

CHAMPIONING THE CAUSE OF *Girls & Women*

by Clara Nartey



My work is about building self-confidence in young girls and women by celebrating Black hair in contemporary art. The piece Amandla is one that I created about the importance of empowering women and how that empowerment has positive benefits in our society for both men and women. The word "Amandla" is from the Zulu language of South Africa and it means "power." This word was used as a rally cry by the leaders, mostly women, of the protests against the Apartheid era in South Africa. When they cried out "Amandla," everyone knew it was time to assemble and protest. I was inspired by their courage to stand up for what is right and lead the way for change.

The quilt I am a Child was created in response to the cry of high school students all across the country. During the racial reckoning and national debate on the same topic in 2020, high school students of color across the country created Instagram pages to tell the world about their experiences in school. The overwhelming number of girls who posted about their experiences talked about the way students, teachers, and faculty ridiculed their hair and how that resulted in loss of their self-confidence and self-worth. I designed this quilt to remind people to be mindful of how hurtful and potentially damaging our words and actions can be to children. →



I am a Child 67" x 50"



SUPPLIES

- Basic sewing supplies
- Digital device
- Fabric: cotton
- Felt: polyester
- Fusible web: (Pellon 805 - Wonder-Under)
- Long-arm quilting machine: (Handi Quilter Moxie)
- Interfacing: (Pellon 810 - Featherweight Interfacing)
- Needles: self-threading
- Sewing machine
- Thread: polyester, Iris (Exquisite Threads)
- Thread snips: (LDH Scissors - Prism Thread Snip)

TECHNIQUE

Nothing beats a good process in creativity. If you have a defined process, you can always go back and tweak it, troubleshoot problems, and improve your techniques. A strong method ensures that you have consistent results. If you haven't established one, you're leaving everything to chance, meaning sometimes you'll create good work and other times you won't. However, if you have a well-defined process, you'll either create good or great work.

For this reason, I'm particular about creating a defined step-by-step process for everything I do. I start my portraits by drawing and then painting them on a digital device. This step is broken down into four miniature steps: drawing the facial features, drawing the hair, creating patterns/surface designs for the clothes, and designing a background for the figure, all on a digital device.

When this is complete, I send the digital file to be commercially printed onto fabrics. I usually send them to Spoonflower for printing on their Petal Signature Cotton fabric. I find that it's easy to stitch through this particular cotton fabric. After I've received the printed fabrics, I assemble the quilt sandwich. Using a lot of hand-guided, not computerized, free-motion-stitching on my domestic sewing machine, I emphasize details and add texture to the figure and hair. I use a long-arm quilting machine to quilt the clothes and background.

Two of my favorite thread-painting tools are self-threading needles and sharp thread snips. Since I change thread colors often while thread painting, I end up with a lot of thread ends that need to be snipped. I use a self-threading needle to bury the threads inside the quilt or to move the thread ends to the back of the piece before snipping them. I find that when I snip the threads on the front of the work without either burying or sending them to the back, they unravel, which can be unsightly or too tiny to further snip off. The quality of the thread snips affects how fast and close to the surface I can snip thread ends. I'm particular about keeping my thread snips sharp all the time. Since I spend hours snipping threads, I need the best tool to help me make that happen.

It's important to find a way to hold all the layers of the quilt sandwich together so they don't shift during free-motion stitching/thread painting. For medium-size pieces, I use strips of fusible web between the layers to baste, and for larger pieces, I'm now using a long-arm quilting machine to baste because it's faster.

TIPS

- If you're using a domestic sewing machine, check to see if it has a basting stitch. If not, simply increase the stitch length to the largest possible size and stitch parallel lines about 8–10 inches apart to hold all four layers of the quilt sandwich together. Alternatively, you can use safety pins to baste.
- My current favorite thread snip pair is Prism Thread Snip from LDH Scissors.
- The least expensive place I've found to buy Pellon products for interfacing and fusible web is Walmart's website. I order all my Pellon supplies online, and they're shipped directly to me.

To see more of Clara Nartey's work, invite her to speak/lecture, or take her classes, visit claranartey.com and follow along on Facebook ([ClaraNarteyArt](https://www.facebook.com/ClaraNarteyArt)) and Instagram ([@claranartey](https://www.instagram.com/claranartey)).