



“Nina Chanel Abney: Royal Flush” Opens at the Neuberger Museum of Art

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by Pat Rogers

PURCHASE, NY—The last Stop on National Tour, “Nina Chanel Abney: Royal Flush” opens at the Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase on February 27, 2019. Continuing on view through June 30, 2019, the exhibition reveals the artist’s deft hand on issues of gender, race, inequity, and homophobia tackled with wit and colorful accessible imagery.

Born in Chicago in 1982, [Nina Chanel Abney](#) tackles controversy in a way she has described as “easy to swallow, hard to digest.” Her provocative and spirited narratives explore the social dynamics of urban life through bold, flat, colorful paintings and collages that are packed with symbols, numbers, words, emojis, figures and body parts—all informed by celebrity culture, video games, social media, hip-hop, tabloid news and the incessant 24-hour news cycle.

Her art also caught the attention of the [Norton Museum of Art](#) in West Palm Beach, FL. The South Florida museum presents a solo show of Abney’s art in the solo show “Nina Chanel Abney: Neon.” Focusing on recent work, the exhibition remains on view through June 25, 2019. Click [here](#) for details.

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Artist Nina Chanel Abney in front of their mural at Nasher Museum of Art in Duke University. Photo: J. Caldwell. Courtesy of Nasher Museum of Art and Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase.

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For those wanting to see her art in the NY Metro, the Neuberger Museum of Art at Purchase College, SUNY presents the last leg of Abney’s first solo museum exhibition, which has been traveling since 2017. The show is organized by [Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University](#) and includes approximately 30 of the artist’s paintings and collages, made over the last decade. Abney is represented by [Kravets Wehby Gallery](#) in Chelsea in New York, who last held a solo show for the artist, “[Always a Winner](#),” in 2015.

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"Ivy and the Janitor in January" by Nina Chanel Abney, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 60 inches. Collection of Noel Kirnon and Michael Paley. Photo by Peter Paul Geoffrion. Image courtesy of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina and Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase. © Nina Chanel Abney.

Since launching in 2017, "Royal Flush: Nina Chanel Abney" has been presented at the Chicago Cultural Center; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and California African American Museum in Los Angeles.

The exhibition is accompanied by a full-color catalogue with essays by exhibition curator Marshall N. Price, Nancy Hanks Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Nasher Museum; Jamillah James, Curator, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Natalie Y. Moore, Chicago Public Media, WBEZ; and Richard J. Powell, John Spencer Bassett Professor of Art and Art History at Duke University.



"Untitled (Yo 123)" by Nina Chanel Abney, 2015. Unique ultrachrome pigmented print, spray paint, and acrylic on canvas, 56 x 56 inches. Private collection. Courtesy of Kravets Wehby Gallery (New York, NY); the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University (Durham, NC) and Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase (Purchase, NY). © Nina Chanel Abney.

According to Price, the title of the exhibition is taken from a player's most valuable hand in poker, but it is something of a double entendre. "It refers to Abney's work, which contains iconography reminiscent of playing cards and the four different suits," Price explained in an exhibition release. "But the title also suggests that the artist holds a valuable hand. When Abney 'lays her cards on the table,' she presents paintings that are rich in critical commentary and meaningful metaphor."

The subject matter may be serious or even raw, but Abney tries to keep it accessible, according to the museum. "Early on I wanted to raise a bunch of questions but find a way to keep a sense of humor, a lightheartedness, even if it was kind of deceptive," Abney explained and describes her art making as intuitive. "Improvisation is a big part of my process because I am usually responding to something," she stated in the release. "I never sketch [beforehand] but gather bright paint, a bunch of different colors, and I go from there."



“Randaleeza” by Nina Chanel Abney, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 94 inches. Private collection. Courtesy of Kravets Wehby Gallery (New York, NY); the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University (Durham, NC) and Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase (Purchase, NY). © Nina Chanel Abney.

The artist’s iconography combines colorful geometric abstract elements with figures that can include mask-like faces with exaggerated or missing features and a blending or reversal of genders and ethnicities, according to the museum. Her characters might be violent villains, unwitting victims, aspirational heroes or ineffectual anti-heroes.

“In portraits, I mix gender and race so one can’t attach one specific meaning to a painting or figure,” Abney states. Not wanting to be defined by a single political motivation, she says she bears the burden forced on black artists: “If I paint a black figure, it can’t just be a figure. It has to be about blackness or race or whatever, where white artists don’t have to think about those things.”

Abney’s technique has strong ties to modernist forebears Stuart Davis, Romare Bearden, and Faith Ringgold but pulls also from public art and mural painting. Her use of bright colors, basic shapes, geometric blocks, and patterning may call to mind Picasso and Matisse, according to Price.

“I create symbols, and depending where I place them, they can mean multiple things... I want to raise a bunch of questions,” Abney explained. “In portraits, I mix gender and race so one can’t attach one specific meaning to the painting or the figure. I want my work to be relevant to what’s happening now.”



“Incite (COM)” by Nina Chanel Abney, 2015. Unique ultrachrome pigmented print, acrylic, and spray paint on canvas; 48 x 36 inches. Collection of Isis Heslin and Jacqueline T. Martin. Courtesy of Kravets Wehby Gallery (New York, NY); the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University (Durham, NC) and Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase (Purchase, NY). © Nina Chanel Abney.

Nina Chanel Abney studied at Augustana College in Rock Island, IL and Parsons School of Design, New York, where she received her MFA in 2007. Soon after, Abney was featured in an exhibition of 30 African American artists that was organized by the Rubell Family Collection, Miami, and has toured extensively throughout the US since then.

Her work also has been included in exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Studio Museum (both in New York); the National Museum of Women in the Arts (Washington,

DC); the Nassau County Museum of Art (Long Island, NY), among others. Her work is held by a number of collections including the Brooklyn Museum and the Bronx Museum (New York), the Rubell Family Collection (Miami), and the Burger Collection (Hong Kong). She lives and works in Jersey City, NJ.

BASIC FACTS: “[Nina Chanel Abney: Royal Flush](#)” is on view February 27 to June 30, 2019 at the Neuberger Museum of Art, located on the campus of Purchase College, SUNY, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase, NY. www.neuberger.org.