

Wise Woman Dyptic 2017

# NELL IRVIN PAINTER

## HISTORIAN / WRITER / ARTIST

Interview by Harryet Candee

Photographs Courtesy of the Artist

*Nell Irvin Painter, the artist formerly known as an historian, author of *The History of White People*, *Old in Art School*, *Sojourner Truth, A Life, A Symbol and Old in Art School: A Memoir of Starting Over* earned degrees in painting from Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers and the Rhode Island School of Design after a Ph.D. in history from Harvard. When not writing essays and drawing self-portraits, she makes artist's books that visualize people and history, often in various residencies. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences since 2007. This past summer, Linda Mussman, Co-Founder of Time & Space Limited in Hudson, New York, introduced me to Nell at the TSL Gallery. It was there that I caught her in a very energized state of mind, busily sorting through and uncovering art work that was to be hung the same day for her opening "A Million Nells: Heedless Self Portraits Over the Years". Nell's work will be on view through October 9, 2022.*

**Harryet Candee:** Your earliest self-portraits became exercises in how to depict a person with dark skin. Tell us the process you went through along the way to get to where you are now with your artwork?

**Nell Irvin Painter:** You're right, Harryet, my self-portraits began as exercises in building my skills as a painter, not much deeper than a question of technique. I knew I wanted to put people in my paintings, and I knew that most of them would be colored differently from people present in art history and as models in my studio classes, where my teachers could help me depict the people in front of my eyes.

Depicting people with dark skin isn't just a ques-

tion of how much alizarin crimson to add to burnt umber. Dark skin is very reflective, and there are more obviously different undertones and overtones in the appearance of dark skin than in light skin, which usually appears to be more matte. And this is just to speak in terms of verisimilitude, which isn't necessarily where I wanted to end my quest. I knew I wanted more than making figures with dark skin look natural. I needed that first level skill before going on to my own means of expression, my own ways of making visual meaning.

But we're still at my starting point: how to paint people with dark skin. That would call for a lot of practice. But none of the models in my painting

classes at Mason Gross or RISD were dark skinned. I turned to the model I had always on hand: me. That's where my self-portraits began, but there was more to it at the very beginning: skin color.

For me as a Black American, colorism and its corollaries also carry heavy baggage. I'm dark skinned, proudly dark skinned, so I didn't want to depict myself as lighter than "I am." But "I am" isn't some crayon color captured unchangingly in wax. "I am" depends on the light, first of all, and also on the season of the year. "I am" markedly darker in August than in March. Add in the still current preferences inflected by colorism—when light skin appears more beautiful than dark skin—





Plantains Solarized 2010

I had to tiptoe around the “I am.” If I were to use another person as a model, there might be issues of lightness and darkness as expressions of beauty and personal value. Another reason, besides my always being on hand, to use myself as a model. I don’t care how I depict me.

As I practiced up using myself as model, I really enjoyed playing with color and composition, quite apart from capturing “I am.” And that’s what you see in the “heedless self-portraits from over the years.” The playfulness you see in those portraits reflect the freedom I feel with regard to personal appearance and its many meanings, meanings made by me, the creator, and meanings made by you, the viewer.

**What mediums do you most favor using in creating your art work?**

NIP: I work back and forth between my hand and my computer, manual + digital, which you see most clearly in the self-portraits I made in 2017. The earlier ones are mainly acrylic, ink, and collage, made entirely by hand, though Self-Portrait Triptych, 2011, is 2/3 digital, the black and white panels, made off the matrix of the hand-made 1/3 in color.

I started working digitally while in graduate school at RISD, when I felt my eye to be visually cramped by discursive meaning—the kind of meaning we express in words. One of the great things about Photoshop is its mindlessness. Photoshop’s pixels don’t care which pixels are beside them, and its sense of history ends when I turn off my computer. And then there are the accidents I can’t necessarily plan. All in all, a fine means of loosening up my eyes and my hand.

I still work manually and digitally, even when, as most recently, my art relates to my writing. I made several new works to go into my forthcoming essay collection *I Just Keep Talking*, from Doubleday in late 2023 or early 2024.

