Crowning achievement

HOW A SERIES ABOUT BLACK HAIR WAS BORN

by Clara Nartey

Every piece of art has a story behind it. The story behind *The Black Crown Series* starts in 2020, when I developed a new artistic style.

My new style involves drawing portraits on a digital tablet; printing them on fabric; and then, using my sewing machine and many different embroidery threads to add details, dimension, and texture to the work. Within this new approach, I also started a new series, which is a collection of portraits of Black women. It highlights and celebrates the various hairstyles we wear, especially those not often depicted in main media sources.

I like to work in series for so many reasons. The process helps me delve deeper into a topic, tell a single story from different points of view, explore a technique in more depth, and, ultimately, create a cohesive body of work.

The idea for this series originated from my personal journey. I had slowly started questioning my adherence to Eurocentric standards of beauty. Consequently, I wondered why I needed to wear my hair straight and long in order to be considered professional or acceptable in society.

After years of mentally resisting this idea that women are judged by their appearance in ways that limit their ability to be themselves, it came to a head one day in the hallways of a New England school campus. I saw a Black woman sitting by herself, wearing her natural hair, in its original texture, not straightened nor treated with chemicals—simply the way it naturally grew from her scalp. As I looked at this woman, I saw how poised and beautiful and almost defiant she looked in her beauty. In that moment, something happened to me. I immediately knew I didn't want to go back to straightening my hair. I wanted to embrace my authentic self and wear my natural, coily textured hair just as I was born with it.

In order to express this new hair journey, I created the first piece in the series, *Chance Meeting*. This piece is an homage to the lady I saw in the hallway who gave me the confidence to start my natural hair journey. It depicts the way she was wearing her hair when I saw her.

After that, I created *Coils and Shells*, which references the first time I was confident enough to wear my natural coily hair in an Afro and not in a bun as seen in *Chance Meeting*. Subsequently, I started creating portraits of other Black women in different hairstyles, because I came to understand that this was not just my personal story, it is our collective story. It is the story of all women—specifically Black women. It is the story of trying to live as true to your authentic self as you possibly can.



Chance Meeting
40 x 30 inches | 2020



Chance Meeting
Detail



Coils and Shells
40 x 30 inches | 2020



Mama's Hopes and Dreams
63 x 47 inches | 2022

It's the story of no longer being stressed by the demands to conform to societal standards of beauty. It is about finally resisting the urge to become and embracing being.

When I start work on a series, I start with an artist statement for the series. This usually contains a few sentences about my ideas for what the series is about; the story I plan to convey; and what thread is going to run through each piece in the entire series. Writing each of these things down prior to starting provides a lot of guidance for what direction the series will take. It serves as a guardrail for the series without creating hard and fast rules which make it difficult to wiggle around.

Some decisions were made right off the bat at the beginning of this series. A few I tweaked as I became more familiar with the direction the work was going. From the beginning, I knew I wanted about a third of the surface area of each piece to be covered with the hair of my subject. I wanted the hairstyles to be the main feature in each piece I created. I also wanted each piece to tell a story about a person or group of people.

In terms of design, I wanted to create contrast between the subject and the background. Moreover, I didn't want the viewer to just see hairstyles. I wanted the viewer to feel the presence of the human being in the work. So, I made a decision to draw big and bright eyes to grab the viewer's attention.

In terms of technique, I decided to intensely focus my thread work on the face of my figures and to use thread to simulate the texture and coily nature of untreated Black hair.

When it came to colors, I decided that since the series is a celebration of womanhood as well as freedom from societal requirements and expectations, I would use bright colors. Another reason I chose to use bright colors in this series is my African heritage. Growing up in Africa, I was surrounded by bold and vibrant colors.

Embracing my authentic self means embracing all of the different parts of whom I am, including my African heritage. In my African heritage, fabrics are used for storytelling as well as memorializing major life events like birth, marriage, and death. I wanted to honor that tradition in the works that I created. One of the ways fabrics are used in my storytelling heritage is by incorporating symbols in the cloths. In almost every Black Crown piece, there are African symbols called Adinkra symbols.

Adinkra symbols originated with the Akan people from Ghana during the early 1800s. Now, they're used all over Africa and around the world. Many Adinkra symbols depict radial or reflective symmetry of shapes. The symbols express concepts, and wise sayings related to life, death, and everything in between—from interpersonal relationships to politics.

These symbols are stamped as patterns onto fabric or carved into wood, furniture, metal works, architecture, or pottery. The earlier works of renowned contemporary artist El Anatsui involved carving Adinkra symbols into wooden trays.



Examples of Adinkra symbols used in the backgrounds of Mama's Hopes and Dreams *and* Charleena.



