BEYOND the STREETS

NINA CHANEL ABNEY

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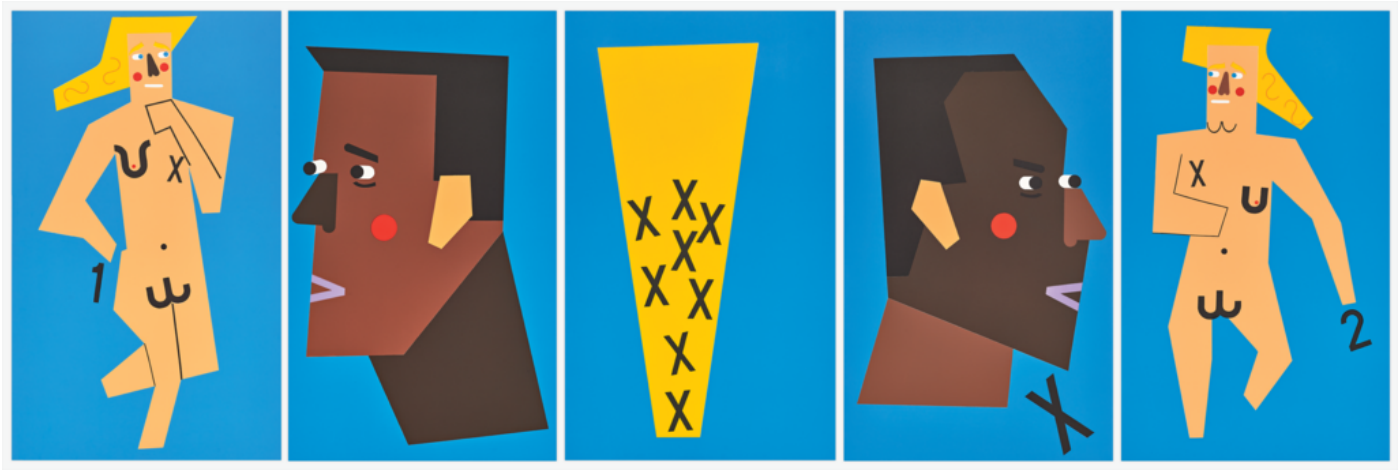

By Charlotte Jansen

“The first painting I encountered that had an impact on me was ‘A Sunday on La Grande Jatte’ by Georges Seurat,” Nina Chanel Abney recalls. “I saw it as a kid while on a field trip at the Art Institute of Chicago. I remember being completely blown away by the scale and feeling enraptured by the entire scene. As a kid, the painting felt like it covered the entire wall.” In the Seurat painting, dated 1884, a crowd of elegantly dressed Parisians cavort with parasols and pets at a park overlooking the Seine. In May 1976, the painting bizarrely found its way onto the cover of Playboy, with the addition of Playmate Nancy Cameron. (It has also since cameoed in The Simpsons and in topiary form.)

The many iterations of “A Sunday on La Grande Jatte” speak to its universal appeal, and finding that power is central to Abney’s practice as an artist. Though her own life was far removed from the people Seurat painted in France in the 19th century (she was born in Chicago in 1982), the feeling of curiosity and awe that she felt as a girl looking up at that painting is what Abney re-creates in her large-scale works and murals today. Crowded with references – to anything from political figures and policemen to Instagram pics, Twitter feeds, family members and celebrity culture – each of her compositions is the result of a carefully constructed mise-en-scène. She might place Condoleezza Rice, Lil Wayne and her friend Randall all in the same painting. “My work is a collision of all of the random information and encounters I take in as I am creating the work,” Abney explains.

Take, for example, her Coney Island mural (2016), painted using the stencils Abney cuts by hand, a technique she often employs on her canvases applied to a wall. While her method draws on Matisse and Romare Bearden, her touchstones are contemporary: blocky, emoji-like symbols – hearts, crosses and mermaids – jiving in a symphony of intense color. The mural marks a shift toward a more abstract language than in Abney's earlier practice, but without letting go of the world completely.