In terms of scale, I have been moving around a great deal since 2019, meaning that my materials need to be portable. I’ve been working on 12” x 9” paper in graphite, ink, tusche, and collage, plus, of course, my computer. I want to return to acrylic on larger supports, say 24” x 20” paper, but that will mean staying put somewhere for some time.

**Have your philosophies and thinking changed since becoming a visual artist?**

NIP: Much has changed, so much that I dedicated

an entire chapter of my 2018 book *Old in Art School: A Memoir of Starting Over* to the relationship between history history (my old means of expression, in text) and art school (where I was learning and practicing new means of expression, in images.) To be succinct here about something I’ve dedicated several pages to, I can say that I now embrace fictional means of expression, whereas the historian in me writes nonfiction. My nonfiction writing these days is much looser than it used to be, I have to say.

**From all the art you have created this far, what particular ones come to mind that have led to an epiphany?**

NIP: In the summer of 2010, between my 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> years of art graduate school, I found my process of working back and forth between the hand of the computer. I made a series of Plantain and Unfashion paintings in that new way that opened up my own path. Unfashion 9 even includes collage from the manuscript of my then newly published book *The History of White People*, which meant freeing myself from my art school teachers’ prohibition against text.

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Unfashion 9 2010

My Unfashion and Plantain paintings opened the way for me to make digital collages, which I have continued to make to this day. Here's a drawing I made this spring at Yaddo to go with my Sojourner Truth essay in my forthcoming essay collection.

**What part of your formal education do you believed mattered most in becoming who you are today?**

NIP: My formal education exists in three parts: undergraduate education at the University of California-Berkeley in anthropology, graduate education at UCLA in African history and in American history at Harvard, and my art school education at Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers and the Rhode Island School of Design. Anthropology taught me the crucial distinction between culture and biology; African history taught me particulars of the various African peoples and their various histories; art school taught my hand to work with my eye and the distinction between visual meaning and the discursive meaning of writing history. I needed it all.

I should add the other absolutely essential part of my education, which was living abroad, first for my junior year of college in France then in Ghana

for two years after I graduated from Berkeley. I've often said that living in a racist society drives you crazy, and if I'm at all sane, it's thanks to living elsewhere.

**Nell, what do you enjoy doing in your leisure time?**

NIP: I've been knitting since the 1980s, before I went to art school, even before Sojourner Truth taught me to look beyond words for meaning. I started knitting out of love of the textures and colors of yarn. I keep knitting for colors and textures and also for the soothing rhythm of hand work and the satisfying objects I make and, sometimes, share.

**Nell, do you find that the ways in which you relay your messages as a visual artist are sometimes filled with familiar and uncertain challenges?**

NIP: At first there weren't many non-visual messages in my art. I was simply building my skills and learning what I could do through mark-making. I did want to impart discursive meaning, which my art school teachers discouraged, perhaps rightly. In any case, it has taken me a decade to pull the various meanings together in ways that

satisfy my eye and my thoughts. Abstraction and digital tools helped immeasurably.

**Who has been a strong artistic force for you in becoming an artist?**

NIP: Two painters, now both deceased, helped enormously: Denise Thomasos and Emma Amos. In addition, I knew from my own academic experience that in art school there would be other women, older women, who had already experienced the frustrations, fought the battles, and learned techniques for survival, and who would help me navigate art schools' terrain. I have always done the work and showed up on time. I knew those women would recognize my worth, even if at first I didn't know them personally. I was right.

