

Virtual 
LAVENDER
 **Labels**

NINA CHANEL ABNEY
(American, b. 1982)

Helen with the Drip, 2020

Acrylic and spray-paint on canvas | 48 x 36 in

The Alfond Collection of Contemporary Art at Rollins College,
Gift of Barbara '68 and Theodore '68 Alfond. 2020.1.25

© Nina Chanel Abney

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



Much of our existence is structured by our environment. What if our external perceptions were shed, left behind, as we move in spaces without raced, gendered context? Abney's Helen exists in an idyllic landscape that is both Black and queer, decentering cis-gendered and heterosexual white paradigms historically valued in artmaking.

Part of a series titled, *The Great Escape*, Abney's expression of open and pastoral landscapes reimagines ecologies where humanity is unrestricted, and individuals define themselves.

In this piece, created in 2020, she considered spaces and their expansive nature while the world stayed indoors.

Abney creates a sense of place sans interaction with the built environment to contextualize the human figure, one where intersections of identity can co-mingle.

The freedom of self-definition is acknowledged in its pop-culture referential title: *Helen with the Drip*, pointing to swagger, coolness and style. It sustains the subject's control over their representation and any gaze they receive, disassociating the historical presentation of Black figures and their disenfranchisement on American soil.

Pushing against the acts of a surveillance state disproportionately operating to contain and monitor, this piece is also activating the symbolism of a *memento mori*, or a reminder of the inevitability of death. With a red 'x' over the deer and the heavy presence of a human skull, Abney juxtaposes what is real and what is possible for the black figure with her compelling vision.

Here, we are both confronted and invited
to engage with power dynamics and
gendered presentation in our outer world.

It begs the question:
where (and when) do you feel most free?