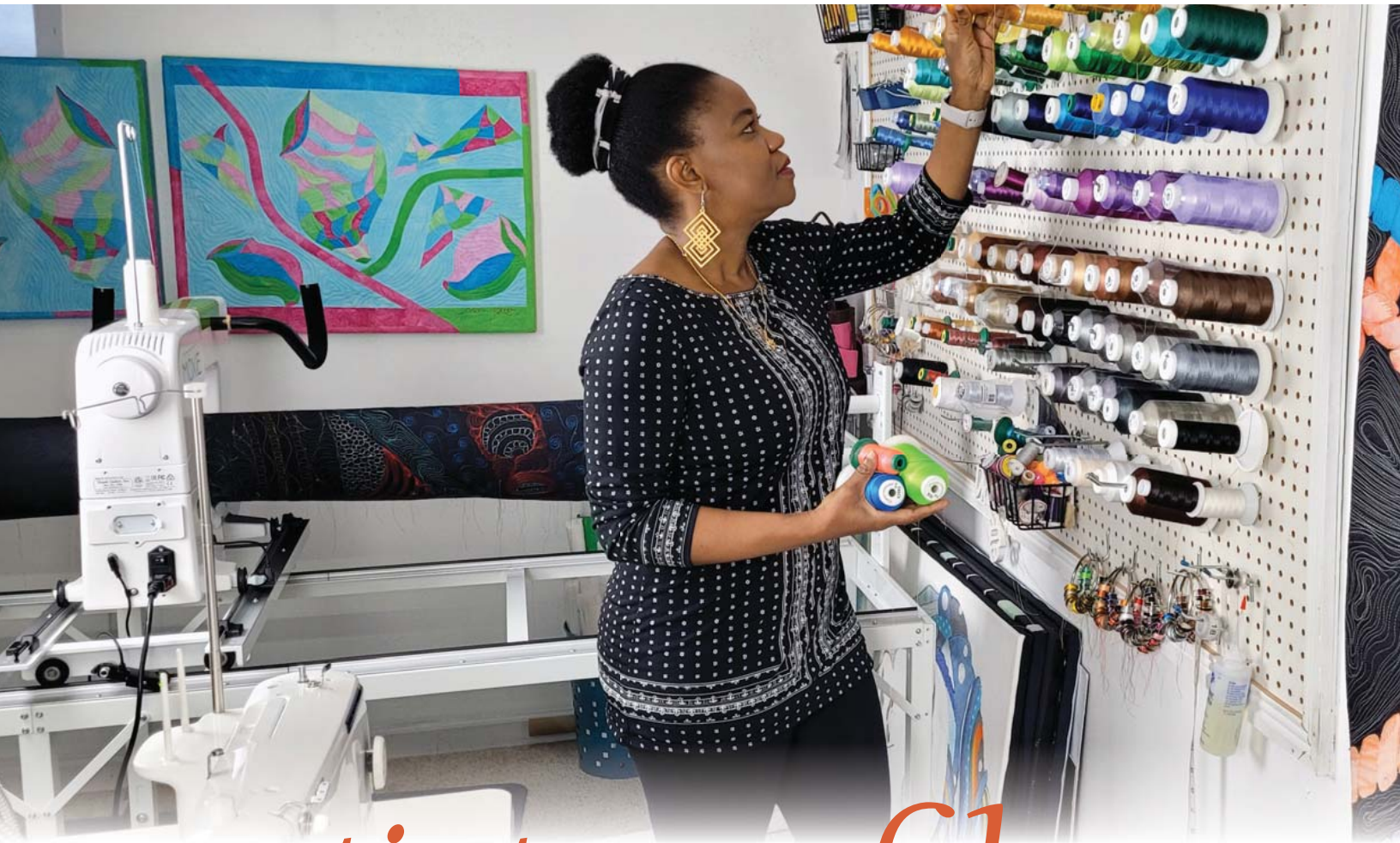


artist profile



Photos courtesy of the artist

Clara Nartey

WEST HAVEN, CONNECTICUT

by Vivika Hansen DeNegre

Most serious art quilters, at some point in their careers, take time to evaluate their goals and clarify their vision. Some are focused on creating a body of work that is shown in galleries or hung in museums among paintings and sculptures. Others aim to win prizes at quilt shows or have their work featured in major publications. Still more wish to hone their skills and share their expertise on the teaching or lecture circuit.

Clara Nartey sees the value in all those goals but doesn't stop there. Her vision is to create a body of work that documents our current culture and leaves a legacy for future generations. "I want my work to have meaning, to start important conversations, and to live on after me when I am gone," Clara says. And she is on her way to accomplishing all those goals, with unique stitched portraits that vibrate with color, texture, and spirit.

