# TRUE REFLECTIONS

# Amarachi's Story: A Profile on British Artist Hannah Nijsten

## *By Zoë Goetzmann*

London artist Hannah Nijsten's work and overall professional career—thus far—speaks to what it means to be an artist, a female artist as well as an entrepreneur in the past, current and future art world.

Nijsten always knew that she wanted to pursue a career as an artist. She recalls the first piece of artwork she ever made as a child: "When I was four, I drew a clown's face on an A1 sheet of paper," Nijsten explains. "I remember 'the fuss' that was made around it—and it was basically just a really 'proportionate' depiction or drawing of a clown." She describes: "It was pretty bizarre—the eyes—everything was so 'level.' It's not something you'd expect from a four-year-old. I think if I saw a four-year-old draw something like that I'd be pretty impressed."

At the age of 18, she moved to London, forgoing the traditional university route. As Hannah reflects, "I didn't really know myself, how I would make it as an artist when I was younger," she explains, "so I ended up going into the workforce like everyone else: pursuing full-time work and running a rat race in London." On the side, Nijsten says that would sketch constantly in "little books, sketchbooks or notebooks."

**"IF YOU COULD LOOK IN THE MIRROR AND SEE OR OBSERVE NOT YOUR 'PHYSICAL APPEARANCE,' BUT YOUR OWN INDIVIDUAL CHARACTER," NIJSTEN EXPLAINS, "YOUR TRUE SELF, YOUR TRUEST FORM OF YOU WHO ARE: WOULD YOU SEE WHAT YOU THINK YOU LOOK LIKE, OR WOULD YOU SEE A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT PERSON?"**

After a few years working as a trader in the "male-dominated" world, as Hannah explains, of finance, she made a game plan. "I was kind of like, 'I need to do this—pursuing art,'" she says. "I needed to figure out how to make the transition from full-time work into a career as a full-time artist." Whilst working in her professional day job, Nijsten decided to "self-teach" herself, she describes. In 2019, she became a full-time working artist.

"In terms of 'a defining moment,'" Hannah says, "we know in the art world it takes a while to make some money." She adds, "You have got to find your own unique style. It's also about finding yourself through your work." Hannah explains, "It took time to find my niche. And then when I found it, it was like, 'Okay I'm ready to do this. Let's go and quit everything.'" She continues, "It was the best risk I've ever taken."

Although her time working as a trader was, as Nijsten admits, "stressful," she notes how this experience informed her current artistic career. "It taught me to stay calm," she says. "If something

takes me off course for a year that's all good and fine, because eventually you'll come back on course." She states, "Art is very subjective. You have to really stick to what feels right to you. "I think working in finance gave me that kind of confidence and calmness."

Storytelling is and remains at the focal point of Nijsten's work (as in her series entitled "Black Beauty," "Black Square" and "Standing With You").

At the age of 17, Nijsten experienced a level of public harassment that most women have experienced (and can relate to) whilst taking the tube subway, on her own, in London.

"I recall a creepy predatory man trying to harass me whilst I was on the tube," Hannah describes. "I remember, there was a girl who I did not really know. She was just standing there on the tube," she explains. "She grabbed this guy, yanked him off me and then took me off the tube and gave me this real, intense pep talk about looking out for yourself."

"It was the first time someone had stuck up for me," Hannah says. "Over the last nearly 12 years now, I have also given passed on that same message that she this woman on the tube gave to me, to other girls and boys who are in difficult situations or kids who are being bullied."

The series "Black Beauty" tells the story of this woman named "Amarachi." In one specific work, Hannah depicts Amarachi as a woman looking at her own reflection.

"If you could look in the mirror and see or observe not your 'physical appearance,' but your own individual character," Nijsten explains, "your true self, your truest form of you who are: would you see what you think you look like, or would you see a completely different person?"

"I wanted the painting to look pretty much symmetrical because I wanted Amarachi to see her truest self," Hannah describes. "She is amazing. She did such a kind act in a moment where most people would avoid that situation." Amarachi's (and Hannah's) story reminds women or people in general to adopt a "Strong Exterior, Soft Interior" (another one of the artist's titled works). Through this series, Nijsten empowers women to project a confident "fierce," rather than a "timid" exterior, she says—no matter how "terrified," Hannah continues, they might be on the "inside." "Black Beauty" celebrates the beauty, power, kindness, generosity and strength of the women and matriarchs who have impacted Nijsten's life: reflected on both the inside and on the outside.