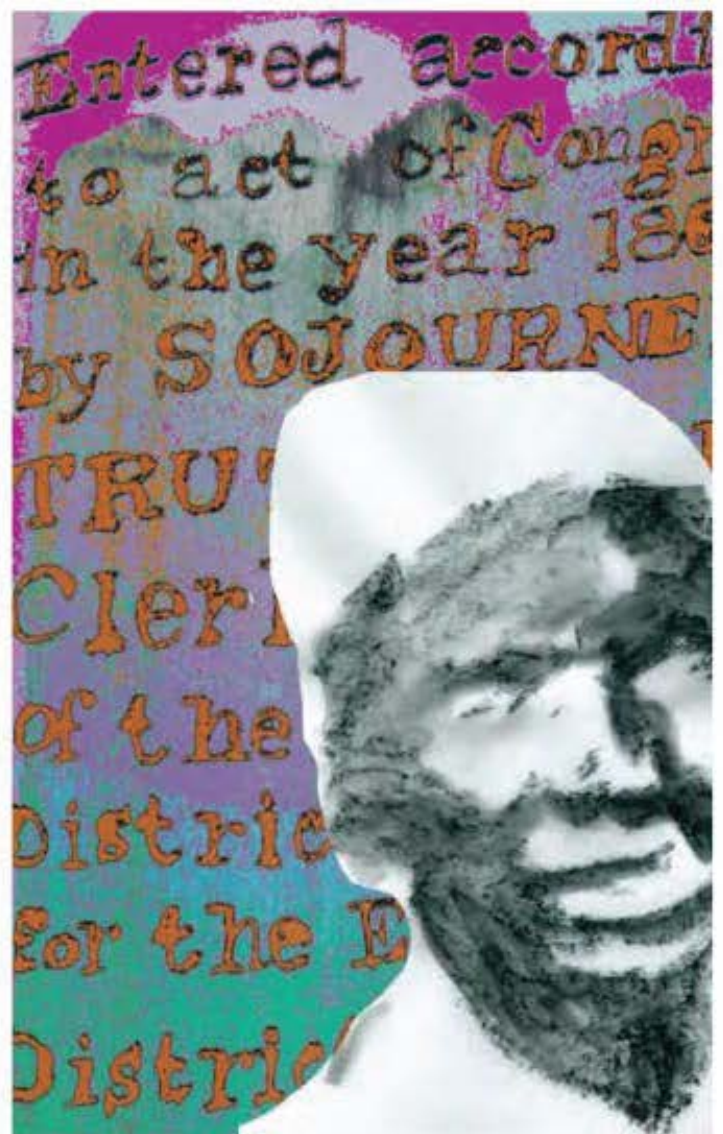
**How has the tasks of marketing and promoting your art to the public been so far? Many artists do not like going to the public arena to promote their art even though there are so many ways of doing it these days.**

NIP: I have been very fortunate in so many ways, two I can mention here. First, I was already well known as a person in the world, if not in the art world. I didn't have to create a public persona





William Still *Triptych* 2022



Sojourner Truth *Pink Green Tusche* 2022

from scratch. Second, my art doesn't have to support my life, so I don't have to scramble for sales or try to meet external market needs. My art has sold steadily if modestly, which is satisfying.

I'm on Instagram (regularly) and Facebook (sporadically) to let people know what I'm doing and making, as a writer as well as a visual artist. I especially enjoy Instagram as a means of staying in contact with old and new "friends" in a medium that encourages spontaneity.

**In what ways have you experienced the simple joys of being an artist?**

NIP: Last March I was in Philadelphia at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in a short printmaking residency with the Brodsky Center. Coincidentally the Historical Society of Pennsylvania had asked me to comment on an object in its collection that was going into a coffee-table book commemorating HSP's 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I chose William Still's journals documenting the arrival of hundreds of people self-emancipating themselves from enslavement. The contents of the journal are riveting, as is the image of Still's handwriting.

We were still living in the Ironbound neighborhood of Newark, with its heavy Portuguese influ-

ences, including of food, including a wonderfully delicious melon that the local supermarket called, simply, "Portuguese melon." The skin of this melon has a texture that entranced me. I used that pattern, along with images of William Still's handwriting, in my William Still Triptych at the Brodsky Center. As we speak, the master printer, Justine Ditto, is pulling the prints of the third panel of the triptych. It's not the one with Still's handwriting, but it's the only one I have access to right now.

**Can you describe a time in your life that truly defines who you are?**

NIP: Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Oakland, California, my progressive family. My parents were good Lefties, and I still share their politics—pan-African, socialist politics that took them and me to Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana in the mid-1960s. In Ghana I learned to see beyond race, which is practically impossible, even now, in the USA. My essay about being Ghana is in my forthcoming essay collection.

