

# THE ADVOCATE

Nina Chanel Abney's  
politically-charged art  
captivates on city streets  
and museum walls.

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—Nina Chanel 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 fiery 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 26, 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."



A detail of Abney's studio wall