At the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea two years later, her eye-popping color was hung on the side of a building. "STOP," a text spells out across the center. "DON'T KILL." "When talking about the idea of simplifying work to create more accessibility and readability, sometimes the text is used as a way to simplify an emotion or a feeling that I want to evoke in the viewer," she says. The image refers to military and police violence, in particular against black Americans, in her flat, Pop-collage style, a disturbing mix of stark simplicity and searing satire.

It's this combination of restraint and restlessness that gives Abney's work its unique tempo and fast pace, akin to scrolling on a cellphone or clicking through endless YouTube videos while being bombarded by pop-ups. "I think the energy comes from the frantic pace that is created when I combine the multitude of things I may come upon in one day." Her bright palettes compound their energy, but unlike the quick-moving media

we're used to, where images are swiftly gobbled up and capitalized, when we come to each painting it makes us stop, stare and slow down. Paradoxically to what goes into the work, Abney makes us see contemporary life haltingly, bit by bit.

Growing up, Abney observed her mom and a few of her cousins painting. "That definitely influenced my desire to be an artist as a child, and my family support kept me going." Nowadays, her motivation comes from deep within herself. "I am an artist now because, simply, I love to paint. I need to create – it is very much my being. That's the biggest motivation, but I am also very much inspired by the opportunities I have to use my art to spark dialogue. My desire is that the discussion around my work (and its subject) could lead to something positive in the world."

Her exhibitions in museums and galleries, such as the recent Royal Flush, which has toured the U.S. (most recently at the Institute of Contemporary Art and the California African American Museum in Los Angeles), have helped hone her practice. She mentions Seized the Imagination, a 2017 solo show at Jack Shainman Gallery, as a pivotal moment: "I felt that with that body of work, all of my previous ideas and techniques successfully merged into a clear universal language that I could endlessly expound on. With that body of work, I felt like I could clearly see my voice."

It's in these environments that Abney creates a more intimate dialogue with her viewers. At her glorious exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, in 2018, Hot to Trot. Not, she confronted us with deconstructed nudes of men and women. They aren't sexy nudes that commodify human bodies but awkward figures with appendages that look stuck on, painted as frescoes onto the architecture of one of Europe's major art institutes. Abney playfully mocks the male gaze of art history and its objectification of nudes, particularly white female nudes. Irony underscores everything Abney does – sometimes it's subtle, sometimes brutal.

Since that 2017 show in New York – where Abney lives – she has continued to create prolifically, spending stints in the studio and shifting more toward a universal language, one that breaks boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, class, history and religion while still being compelling and pop enough to speak to everyone. She notes Henry Taylor, Faith Ringgold and Kerry James Marshall, as well as the late modernist Stuart Davis and Robert Colescott, known for his busy, buoyant narratives of African-American life, as influences. Each of those great artists touched on something fundamental about their time and their experience as individuals. Abney, too, taps into aspects of our collective psyche, through her lived experience as a 36-year-old woman in America today, in a society that is increasingly divided and perplexed. It's out in the public space (where, working as an artist, as she told The New York Times in 2018, "there aren't a lot of women of color") that her work has the full force of its effect. Away from the coffers of culture, outside the walls of blue-chip galleries and prestigious institutions, perceived barriers are eliminated and "more people are able to see the work – deliberately or by consequence of walking down the street. More people feel invited to interact with it, more people feel welcomed to engage with it."

“It’s about creating accessibility – and creating an inclusive space for individuals who may not feel like they are welcomed in a white cube, or assume that they couldn’t relate to work in a gallery,” she adds. Abney shares with any artist who intervenes in the public space, who is engaged with art as a response to sociopolitics, the intention to get away from “any self-imposed limits on what art can be, allowing it to freely navigate between the white cube and public space and between, for lack of better terms, ‘high art’ and ‘low art.’ Having my work exist in an accessible and versatile platform is of the utmost importance to me and something I’m constantly striving for.”

One day, a kid just like Nina will be standing in awe in front of one of her giant paintings, just as she stood in front of Seurat’s. But instead of the parasols and picnickers, there will be Lil Wayne and her friend Randall.