Art quilters generally have roots in traditional sewing or quilting or come to the genre after exploring other media. But Clara's journey had a few additional twists and turns along the way. "Growing up," she says, "I used to be the creative one." She loved interior design, created home DIY projects, and even started a handmade jewelry business with a friend while in college. Although she enjoyed fashion and working with her hands, she looked at those skills as hobbies, not as a basis for a career. "Moreover, the visual arts weren't something I'd tried nor were they something I thought I was good at." Academics, on the other hand, were her forte. "Career-wise, I was more of a nerd." She headed to college and pursued a double major in computer science and statistics. With plans for a career in the tech industry, she also earned an MBA. She then worked in management consulting.

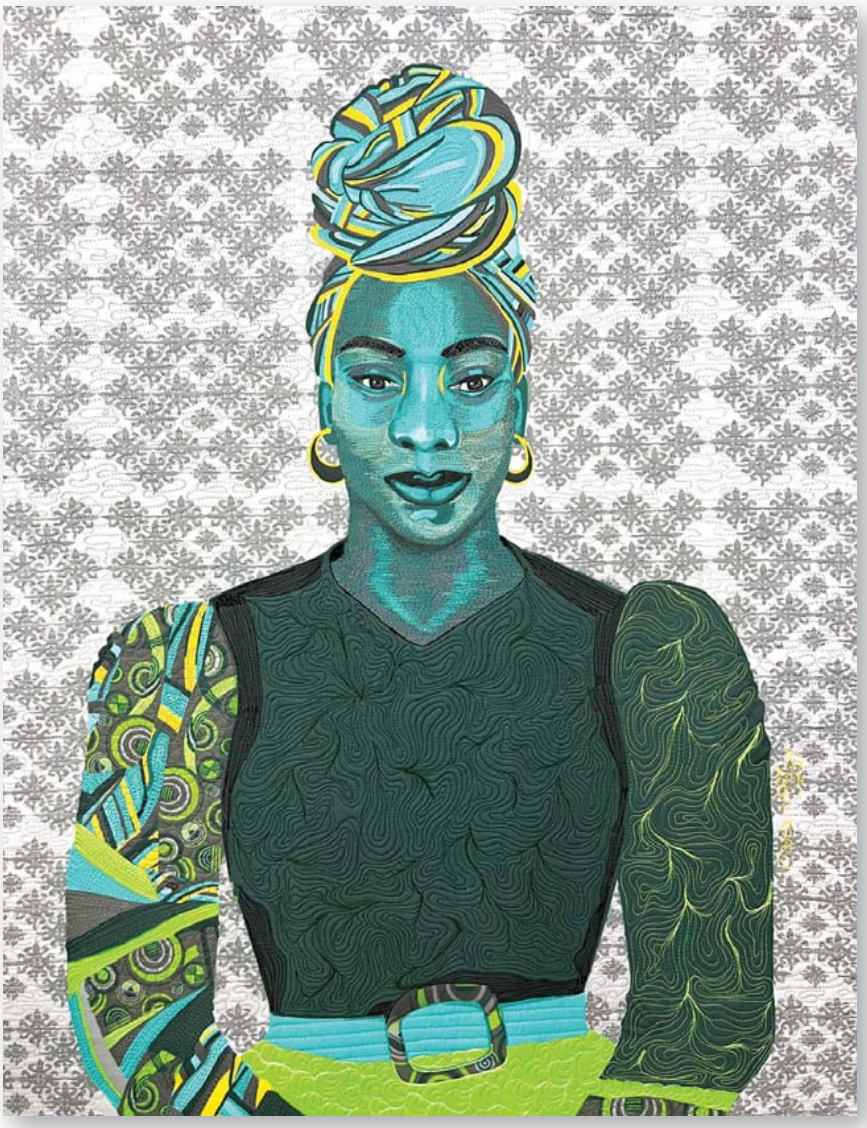
But her artistic skills honed in her early years bubbled to the surface at a time when Clara needed a creative outlet. After losing her job, she found herself with an abundance of free time and was looking for a project that used her hands. Her mother's creativity and resourcefulness became her inspiration to pick up sewing. "My mom owned an embroidery machine and used it to decorate our clothes. So during my period of unemployment, I purchased my first sewing machine—and of course it was an embroidery machine. I originally bought it for a monogramming project for a family friend. After the project was done, I had a sewing machine that I didn't know what to do with."