**When our compasses entice us to go on another adventure in life, it's just telling us its never too late to do anything. Do you find this true?**

NIP: I don't think this is true, but you can do a lot later than you might assume. I went to Mason Gross in my mid-60s, which seemed pretty late for starting something that would take six years at a minimum. But I couldn't start that six year undertaking now that I'm 80. I no longer have the strength and stamina to commute from Newark to New Brunswick five days a week for three years or to move to Rhode Island and paint standing up seven days a week for two years.

Sure, I can still write and paint and draw—after my essay collection, I have another book contract for a new personal biography of Sojourner Truth. But writing a new biography isn't as strenuous as making big paintings and moving them around.

**What books have you found to be really good?**

NIP: In 2021 I chaired the nonfiction jury of the National Book Awards, starting with winnowing 670 books down to a long list of ten, then five finalists, and then one winner. There were a lot of really good books. The final winner was Tiya Miles's *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family's Keepsake*. The book is beautifully illustrated and written as history and as an account of women's handicraft. In addition, *Continued on next page...*  
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Black Nells with Fabric 2017



Self Portrait 2011

I can recommend any of the books on our long and short lists.

In terms of fiction, I'm now reading Alice Elliott Dark's *Fellowship Point* on a family's decisions about a beloved Maine place held in common. The protagonists are women my age facing issues I face, and the writing is insightful and satisfying.

**Tell us about your closest loved one in your life?**

NIP: Well, that's easy. My closest loved one is my husband, Glenn Shafer, a historian of probability to whom I've been married for nearly 33 years. Glenn and I met as hotshot scholars at Stanford and bonded over being academic misfits. Glenn is smart—a lot of people are smart. But he's also thoughtful, insightful, and emphatic. He perceives our country and our lives within it with deep understanding.

**Tell us about the paintings that were selected for the TSL Gallery October show, "A Million Nells: Heedless Self Portraits Over the Years"?**

NIP: I decided to show a series of self-portraits out of vanity and sheer pleasure. I've enjoyed making self-portraits since art graduate school at

RISD more than a decade ago, but I'd never before had an opportunity to exhibit several together until the lovely invitation from TSL. Given the size of the TSL venue, I reckoned I needed large-format prints. Then it was a question of the number and, considering the size of the space, we settled on 17. There was also how much large reproductions would cost. Claudia Bruce supplied the very apt subtitle, *Heedless Self-Portraits from Over the Years*.

I wanted to show the range of my mediums, compositions, and palettes, then Linda, Claudia, and I curated the arrangement, so that kindred pieces worked together. The two distinct pieces, *Blue Nell on Kaiser* on Jacob Lawrence and *Self-Portrait Skeleton*, strike different notes, so they greet you as you enter the space.

**Do you have a favorite music venue you enjoy listening to? Do you listen to music while you work?**

NIP: I don't tend to listen to music when I'm at leisure or when I make art, but every week Glenn and I listen to Afropop Worldwide and enjoy learning about music, usually new music, from around the African diaspora. I have worn out my

Abbey Lincoln and Tribalistas CDs, plus my laptops don't have CD readers any more.