Hannah's use of simplicity and texture in her overall creative and technical processes help capture and understand the powerful messages resonant in her minimalist works.

Using 2 to 15 liters of acrylic paint to create one individual painting, Nijsten pours this material into a series of mixing bowls. She proceeds to mix the paint continuously. Hannah dehydrates the material for a period of two weeks. When she applies the paint to the canvas, she paints in continuous layers (i.e., up to "100 layers;" however, Nijsten notes that it is difficult to keep track when she is in her "creating" zone). Through the application of paint, the material hardens to form thick, sculptural layers and structured forms.

"I got to the point where I was doing a lot of flat 2D paintings and I would look at them and I would feel like there was something missing," Hannah says, "so then I started introducing texture," she explains. "It just felt right." Nijsten admits, "And when you see the work in person you get to see the power in real life."

Hannah's overall process echoes a pivotal technique revolutionized by artist Gerhard Richter. Popularized by the artist in the late 1970s through the 1990s, this method is known as "the squeegee method." Through this specific artistic process, Richter would apply layers of paint onto the canvas with his own homemade tool to create abstract, blurred works. Thus, similar to Nijsten, Richter created his own experimental, signature artistic style.

"I'll never change my style," Hannah says. "This also might represent advice for other emerging artists. Don't concentrate on other people's art too much," Nijsten continues, "because you'll lose your own technique—by taking or copying a style from someone else." Hannah states adamantly: "Don't follow the trends!"

When it comes to collaborating or working with galleries and art fairs, Nijsten suggests emerging artists follow this similar advice, advising them to pursue their own personal autonomies, beliefs, creativities, freedoms and artistic styles. Through her own astute observation, she says, "'Art is art for a reason.' There are stories behind the works that must be told," Nijsten explains. "This is why artists create at the end of the day."

Hannah's fixation on "the square" represents another inventive component to her signature artistic oeuvre and style.

"Do you know what I love about my black squares? I love that they are not perfect." Hannah describes, "I love imperfection. I don't think there's such a thing as 'perfection." She continues, "No square is exactly the same that I create. But overall, it's still a black square, but actually in the detail, there's nothing perfect about it out of all."

During the ongoing pandemic, Nijsten created her series, "Black Square." Through the project "Standing With You" Hannah produced 11 works of art. Each work of art stood for 11 football (soccer) players in the United Kingdom, including figures such as Gary Lineker, Shaun Wright-Phillips, Ross Barkley, Anton Ferdinand, Andy Cole and Kieran Gibbs. Inspired by the experiences of Hannah's close friends who are and were key players in these specific leagues, the project was created to raise awareness around ongoing, long-standing racial abuse against players in the U.K. football league.

"The message behind each work was to promote 'the power of people coming together to create positive change,'" Nijsten explains. "The weaving of squares—to me—conveys or illustrates the act of people coming together." She describes further, "The light reflection on the layered acrylic paint is a metaphorical way of showing the positivity—the light—that is created when we all come together." Hannah uses the motif of "the square" in different colors, designs and forms to explore themes related to community, unity, skin color, race, diversity and solidarity.

"Obviously I am white," Hannah says. "I'll never be able to experience what players go through on a daily basis." However, as a former athlete, she can relate her own personal pride in her former athletic abilities to the consistent need for justified sportsmanship, solidarity and basic human rights that should be afforded and extended to all athletes, regardless of skin color or race. As she explains further, "I was a British gymnast, and I can't even imagine if I was doing my competitions, having someone scream racist abuse at me under that amount of pressure."

In April 2022, Nijsten will dive into the latest "NFT craze." Her NFT project—minted on OpenSea — will consist of a series of unique video animations illustrating the stories behind her works. Through this process, she hopes that she can "show people what I see when I look at my own artwork," she says. As the art world and artists continue to discover how to embrace this new digital medium and practice, Nijsten's NFT project represents a natural progression to her own self-invented hybrid acrylic painting, sculptural technique and style. Hannah's work represents a true, personal reflection of her pioneering efforts to change the art world, and the world in general: past, present and future.