"Amethyst" • 30" × 40"

As much as she loved fashion, sewing her own clothes wasn't her goal. "I knew that I wasn't going to do that! I started researching how to use my new machine to do creative things and that's how I found and fell in love with art quilts. Before that, I embroidered on baby blankets, and tried traditional quilting for a brief period. But it was the idea of making wall art with my sewing machine that I was really excited about." Art and design had always piqued her interest, and "the fact

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"Emerald" • 30" × 40"

"I want the hair to be a feature in my work, because the hair—and hair story—is how I started doing portraits."

that I could use a non-traditional tool like a sewing machine to achieve that purpose was fascinating to me."

Since that first encounter with the sewing machine, Clara's artistic abilities have skyrocketed and her business—which incorporates all aspects of her professional training, consulting experience, and artistic prowess—is flourishing. She has also created a body of work that is distinct, cohesive, and incredibly powerful. On the surface, her work is immediately recognizable and focuses on faces, clothing, texture, and setting. But those are just the outward things we see when looking at a 'Clara Nartey' art quilt. Behind every stitch, each quilt tells a story—and sometimes those stories deeply move viewers in ways she never would have expected.

For example, one of Clara's goals is to focus the viewer's attention—to examine her portraits and see the humanity of the person portrayed. "I want the hair to be a feature in my work, because the hair—and hair story—is how I started doing portraits." The quilt documenting her own hair journey was about accepting her natural hair texture and building a positive self-image. That piece led to more work intended to counter negative stereotypes about Black hair and represent it beautifully in art. She once hung an exhibit of quilted portraits in a local high school and the response from the young girls who saw themselves represented in those quilts was tremendous. "It motivated me to keep doing portraits" and continue this important work of representation and telling stories of strength and diversity.

Clara's process in creating these intimate portraits begins with a reference photo that she alters and manipulates digitally. The resulting image evolves into an entirely unique piece of physical fiber art. "A simple way of describing my process is saying that my works are thread-painted, digital paintings. I do hand-guided digital painting of my portraits, which means I'm not using digital tools to manipulate my reference photo so that a computer program generates an image for me." It is all her work!

How does she do it? She works on an iPad to make a rough sketch of the position and proportions of the facial features. "Then looking at the photo on my phone, I start shading the grayscale values that I observe onto my iPad." She always paints the face in grayscale before adding color. "Painting this way has taught me to have great observational skills. What I paint is what I see, not what a computer sees." After working on the face, she moves onto the hair. "Here, I get to be a hair stylist. Painting hair usually takes a lot of time—usually several hours."

The next step is to focus on the clothing. Since her work is all digital, she has no fabrics to create the clothes, so she designs those as

well. "This presents me with opportunities to influence the narrative of the piece. A major decision I like to make when designing fabrics for the clothes is what symbolism do I want to embed in the fabrics. How can I use the fabrics to help me tell the story of this piece of work? I then use illustration software and design the fabrics to 'dress' my figures. Here, I get to be a fashion designer—matching colors, prints, and accessories. When all this is done, I send the digital files of the fabric designs and digitally painted figures to Spoonflower for printing. That is the end of phase one—the digital painting phase."

Finally, the stitching. "When my printed fabric arrives, I use quilting techniques to create a quilt sandwich and embroidery techniques to stabilize the fabric and prepare it for the heavy thread painting. In this phase, threads are my paint. Going by some estimates, I use a couple thousand yards of thread on each piece. I use a variety of thread colors to stitch details and to add texture onto my figures. I stitch so close that it's more like machine embroidery than quilting and all of that harkens back to my embroidery days."

So which comes first: quilt design or the story behind the quilt? Clara responds, "I'd say it's a collaboration between the story ***I want to tell*** with the piece, and the story *the piece wants to tell* the world." Sometimes, she begins with a story and as she works, the piece moves in a different direction as it evolves. "Other times, I start with just a loose idea without a strong story in mind" and eventually, the story bubbles to the surface. How the final work is viewed is also part of the process. Viewers might have an entirely different response than expected. "So, the story behind the works are truly collaborations between myself, the work itself, and what the viewer sees."

Making and exhibiting amazing artwork are not the only ways Clara has made an impact. While many artists focus on just one income stream, Clara has developed a business that encompasses creating art, teaching, coaching, showing, and selling prints. Her website is

Gem Quilts

The portraits featured in this article are from Clara's series *Hidden Gems*.

