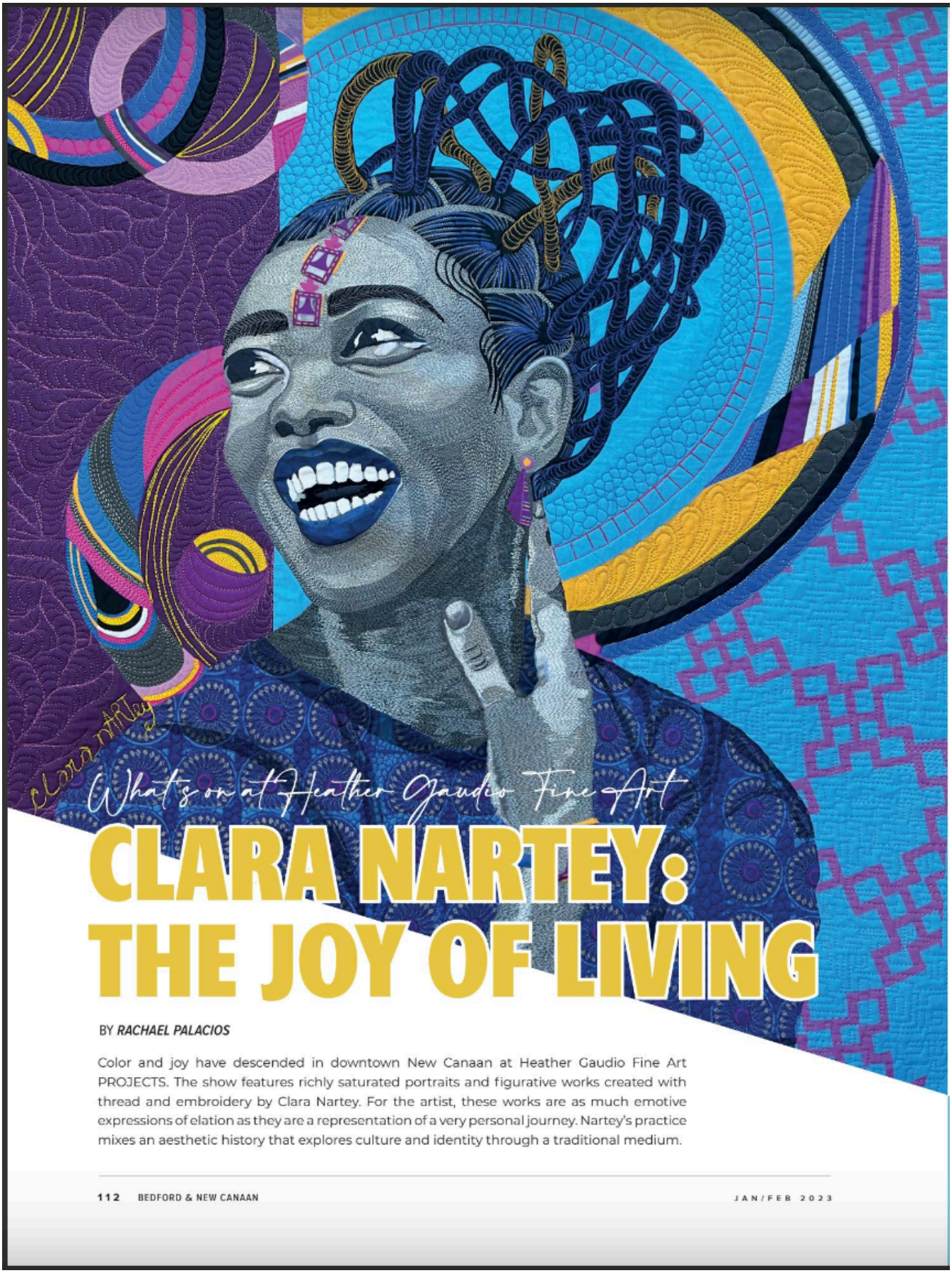


*What's on at Heather Gaudio Fine Art*

# CLARA NARTEY: THE JOY OF LIVING

BY ***RACHAEL PALACIOS***

Color and joy have descended in downtown New Canaan at Heather Gaudio Fine Art PROJECTS. The show features richly saturated portraits and figurative works created with thread and embroidery by Clara Nartey. For the artist, these works are as much emotive expressions of elation as they are a representation of a very personal journey. Nartey's practice mixes an aesthetic history that explores culture and identity through a traditional medium.