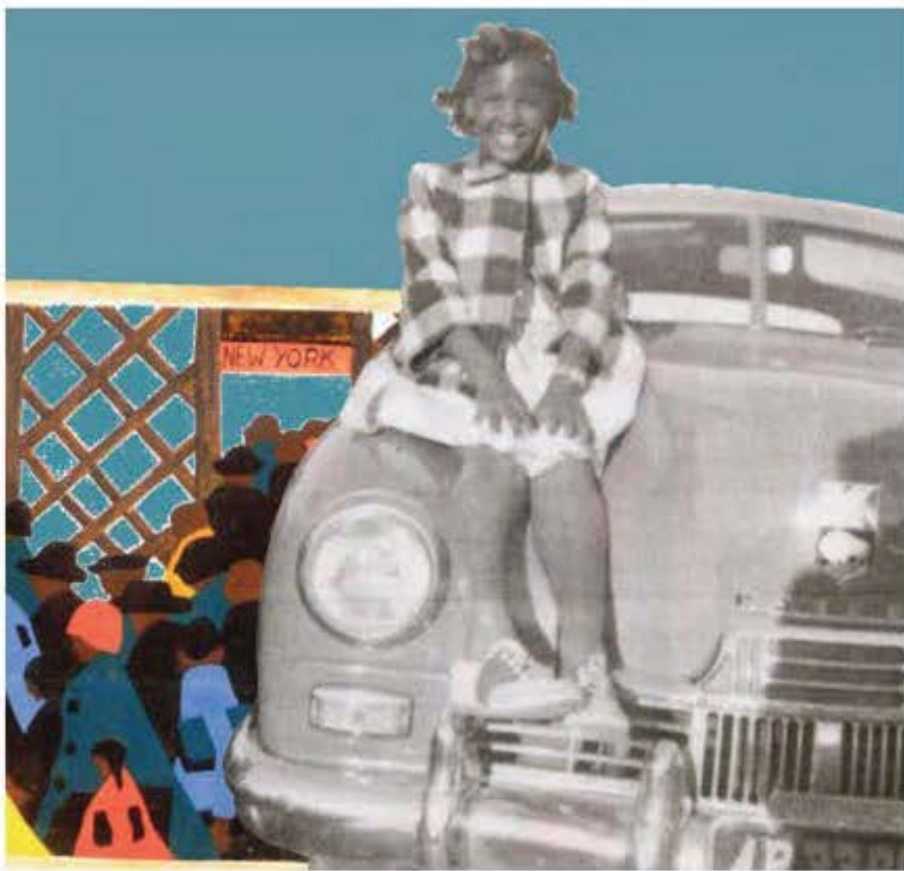
**When it's time to settle down with a cup of tea in a comfy chair, what thoughts often cross your mind?**

NIP: I think about my mother. She didn't want to die; actually, she looked forward to being a widow. But congestive heart failure cut her down at 91, while my father lived to nearly 98. My mother started a new life as a writer at 65, and used the forbidden word *old* in the title of her second book. Two gifts (of many) from her to me.

**Can you introduce us to some of your ideas you have written down about the year of Great Upheaval 2020, and, what direction do you think the world is now heading in? Do you feel you have enough positive energy to spread to your followers?**

NIP: Those words are on my website [www.nellpainter.com](http://www.nellpainter.com) and will be in my forthcoming essay collection. Unlike many of my friends, I appreciate our post-2020 times even though they're scary. For the first time in my long life, I feel that my fellow Americans—those I'm in touch with, at





Blue Nell as Girl on Kaiser on Jacob Lawrence 2022

least—see the USA and its history pretty much as I have done forever. I no longer feel like an alien in my own country. For this sense of having a country, I look to the life sacrifices of George Floyd and so many others for spurring what has been called the “Great White Awakening.”

**What initially gave you the interest to becoming a historian?**

NIP: I was in Bordeaux, France, wondering about the city around me. In high school and college I knew the history I was being taught was—how shall I say?—partial, if not studied with crucial omissions and outright lies. I majored in anthropology as an undergraduate and didn’t approach American history until around 1970, when the field had opened up considerably, and I felt I could contribute to it meaningfully.

**Tell us about your essay you wrote in the Paris Review about black horseback riders in Black Lives Matter protests?**

NIP: My parents were from Texas, my father from the small town (now a suburb of Hous-

ton) of Spring. He grew up writing his horse, and when I was a girl, he and I rode horseback in San Pablo, then a purely rural part of the East Bay. I didn’t continue horseback riding after leaving home, so horses remain in my memory of my youth.

**What are some of your upcoming challenges you see on the horizon?**

NIP: I’m soon to return to air travel for the first time since the spring of 2020, when we got the last plane to anywhere from the Genoa, Italy, airport and the last flight to JFK from Paris. I’m going to Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada (my favorite country) for a group show my work is in. In October I’ll start my new biography of Sojourner Truth, working title of Sojourner Truth was a New Yorker, and She Didn’t Say That, in Ulster County. Once I get a decent draft of the biography, I’ll make new art to go into the book.

*Thank you, Nell!*



Triptyck #1, #2, #3 2011