Charleena
40 x 30 inches | 2020

Block printing is the authentic technique for creating Adinkra cloth. A piece of Adinkra cloth made in 1817, which is part of the permanent collection of the British Museum, is believed to be the oldest piece still in existence. Adinkra-cloth printing involves carving stamps out of Adinkra symbols. Then, natural dyes are created by boiling the barks and roots of trees over several days. Dipping the carved Adinkra stamps into the thickened natural dyes, patterns are then stamped onto woven cotton fabrics.

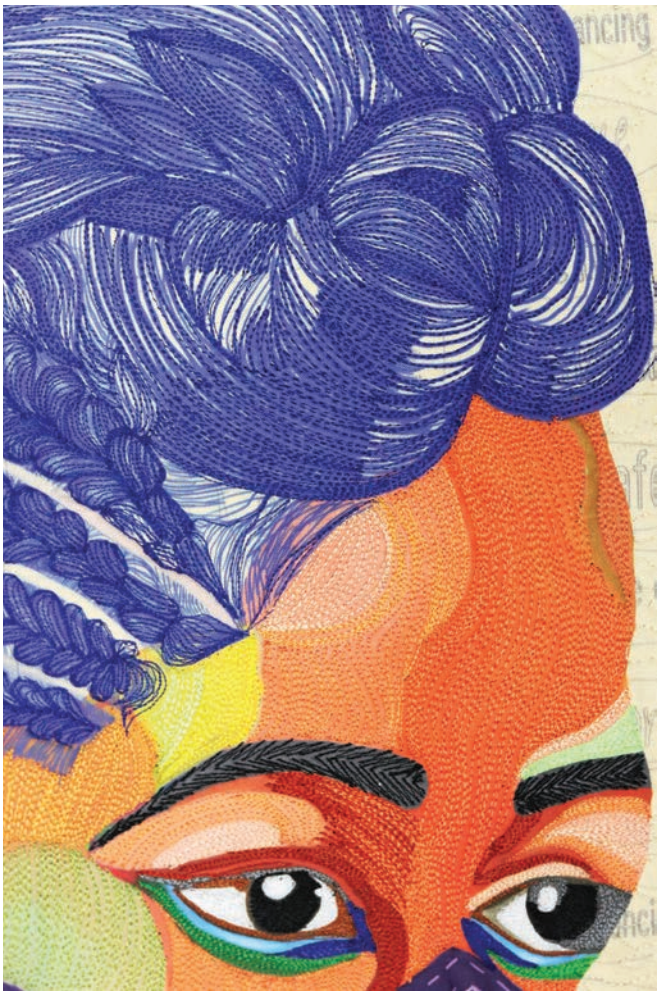
Similarly, in my work, I create fabric patterns to help me tell stories. I start by choosing which Adinkra symbol will best help me tell the current story. Other times, I will design my own original symbol. Next, using that single motif, I'll create a pattern, sometimes by adding other elements or by repeating and organizing the same motif in pleasing geometric patterns to cover the surface in my computer drawing program. I use the



Hats Don't Fit
40 x 30 inches | 2020



Essential Worker
40 x 30 inches | 2020



Essential Worker
Detail

resulting fabric as the background for my portraits or for the clothes my subject wears.

For example, when you look at *Mama's Hopes and Dreams*, I used an Adinkra symbol for hope, providence, and faith. This symbol fits in perfectly with the story of how a mother has great hopes and dreams for her children irrespective of how well she's able to make those dreams come to pass. Here, I deconstructed the original symbol as well as combined it in different configurations to create the background pattern.

In *Charleena*, which tells the story of a young pregnant Black woman who was killed by the police, I used an original symbol that I created myself. Charleena had four children and was pregnant with her fifth when she died. I created a symbol which I nicknamed the hug to represent Charleena hugging her children. In the background fabric I designed for this piece, I included five hug symbols, one for each of Charleena's children.

Creating work in a series that embraces my authentic self has made my art practice more meaningful. It has become so much easier to articulate why I do what I do. Each work is personal, each story is dear to me.

My intention with all the works I've created for this series is to counter the negative stereotypes about Black hair which are prevalent in our society. The most pivotal moment in my art career occurred when I exhibited my work in the art gallery of a high school. After viewing my work, students wrote essays in response. They wrote about issues of belonging, identity, and difficult relationships. I was moved when I realized the deep emotions my work had evoked in the students. It forever changed how I view my work. My hope is that, as they see their hair represented in beautiful and positive ways, these works will help build the confidence of young Black girls and women. ■

Clara Nartey is a SAQA member who resides in West Haven, Connecticut. She is an artist who creates video lessons to teach artists about professional development. Learn more about her at www.claranartey.com