Paintings by Painter

Later, in her 2,200-square-foot basement-level studio on Union Street, Painter MCGA’09 shows her many projects and work areas, from tables covered with paint tubes and brushes, to alcoves full of drawings and paintings, to an office piled high with papers and books—the only space that discloses Painter’s life before she reinvented herself as an artist.

A preeminent American historian, Princeton professor, and author of nine books, including the acclaimed *The History of White People* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), Painter chose to trade in appearances on ABC News, *The Colbert Report*, and PBS for the relative obscurity of being an artist when she applied seven years ago to the Mason Gross School of the Arts in New Brunswick. Deciding to take this late-in-life leap was surprisingly easy, Painter says.

“I was willing to go back and start all over again because I knew there would be older women professors who had fought all these battles and who would understand they had a serious student here who would do the work,” says Painter. “I was taking advantage of women of my generation who had done all the groundbreaking.”

One of them, associate professor Hanneline Rogeberg, remembers first encountering the formidable Painter, who was a returning student and surrounded by classmates who were far younger and not nearly as fully formed. Initially, that mix “caused considerable consternation for many,” Rogeberg says. “Nell came with a kind of expectation of academic rigor and did four times as much work as everyone else. That butted up against how other students reasoned and worked. She was vocally irritated by what she saw as indulgent slop.”

The conflict, and rounds of debate, ended up raising the bar for everyone, says Rogeberg, who remembers the more challenging task for Painter was being able to set aside the empirical approach to learning she employed as a historian and “to invite accidents.”

By 2009, Painter had added her bachelor of fine arts from Rutgers to her long list of graduate degrees from top universities. She has since earned a master of fine arts from the Rhode Island School of Design and served as artist- and scholar-in-residence in Yale’s Department of African-American Studies. After leaving teaching at Princeton in 2002, where she is a professor emerita, Painter and her husband Glenn Shafer, the dean of Rutgers Business School—Newark and New Brunswick, moved to the Forest Hill section of Newark.

Emma Wilcox, cofounder of Newark’s Gallery Aferro where Painter won a coveted slot in the gallery’s residency program, described Painter’s two-woman exhibition this spring as “absolutely wonderful.” Like her time at Rutgers, Painter motivated residents, Wilcox says, and also exposed the gallery to the broader universe that Painter embodies. “Because Nell had lived this rich life before joining our program, she was an advocate for us among people who are policymakers and have power over the city and the state, but who may not have a gallery like ours on their radar,” Wilcox says.

Still young as an artist, Painter says her style is evolving. Her work ranges from bright acrylics to a grisaille palette using charcoal and pencil. Her method involves appropriating historic images and words that she then manipulates before painting or drawing over them to impart a new meaning—not so different from what a historian does. She has produced several series, including the *Black Sea Composite*, which are maps that exaggerate the connections between the nations involved in the slave trade routes; a dozen self-portraits that disguise her true beauty (“my ego’s not tied up in these images, I’m just a handy motif”); and her *Back Man* series, a repetition of male figures that was inspired by an archive of photos by Brooklyn photographer Lucille Fornasieri-Gold, with whom she shared the show at Aferro. On a wall in her studio hangs *The Beauties of Slavery*, an enormous canvas covered in pearlescent silver swirls of paint and a notation crediting her source. It’s more evidence of her role as a historian, a skin she’s not yet ready to fully shed.

“This one has a footnote, and it’s going to stay there,” she says, pointing to the hand-lettered words *American Antiquarian Society*. “When I was a historian, I was always respectful of other people’s works. As an artist, you just take stuff. And that has been very hard for me.”

— Jill P. Capuzzo