Born in Ghana, Nartey moved to New York, where she earned her MBA, then moved to Massachusetts, before settling permanently in Connecticut. As was the tradition in her family, she'd learned to stitch and embroider from her mother, but for Nartey, the sewing machine represented a respite from the world of finance. Never would she have envisioned becoming a full-time artist with said machine – it took the economic downturn of 2008 to present her with new opportunities. With a change in career, Nartey was able to dedicate more time to artistic investigations, developing collaged explorations of color and abstract patterns that reflected her culture.



As she perfected her embroidery techniques and began to expand her lexicon into quilted patchwork designs, the self-taught artist had an experience which was to have a lasting personal and artistic impact. While waiting for an interview at her daughter's private school, Nartey encountered an African American woman proudly wearing her hair naturally. Centuries of Eurocentric norms have dictated the aesthetic standards for women in society, particularly in a professional setting. African women have had to conform to meet these norms by treating their naturally curly hair with chemicals and straighteners. Nartey realized that years of self-negation and wanting to fit in had denied her from embracing her authenticity. "It took a lot of courage, and it was a very personal journey," the artist states, for her to allow her hair to regain its natural form. This pivotal moment also saw a shift in her artwork, which turned from abstracted patterned shapes to depicting the figure. Nartey's visual language shifted to disrupt the societal understanding of beauty to where Black women could see themselves and imagine new possibilities.

Although stitchwork has traditionally been associated with domesticity and has been dismissed as a 'lesser art', the medium is enjoying a revival and is justifiably being recognized as a valid fine art form. Nartey's process combines this traditional medium with new technologies, by starting out with drawing her subjects on an iPad, much like David Hockney adopted in the early aughts. She always begins with a line drawing of the subject's face, which were originally sourced from stock imagery and today are generated from people she personally knows. Nartey then adds the hairstyle, clothes, symbols, decorative elements, and backgrounds that reveal a story. These images are then printed on a large canvas which the artist dubs her 'underpainting'.

The canvas is then backed with three or four other canvases and thicker materials to support the weight of the stitching and fabric collage to follow. Nartey then takes to the sewing machine, stitching layers upon layers of embroidery thread over the underpainting, at times deviating from the original design. While her process is meticulous, she does allow for intuition and improvisation to take place. Nartey never really knows what type of stitching is going to be applied until the moment she is working on the piece. Just as an artist uses pencil or paint to generate a line, add a highlight or deepen a shadow, so does Nartey use thread. Its direction and weight render the desired values, contrasts, and textures.

**"MY THREAD IS MY PAINT,"**

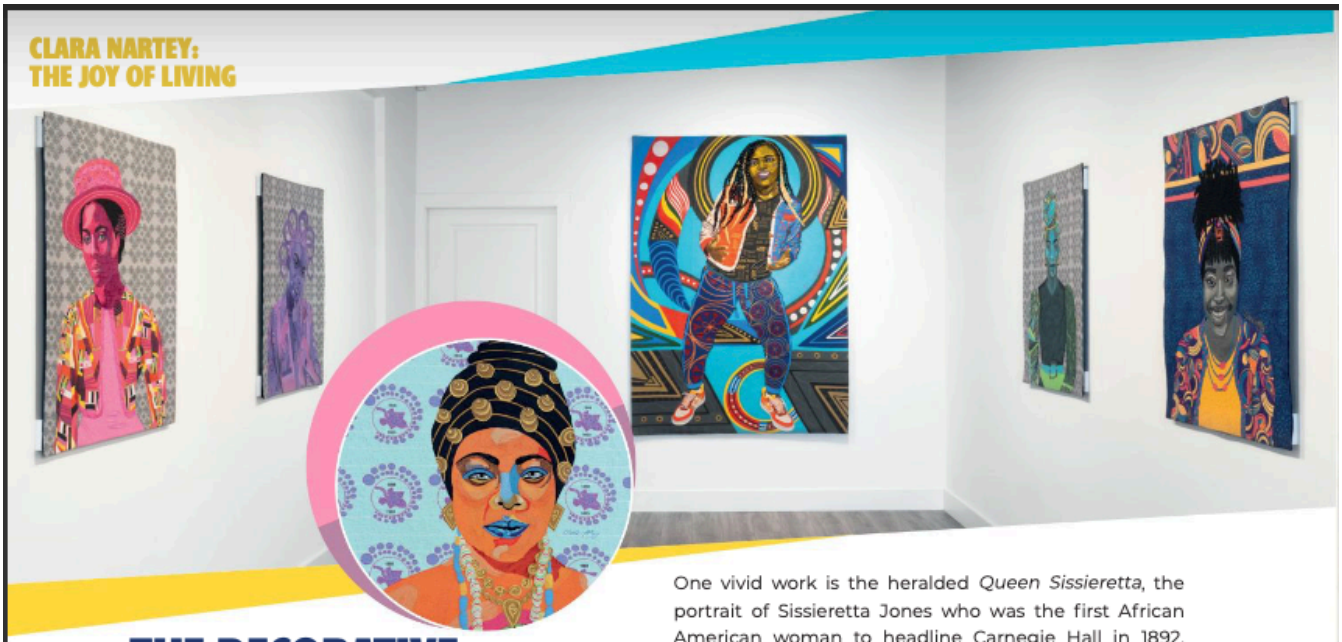
she states coyly. The artist estimates that each tapestry has over two thousand yards of thread.





