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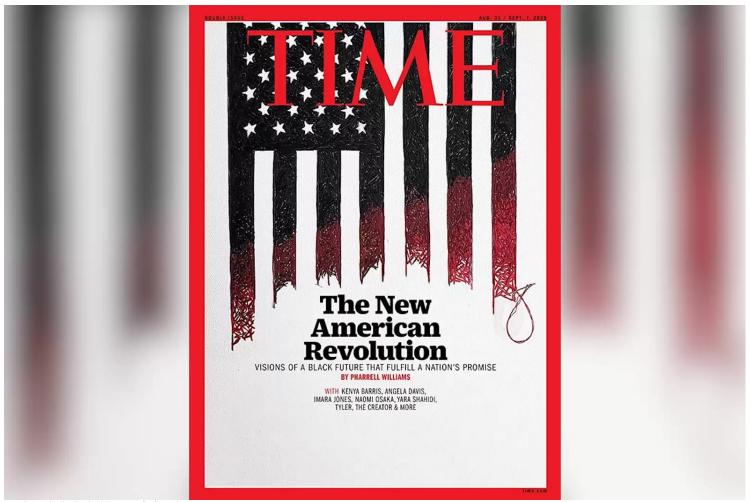
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Meet The Artist-Activist Whose George Floyd Portrait Captured Black Lives Matter Ethos

Nneka Jones' hand-embroidered depiction of an American flag for TIME was completed over the span of 24 hours.

By Aliya Karim

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Nneka Jones hand-embroidered the American flag for TIME's Aug. 31-Sept. 7 issue. | TIME MAGAZINE

 $For TIME's \ latest issue, "The \ New \ American \ Revolution," the \ magazine \ \underline{commissioned} \ Nneka \ Jones \ to \ embroider \ its \ cover.$

The 23-year-old self-described activist-artist has spent years using her artwork to spark conversation around various social justice issues. Her 2018 "Sex Target" series used condoms and paint to depict survivors of sexual abuse and trafficking.

More recently, Jones began exploring the medium of embroidery on canvas, sharing her process of stitching portraits on Instagram. But it was her <u>stunning painting of George Floyd</u> that caught the eye of TIME's international art director, Victor Williams.

Jones came to the U.S. from Trinidad and Tobago to pursue her BFA at the University of Tampa; she graduated this spring.

 $Below\ is\ a\ conversation\ between\ Now This\ and\ Jones\ about\ her\ work.\ This\ interview\ has\ been\ edited\ and\ condensed\ for\ clarity.$

How do you use your art for activism and social justice?

After I had officially graduated, I realized that most, if not all, of my work was created with the intention to evoke some kind of change or bring awareness to a specific issue. And so it was really after graduation that I identified that I was an activist-artist.

What I mean by that is I'm not just creating artwork for aesthetic pleasure, for having the artwork hang on the wall. And [instead I'm] trying for it to go beyond that, so that it creates some kind of connection with the viewer and forces them to reflect within themselves, but also reflect with other people so that it starts that conversation of whatever the issue [that's]

being highlighted, whether it's racism or colorism or sexual abuse.

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What was it about this medium — embroidery on canvas — that called out to you?

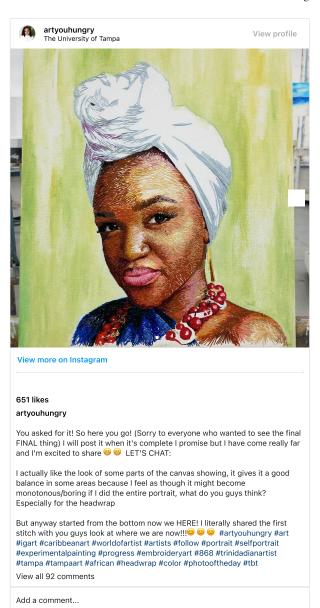
I was doing a lot more research on what kind of materials I can use to create that kind of effect just because I've always been into hyper-realistic painting and capturing the essence of a person. That's my main goal when I'm doing a portrait.

I discovered a couple of embroidery artists that use different fabrics and embroidery thread and just textiles on the whole.

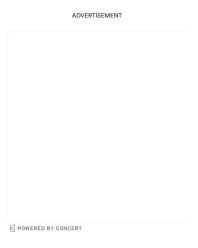
And I said, you know what? Why not try and experiment with it?