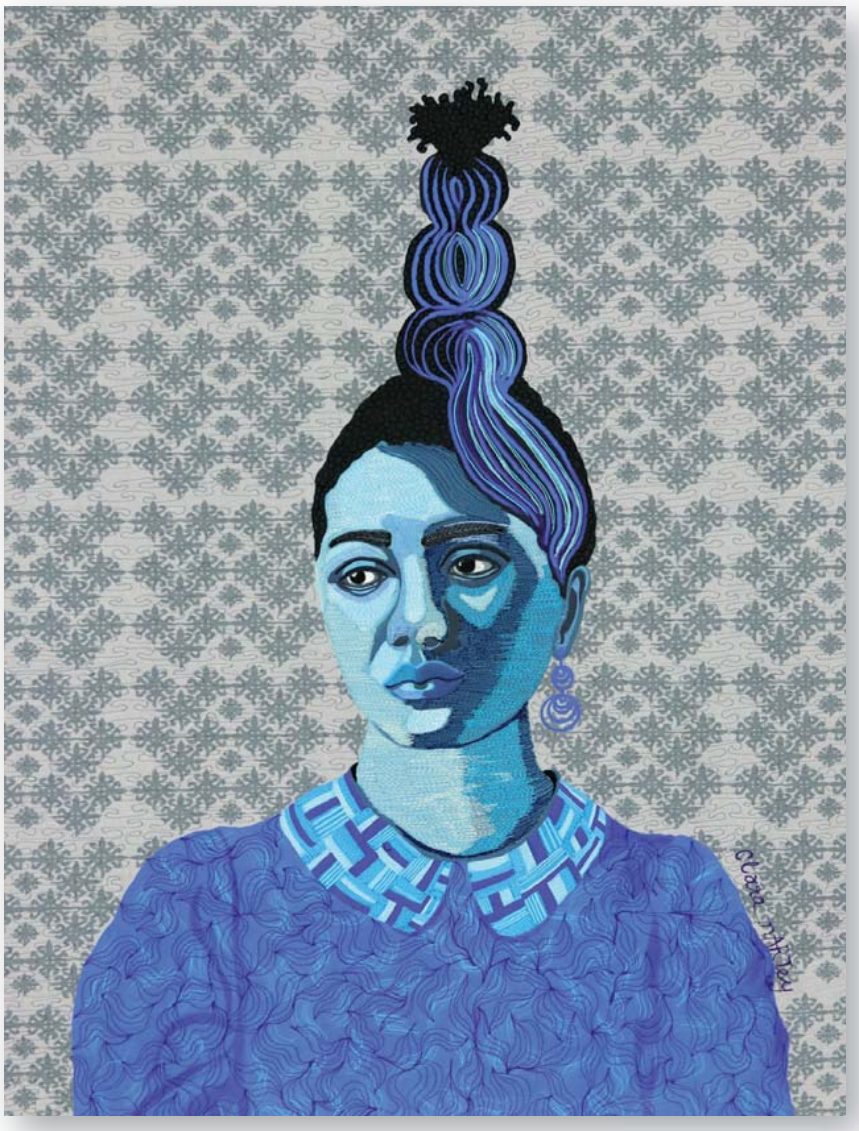
"In this ongoing series, I explore the different shades, facets, and color ranges of precious gems as a metaphor for humans of different races. Different, but each one equally precious.

"The portraits are created with a wide range of ink colors—painted digitally, printed onto fabric, then stitched with colorful threads including variegated threads for the first time in my portraits. The Adinkra symbol for Siamese crocodiles is used in the background of each piece. The story behind these mythical Siamese crocs references unity and highlights the absurdity of fighting each other when they're joined together at the belly."

Learn more about this series at **claranartey.com.**



"Rhoda" • 30" × 40"



Above: "Sapphire" • 30" × 40"

Right: "All Lit Up" • 30" × 40" This quilt is from The Joy of Living *series.*

> "I don't ever want to stop experimenting as an artist."

clear and colorful, and her blog is inspiring. She's found a professional 'sweet spot' of maintaining a studio practice as well as guiding others on their creative journey. When asked about her multilayered approach, she is forthcoming.

In addition to being an artist, "I have a degree in business management. But the thing about art and money is that society has created this perception that art that has anything to do with money or business is not pure art. (Bear in mind, this is the same culture that tells creative people that they'll starve if they choose to become artists.) So, what are creative people expected to do? Starve or find ways to make artwork for them? I believe multiple income streams can help alleviate that stress and provide some financial security to help artists focus on pursuing their crafts so they can create amazing works that impact the world in so many meaningful ways."

She continues, "Even for established artists, income from art isn't always consistent—there are months you'll make more money than others, and months where you'll earn nothing. I think a lot of artists are not able to have the mental space to grow into the great artists they could become because of all the financial stress associated with being a professional artist."

Ultimately, Clara wants her work to leave a legacy as she learns and grows as an artist. "My artistic goal is to evolve so much that ten years from now I'll look back at my work today and be amazed. I don't ever want to stop experimenting as an artist. In addition, I want to have helped train a group of textile artists who are professionally doing very well in the art world."

To learn more, visit **claranartey.com**.

