation that promotes the show as a call for justice for African-American police brutality victims.

It’s a tidy view that, while perhaps therapeutic, only scratches the surface of Ms. Abney’s vision.

Scrutiny reveals that both white and black police officers make the rounds in Abney’s work—not to mention both black and white victims. Police batons double as hard-ons while confused arrows and pointing hands pay tribute to the epic comic painter Philip Guston, as they flip between representing either the faceless powers that be or our guardian angels with helping hands. Meanwhile, animals of all sorts (birds, dogs) either scurry in fear, dive forward to attack, or simply lead the humans onward via their hidden senses.
Installation view of Nina Chanel Abney’s *Always a Winner* at Kravets Wheby. (Photo: Courtesy of Kravets Wheby)

And the officers themselves are as complex as they are in real life; do they lead to safety and fight crime or use their power for nefarious purposes?

Like black history painters before her, such as Robert Colescott and Kerry James Marshall, Ms. Abney has no answers for our problems but has concocted a beautified opus inspired by what seem like insurmountable troubles.
Last summer, Nina Chanel Abney created a 90-foot-long mural—100 kinetic, color-drenched figures and shapes parading down a wall in São Paulo—that she designed, somehow, in her Jersey City, New Jersey, home, a space small enough that she works in the living room on any painting too wide to make it up the winding stairs to her studio. It’s not the first time Abney pulled off the implausible. She applied to the Parsons MFA program while doing a stint on a Ford Motor Company assembly line in her native Chicago, and by graduation in 2007 had gotten the attention of Chelsea gallery Kravets Wehby, which immediately sold everything in her studio to a roster of heavy-hitting tastemakers. Mera and Don Rubell, whose collection of contemporary art is widely regarded as one of the best in the world, snapped up the painting she’d made for her thesis, which depicted her grad-school classmates as black prisoners and Abney as a white prison guard holding a machine gun; Beth Rudin DeWoody, another influential collector, was so taken with a portrait that she persuaded the gallery to sell it to her even though it was on hold for someone else.

Recently, Abney has been exploring collage, layering words, arrows, and faces in a bright mix of references. “At first I felt this obligation to talk about race in my work,” she says, “Now it’s more reflective of what I actually deal with. Not that I don’t deal with racism, but that’s not my whole life.” In the fall, as she began paintings for Untitled, an art fair this month in Miami, and a Kravets Wehby exhibition this spring, she was considering touching on the racially charged events in Ferguson, Missouri. But as with any of her influences, which range from South Park to hip-hop, that would only be a starting point. “I like to bring everybody’s perspective in,” she says. “I’d approach it from both sides of the story.”
Abney's work. "Everyone in the painting is kind of a suspect," she says. "I use rubber gloves to symbolize that someone has done dirty work."

Abney, whose reserved demeanor contrasts with her art's high-octane, politically charged voice, graduated from Augustana College, a small liberal-arts school in Illinois, then spent a year working on an assembly line at Ford in her hometown of Chicago while preparing her art school applications by night. When she arrived at Parsons The New School of Design in Manhattan, she was one of the youngest students in her M.F.A. program and had never set foot inside a gallery. But she quickly grew savvy; her senior thesis was a stunning, enormous painting called Class of 2007. In it, she portrayed her classmates with black skin and sporting orange jumpsuits, and herself, the only African-American in the group, with white skin, wearing a prison guard uniform. The day after she unveiled the piece, Kravets/Wehby gallery invited her to join.

Last spring the gallery featured her first solo show, "Dirty Wash," in which she used wild, bright colors on extra-large canvases to depict narratives including political figures in scandalous situations—think Condoleezza Rice posing seductively in a bikini. "I'm fascinated by how celebrity news has become not more interesting, but more important than politics," she says. "I like to infuse that with race issues."

The show sold out within days, catching the eye of major collectors like Donald and Mera Rubell, who flew to New York to see it (and acquired, in addition to other work, Class of 2007). This December the couple will include Abney in their Miami museum's exhibition "30 Americans," which will highlight the work of African-American artists. Abney, the youngest painter in the show, will have her own room. "She fits in with the narrative thread that starts with Robert Colescott," Donald says. "She's a powerful storyteller," Mera adds. "There's a mystery in her work."

