

Let's Talk About Hair and Art

Nicole Moore



Hair Power was created from the basis of my personal and political lived experiences. However, these lived experiences are derived from a wider cultural, ideological, structural, and historical context that shapes, distorts, and otherwise seeks to alter those lived experiences. My position as an artist was to look through a Black feminist lens, allowing the artwork to avoid becoming a voiceless subject of a White lens. With art, I am able to explore elements of self-identity, cultural identity, personal thoughts, artistic expression, and the meaning of the artwork itself. I can examine and interpret the things that I do with my inner thoughts and feelings, so as to capture deeper, profound life experiences. This contributes towards seeing my role of artist and artistic activity as part of a political, cultural, social, and feminist activism. Art that connects everyday experience with social change or critique and creative expression becomes a vital means of reflecting upon the nature of society and social existence. With this in mind, the aim of Hair Power was to empower viewers and represent those who wear their afro hair in its natural state as well as to encourage those viewers who may need inspiration while thinking of shedding Eurocentric beauty standards.

World Afro Day:

[World Afro Day](#) (WAD) was founded on 15 September 2017 by London-based Michelle De Leon as a platform for celebration and much more. Enraged by a law passed on 15 September 2016, in the Southern US state of Alabama, which allowed companies to deny jobs to people with dreadlocks (also known as dreads or locs), De Leon held the first WAD on 15 September 2017 to mark a law that discriminates against afro hair. WAD has since been endorsed by The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.¹

I was inspired to make the artwork *Hair Power* after being invited to participate as a panel speaker at a World Afro Day event on 15 September 2020: 'Hair Today/Wear Tomorrow.' My presentation included a reading of two poems from my independently published anthology *Hair Power Skin Revolution* (2010).² Later that day, I posted a [photograph](#) of

myself on Instagram, wearing a big afro, taken at Mount Pleasant Hotel gardens, in central London, where I lived/worked between 1976-1978 as a Catering Secretary. In the Instagram caption, I wrote: 'The more we challenge the stereotypes which seek to influence our lives, the more society will be forced to accept us on our own terms and that can only happen when we as Black people collectively share and confront our own fears of wearing our hair the way we want to.'



Hair Power by Nicole Moore

The artistic process:

As a reference for *Hair Power*, I used my own afro comb³ for the design by literally drawing around it, using the comb — a symbolic icon — as a geometric measuring tool to draw/sketch in a similar way a ruler was

used for the marking and positioning of the design. I then lightly sketched and interspersed the remaining images at different angles, so as to display them as a central, focused, and unified entity. I used Crayola Super Tips, a black V7 Hi-Tecpoint pen for fine lines, and the constraints of an A5 portrait size frame. I later erased the frame and extended it to the size of the A4 Crawford & Black sketch pad itself.

The aim was to create an illusion of a three-dimensional form and shape by layering and overlapping the afro combs, placing them in an asymmetrical stylised arrangement so as to arrive at a more dynamic feeling, one that included a sense of rhythm of combs spiralling that led the viewer's eye to view the artwork at a focal point of visual unity and to then look elsewhere. I did not want the afro combs to be geometrically organised in any way. I added more lines on the bottom right to represent elements of the afro comb and to indicate movement.

The idea of a Black Power fist⁴ evolved over a period of a few days. It made sense to incorporate this part of the image at the top so as to make a connection, not just with the power of afro hair, but with the history of how the Black Power fist became an icon overnight; when Tommie Smith and John Carlos protested on the podium at the 1968 Olympics, while the US national anthem was playing, refusing to salute, instead raising their fists up as they bowed their heads to symbolise Black Power. I was only fifteen years of age, yet I felt that power, despite the thousands of miles between the US and Northamptonshire, where I was living at the time.

The rich vibrant background colour scheme of gouache paint in red, yellow, and green developed naturally, so as to make cultural connections with the Rastafari flag,⁵ with my Guyanese heritage, with the history of wearing my hair in dreadlocks between 2006 and 2012, and of wearing my hair in an afro in the 1970s. These Africentric diasporic connections supported my artistic process while making the artwork. The artistic process also included documenting the art method by taking photos at different stages, and by making audio recordings to capture my thoughts and feelings.