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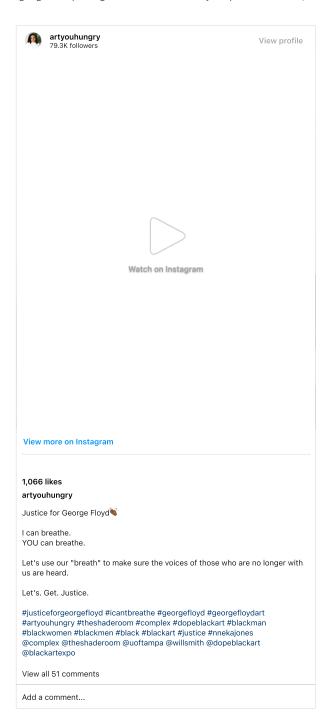
The first-ever hand-embroidered piece that I completed was a <u>portrait of myself.</u> I usually document my process of any type of art that I do, whether it's a sculpture or a drawing or painting, and I put that process on Instagram. A lot of people were like, "oh my gosh, I thought this was a painting [until I] saw the process of you actually hand-stitching it."



My work evolved from identifying that I could use different materials and different textures to create this meaning, that I could manipulate whatever material, [even] thread, to capture the essence of this person and still communicate the same messages.

How did this TIME-commissioned piece come to be?

After George Floyd's death, I had seen the video. And it made me cry. I felt like if I was referring to myself as an activist-artist, I had to do something. And what I do is make art. So I decided that I was going to do a painting of him. I sat down that day and painted four hours, recorded a video, and posted it to my Instagram.



That [took off] on Instagram, as well as Facebook and other social media platforms, because a lot of people wanted to not only bring awareness to the incident that had happened with regard to police brutality, but also [wanted to] remember him in a beautiful way, in the way that he was seen by his family and friends.

Victor saw the video, and he emailed me. He said he was very interested in having me work with TIME and collaborate with them on a project. But that project actually fell through.

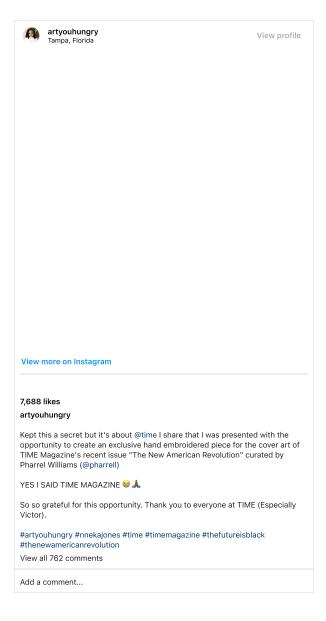
This is now the second time that Victor has reached out to me. He reached out to me and told me about another project, but [he said], "We need it to be hand-embroidered. I've seen your hand embroidery work. And I think it's going to fit with the theme with this issue."

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We went back and forth with ideas up until Monday of the week that it needed to be produced. So I had only 24 hours, and usually hand embroidery takes me a week to a month to produce. So it was crazy.

What do you see when you look at this piece?

The piece is symbolic of a very optimistic and intentional future that's shifting towards equality, and literally showing that it's a work in progress towards a more close-knit future.



If you look at the piece, you see that at the very top of it is a block stitch, it's very closely-knit together. You can barely see the canvas. But as your eyes travel down the piece, you can actually see more of the stitches, and the needle is physically left, stabbed into the canvas.

It's showing that this is something that's a work in progress, it's something that needs to be done. But it takes time. It's not something that's gonna happen overnight, and in order for it to happen, there need to be more opportunities for Black visionaries and leaders and creatives, to be uplifted.

This issue of TIME examines, as singer Pharrell Williams wrote, the "Black vision of the future." As a Black woman, an artist, and an immigrant, what do you see for the future?

For me, this piece not only deals with America, but it also speaks to me on a global scale. I have people right now messaging me from my home in Trinidad and Tobago as well as different places around the world, telling me that the piece represents hope for a better future.

It's people of different ethnicities reaching out to me, not just Black people, not just white people. As a Black woman and as an activist-artist, I felt like I did my part in terms of creating something that speaks without using words. The hand-embroidered stitches show how intentional and how purposeful and hopeful the future would be if everyone makes an effort that reflects on themselves in order to make the future a better one.

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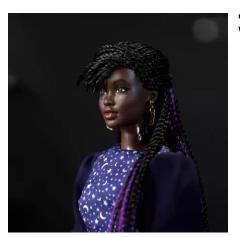




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