Abney agrees, "I have a definite story in my head," she says, "but I like to leave it to the viewer to figure it out." —HAVEN THOMPSON

When she arrived at art school in Manhattan, Abney had never set foot inside a gallery.
The New York Times

Museum and Gallery Listings
Published: April 2, 2009

Last Chance

★ NINA CHANEL ABNEY: ‘EMMA’S BASEMENT’; closes on Saturday. The title of Nina Chanel Abney’s second New York show, “Emma’s Basement,” sets the scene for Flaubert’s “Madame Bovary” in a fervid underworld, where presumed absolutes like race and gender are unstable; narratives run from dreamy to nightmarish; and the moral tone is impossible to parse: good and evil switch roles; orgies could be sacred celebrations. Still in her 20s, Ms. Abney was introduced by her very smart gallery just a few years ago, arriving with a fully developed painting style and a command of scale. She sustains that mastery in this show, which has marginally less impact than her first in 2008 — two solo outings in the course of a year stretches even a strong talent thin — but confirms that she is an artist to watch. Kravets/Wehby, 521 West 21st Street, Chelsea, (212) 352–2238, kravetswehbygallery.com. (Cotter)
The New Irascibles
1985

In 1985, the September issue of Art magazine ran six group portraits by photographer Timothy Greenfield-Sanders capturing the early participants in the East Village art scene—artists, dealers and critics—whom the magazine dubbed “The New Irascibles.” Included were David Wojnarowicz, Patricia  Pavlacka, Mark Rusin, Kiki Smith, Coco De La Renta, Pat Hains, Robert Posen-Witten and Patrick’s own Carlo McCormick, just to name a few. The visual composition was heavily based on Nina Leen’s iconic 1951 photographs of Abstract Expressionists titled “The Irascibles,” which featured, among others, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko and the lone woman, Hilda Sherson. Posen-Witten, who wrote the accompanying 60-page piece, astutely observed, “Only beginnings and ends are interesting” while borderline the transformation of the East Village from artists’ playground to gentrified bubble where, he said, “the art has improved” and “has become all.”

Fast-forward a quarter century later, we arestruggling the end and the beginning of something else. When the economy took a nosedive, anxiety spread like wildfire throughout the art world, and the laissez-faire of the art market, which had been invincible for so long, looked uncertain. The格尔多theorist’s age of consumption, the week that failed it and the flippancy attitude that made it all seem so absurdly optimistic. The return of the real bean-counter back—and about time, too.

Everyone in the scene can feel the tide changing, and something new is brewing in the air. Art has expanded into something monumental and spreading. Nineteen times are riddled with uncertainties, creative minds are restless and restless. To quote Hunter S. Thompson’s famous line: “When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro.” So here, as an homage to “The New Irascibles,” we present a band of young, brave artists, from Jersey City to the Lower East Side to Brooklyn, who have been forging ahead steadily, creating their own moments, movement, style and even a couple of new business models. They are The New Irascibles, as photographed by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders.
The work of the 21-year-old painter Nina Chanel Abney is sheer unconsciousness. Her paintings consist of strong, minimalist and visceral images infused with humor, irony, provocation, satire and fantasy, mocked by the bold lines of Francesco Clemente and the sensual yet disturbing colors of Francis Bacon. The style, however, is all her own. The result is that Abney's paintings seem to possess both the permanence of museum pieces and the emotional appeal of street art. Given such talent, it's not surprising that Abney got picked up by Chelsea gallery Kravets | Wehby right out of grad school and, like a chosen few, launched into a career as an artist without dipping a heel.

Every piece she's painted so far has sold, and if you've entered the waiting list. The big-name art patronizing Abney family was one of Abney's first collectors. Later, when the Rubell Family Collection organized the "20 Americans" show during Art Basel Miami 2008, they gave an entire wing to her paintings.

"The Chicago native, raised after her mother's favorite singer (Nina Simone) and perfume (Chanel No. 5), moved to New York to attend Parsons' MFA program four years ago. Now, totally familiar with the city when she arrived, Abney arbitrarily selected an apartment in Jersey City. "I felt a little removed from the whole Chelsea and party scene—I find out about them eventually," says Abney, who has no plans to leave her perch across the street. "I like the distance. It's only 13 minutes away and I can come into the city whenever I want to. But then I come here and it's a little more quiet." She's about us here a piano located so she can practice just in between working on a large piece for a group show at Kravet | Wehby in October and her first solo show abroad at Fred Gallery in London next year. When you are that good and that busy, you don't need to chase the scene. It comes and finds you—ciao in Jersey City.

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