

The Remixed Symbology of Nina Chanel Abney

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In a graphic design class in college, the instructor warned us to never place objects at a 45-degree angle in a composition. “It’s too expected,” he cautioned. “No...try 13 degrees...or 37...” I imagined him saying this every time I approached a poster design. As a strategy, the work of Nina Chanel Abney disregards similar forewarnings, instead engaging in a dance between the expected and the unexpected. She moves this tactic beyond composition and into concept, offering us familiar faces, places, and symbols next to others that baffle as much as they intrigue. The works become a portrait of the modern brain, a marker of the manic hyperactivity that preoccupies contemporary American life. What results is a soupy mixture of pop, celebrity culture, Instagram filters, and catchy slogans—this alongside sharp intimations of deep-seated political anxiety.

Abney has said: “I like to drop the bomb. Start the conversation, then leave the room.”¹ And, indeed, her largescale works go off like bombs. Their frenetic array of figures, text, glyphs, and patterns is almost orgasmic and symphonic. Gingham patterns

flank floating heads interrupted by sharp arrows and truncated text; geometries stack and fold over each other like origami. Text is in turn written and redacted; messaging abounds. In her dense compositions, bodies stack like sentences on a page. The page here is king: the page as in a frame, the page as in the screen, the page as in the space of narrative exploration.

Abney’s exhibition *Royal Flush*, which traveled from The Nasher at Duke University by way of the Chicago Cultural Center, is currently split across Los Angeles, between The California African American Museum (CAAM) and the Institute of Contemporary Art Los Angeles (ICA LA). While the dual exhibitions may introduce a larger swath of the public to Abney’s raucous paintings, the split venue ruptures the experience of seeing the artist’s style and content evolve and warp over her still-early career. *Royal Flush* reads almost like a retrospective—broad alterations and experimentations in depth, pictorial representation, and subject matter are evident across the dual exhibitions.

One of the earlier works at the ICA, *Randaleeza* (2008) pictures former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice emblazoned with star tattoos on her shoulders and sporting a scant white bikini and grimacing expression. In the same painting, Abney also portrays her friend, Randy, with legs spread, boxer briefs on display, and arms raised—one of his hands is made prisoner by the foaming mouths of chomping dogs. He wears a patterned plaid shirt, the normalcy of which contrasts his screaming face. The deeply hued, painterly skin tones on both figures delight with washy variations in tone articulating cheekbones and abdomens. From there, the painting’s logic begins to break down into a sort of surrealist messaging—above Randy and the dust storm of rabid dogs are disembodied hands, a floating head who appears to be seconds away from poking his own eye, and two naval officers smiling and pointing

FUCK
THE
LOOP



YO

3



3



POW



OW



No
O







at Ms. Rice. The work breaks down into a tangled mess of figure, pattern, and meaning.

In more recent works, this level of representation, washy paint application, and articulation of form soon gives way to a flatter, more graphic style. Retaining her compositional prowess, Abney has lately convoluted her already-complex scenes with flat colors and planes. Works like *Catfish* (2017) and *(Untitled FUCK T*E *OP)* (2014) are compositionally dense rainbows of form, glyphs, and figures that beg to be decoded. The narrative story arcs of the earlier work, while surreal, are more singular, meant to be read as fable or cautionary tale. But here, any kind of sequential parable is swapped for simultaneity, like a dream in which you are watching multiple story lines unfold. Yet, as the narrative becomes more complex, representation simplifies—the multi-hued skin tones of the earlier work are abandoned in lieu of flat geometric bodies and heads, almost as if her

subjects are becoming emoji versions of themselves.

Catfish unfurls like a scroll. Across the 18-foot-long panel, nude women of multiple ethnicities flaunt and pose with heads turned to face the viewer, as if posing for a salacious photo shoot. One male is pictured towards the center of the composition: his head tilts towards one of the female figures as he handles his genitals. A yellow burst of color with sharp edges spews from his mouth suggesting some type of expletive. Words like NOPE, YES, and WOW, along with money symbols, eyeballs, and the letter X, litter the painting, implying sexual exchange (whether voyeuristic, financial, or more poignantly, aggressive). Yet instead of an easy #MeToo-type read into unwanted sexual advances, the women in the painting all pose complicitly and with pursed, smiling lips—the women flaunt themselves, not as victims, but at ease in their bodies and sexuality. Any

Previous image: Nina Chanel Abney, *Untitled (FUCK T*E *OP)* (2014). Acrylic on canvas, 72 × 108 inches. Image courtesy of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. © Nina Chanel Abney. Collection of Kamaal Fareed. Photo: Peter Paul Geoffrion.

Nina Chanel Abney, *Royal Flush* (installation view at the California African American Museum). Left: *Untitled (IXI Black)* (2015); right: *Untitled (XXXXXX)* (2015). Photo: Brian Forrest.

simple narrative becomes skewed and broadened.

Yet there is no mistaking the subject of *Why* (2015), which depicts white police officers, some with pig heads or shirts that say OINK, blatantly shooting a black man. This painting (not included in the exhibition) was part of a body of work made on the heels of the fatal police shootings of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and several others. This series of works directly addresses issues of police brutality and racial bias. Still, even with this more concrete subject matter, Abney makes room for muddled meaning. *Untitled (XXXXXX)* (2015) and *Untitled (IXI Black)* (2015), both on view at the CAAM, flip the assumed races—in both paintings, the officers are black, and the man being apprehended is white. Similar to Robert Colescott's Shirley Temple paintings (which switch the races of Shirley Temple and her black sidekick Bojangles), Abney here suggests an alternative reality, or perhaps even broadens the scope of our understanding of the racial power dynamics that poison American culture.

The overtness of these works is somewhat partitioned to 2015, at which point Abney began to be praised as a #BlackLivesMatter advocate and spokeswoman. These assumptions, while flattering, resulted in Abney backing off from such forthright representations. "I'm not addressing only police brutality," Abney explains in an interview with ICA curator Jamillah James. "I want to talk about a million other topics that affect everybody, you know..."² Not wanting to be boxed into any one discourse, Abney has fervently pursued a painterly language that fuses synchronal subject matter, stacked and tangled. ("I never want to be in one lane...I get bored."³)

Her disparate sources of content allow the artist herself to become analogous to an internet browser, accepting information from a milieu of sources and then re-presenting it back to the viewer

in a remixed state. Abney insists on an informed yet unbiased tone, allowing her subject matter to float through various interpretations and perspectives, privileging universality over overt meaning. Like iPhone notifications or news feeds, Abney populates her work with symbology that is painfully relevant to contemporary culture, political or otherwise, allowing the paintings to transcend issues germane to a specific race or community. Instead they become cyphers for our current moment, as if to echo the idiom of our time: it's complicated.

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1. Kelvin Ward, "Nina Chanel Abney—Always a Winner," Vimeo video, posted by *Bholdr*, October 29, 2015, <http://vimeo.com/143994438>.

2. Marshall N. Price, *Nina Chanel Abney, Royal Flush*. (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2017), pg 81.

3. *Ibid*, pg 82.