*Each and every Heather Gaudio installment is a museum exhibit worthy of attention.*
***The Joy of Living is now on view at Heather Gaudio Fine Art PROJECTS, 78 Elm Street, New Canaan.***

## CLARA NARTEY: THE JOY OF LIVING



# THE DECORATIVE PATTERNS THAT ENHANCE THE BACKGROUND AND THE CLOTHING, COLOR, with their complex sense of are as important in depicting the story of the subject. Nartey creates her own designs, some of which are reminiscent of Gee's Bend quilts, while others look like constellation motifs seen in Gustav Klimt paintings. Additionally, the artist incorporates symbols, which are closer to home, to reveal the story of the sitter. Known as *adinkra*, these Ghanaian symbols are a writing system that represent various concepts used by the Akan peoples to mark fabrics and other surfaces. The Akan is an ethnic group living primarily in Ghana and the Ivory Coast, and their symbols are used in various sub-Saharan countries in Africa and have made their way to the Americas. These symbols tell stories, memorialize events and bear wisdoms that are part of the cultural identity. The vibrant interaction of colors, patterns and symbols in the works give the flattened pictorial space a distinctive formal energy.

On view in the exhibition are works from her most recent series called *The Joy of Living*. This grouping reflects a celebration of life after the dark months of isolation during the pandemic. They are dazzling and cheerful depictions of women smiling and laughing. As with the work of Lorna Simpson, which investigates the history of African American hairstyles and conventions of beauty, Nartey reclaims the natural hair of her race, donning her subjects with intricate hairstyles and braids. But instead of politicizing her subjects, Nartey's works are jubilant and the pure expressions of joy.

One vivid work is the heralded *Queen Sissieretta*, the portrait of Sissieretta Jones who was the first African American woman to headline Carnegie Hall in 1892. Jones was gifted many medals by her international admirers during her lifetime, which she proudly wore during her performances. The soprano was no stranger to racial strife and broke many barriers during her lifetime. Sadly, the performer became impoverished when she was forced to abandon her career to take care of her ailing mother. Jones died unknown and was buried in an unmarked grave in Rhode Island in 1933. Nartey pays homage to the celebrated performer attiring her in bright colors and festooning her hair with medals, much as an African queen would accessorize a regal headdress with gold. The patterns on the wall-papered background are sourced from Nartey's research of the actual medals. The artist presents Jones frontally, looking with self-determination at the viewer, assured in her place in history.

A more contemporary subject is *Dancing Queen*, Nartey's first full-standing figurative work. In this tapestry, a young woman in colorful streetwear poses against a highly stylized background. The Nike sneakers on her feet are the ones the brand issued to commemorate the Ghanaian population living in the United States. *Little Accra* is an enclave in the Bronx named after the country's capital. The shoes are adorned with *Sankofa*, an *adinkra* which places importance on learning from the past. The right shoe features Nserewa, a signifier of wealth and abundance. Nartey uses the symbols the American brand appropriated and stitched on the special editioned shoes, and reclaims them into her own work, a gesture underscoring her explorations and pride in her cultural identity.