The interpretation of abstract or abstract realism⁶ artwork remains open to its viewer. *Hair Power* is now framed and resides with an African Caribbean art collector, Lennox Charles, who I have known for many years. Lennox kindly provided me with a narrative of what the painting meant to him, in terms of the colour scheme, and iconic symbols, stating that:

"I found the colours to be bright and distinctive, like colours used in Ghanaian fashion, based on the African continent with a Caribbean theme. The painting demonstrates how much we as a people should speak up and be counted in the bigger scheme of things, whether we are from the Caribbean or Africa, as there is a sense of Oneness, Earthiness, and a common ground found in our hearts towards nature and toward each other. The Black Power fist symbolises the daily struggles we face yet we remain a force of power. The interlocking combs say that together as a people we are strong, unbreakable, rather than when we stand alone. The heart in the centre of the painting shows that we are or should be of one heart and mind, so that we can stand strong through all that comes our way. The heart also says that we should always show love, even

to those that hate and abuse us, for we are a people of Mother Earth. We keep giving, but God help them the day when we say Enough is Enough!”

The journey of making *Hair Power* was particularly enlightening, especially knowing that I was going to be talking on the WAD event panel, sharing my perspective on afro hair, as well as reading poetry from my [Hair Power Skin Revolution](#) anthology. This opened up my consciousness in the same way a tree flourishes when it blossoms, and the inspiration was enough to motivate me to make the artwork.

Many Black women I have met throughout my adult life have gone through the dilemma of social conditioning that is so dominant in society, that, almost without a thought, it is easy to get tangled up in the ideology that straight hair is something to strive for. Hair discrimination is still particularly rife, especially but not exclusively, in schools all over the UK and continues to affect Black pupils who wear afro hairstyles. Wearing afro hair is typically perceived as unprofessional in corporate settings. Even though UK law protects individuals on the grounds of nine “protected characteristics” including race, age, religion and sexual orientation, the Equality Act 2010⁷ needs amending, since hair is not specifically named as a “protected” characteristic, and as a grey area, is open to discrimination. “This reveals the cultural bias at play in the law and demonstrates a blind spot that ignores one of the defining features of blackness.”⁸ Despite this, a natural hair renaissance has developed within the last ten years, with Black women ditching relaxers and weaves, Black men embracing a more natural textured look, and a growth in Black people wearing dreadlocks. There is no doubt about it, an increasing number of Black people are thankfully embracing their natural hair with pride and challenging those Eurocentric fashion trends that seek to influence their lives. They are discovering that afro hair is beautiful when left to its own devices.

Notes:

¹ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, commonly known as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) or the United Nations Human Rights Office, ‘is a department of the Secretariat of the United Nations that works to promote and protect human rights that are guaranteed under international law and stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. The office was established by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 December 1993 in the wake of the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights.’ — Wikipedia

² Moore, N. (Ed.) (2010) *Hair Power Skin Revolution*, a collection of poems and personal essays by Black and Mixed-Race women.

³ The afro comb is much more than a hair accessory; it is an icon that has long been associated with the 1970s, a time when the Afro represented Black culture and the civil rights movement. It was a time when afros were worn not just as a chic hairstyle but as a political emblem and a signature of unity and a collective identity. According to an exhibition: *Origins of the*

Afro Comb: 6,000 Years of Culture, Politics, and Identity. 'the afro comb dates back to ancient Egypt; the oldest comb from the exhibition's collection is 5,500 years old.'

⁴ 'During a medal ceremony in the Olympic Stadium in Mexico City on 16 October 1968, two African American athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, each raised a black-gloved fist during the playing of the US national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner". In his autobiography, *Silent Gesture*, published nearly 30 years later, Smith revised his statement that the gesture was not a "Black Power" salute per se, but rather a "human rights" salute. The demonstration is regarded as one of the most overtly political statements in the history of the modern Olympics.' — Wikipedia.

⁵ The Rastafari flag consists of three colours: red, yellow, and green. They symbolize the bloodshed of the African people, the natural wealth/gold of the African land and the lush fertile greenery of the African continent.

⁶ Abstract realism is the infusion of the elements of design with the depiction of real life in visual art. According to eHow's definition: "Abstract art is art that does not have a definable focus. It is art that exists through patterns, colours, texture, and line without the need for an external motivation. Realistic art consists of art that aims to replicate nature. When these two elements combine to create an abstract impression of real life, you get abstract realism." When you combine the two concepts of abstract and realism, you also get a new style of art that attempts to depict emotions behind a particular real-life object. The goal of abstract realism involves using painting techniques to slightly distort a real object.

⁷ The Equality Act 2010 is an Act of Parliament of the UK, passed during the Brown Ministry with the primary purposes of consolidating, updating, and supplementing the numerous prior Acts and Regulations, that formed the basis of anti-discrimination law in England. These consisted primarily, the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, the Race Relations Act 1976, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and three major statutory instruments protecting discrimination in employment on grounds of religion or belief, sexual orientation, and age.' — Wikipedia.

⁸ Dabiri, Emma (2020), 'Black pupils are being wrongly excluded over their hair. I'm trying to end this discrimination.' *The Guardian*.