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YOU GOTTA NOURISH
TO FLOURISH

Meeting Nina Sweeney

Nina, a newcomer to the Oxfordshire art scene, is an up-and-coming illustrator whose work would brighten the dulllest day – and the darkest moments in life.



She was chosen to design an 11-metre-long mural, sponsored by Nike, to perk up the playground of the school in South Manchester, Button Lane Primary in an area of deprivation where footballer Marcus Rashford spent his early school years. In spring greens and blues with primary red and yellow, it's a celebration of dreams to help children to smile and think big in a place where many children are on free school meals, money is tight, and ambition is all too easily straitened. "Marcus had a dream and for him, it came true," says Nina, "and in the mural, you can see the dreams of the children in thought bubbles. Some are pre-painted, but others are blank so that the real kids can draw in their own ideas whether that's to be a midwife, a fire-fighter, an astronaut or the next Lord Sugar."

Nina herself, as a child always dreamt of being an illustrator, and so she is thrilled to be following this path. She loves to draw, and this is evident in her style – her colourful vivacious illustrations look as if they were fun to do! "They are!" she smiles.

In her mid-twenties, Nina is tuned into the zeitgeist: with a heart-warming palette rich in vibrant pinks and oranges, her vibe is contemporary (and popular on TikTok apparently). With a deliciously relatable style, she captures moments from life – a cup of tea, a pot plant, lemons, and love – alongside edgier messaging: in "It's a dress, not a yes", for example, joyful flower-power colours are teamed with a more serious edge.

"As an art student I loved life drawing classes and I have always liked people and found them fascinating. I'm intrigued by people's characters and their stories and so I find them interesting to draw too. I always enjoyed drawing women and I'm very interested in feminism, equality, and female empowerment. I have both a brother and a sister and it's something we discussed very often and openly as a family when I



was growing up. Then as a teenager and a young adult, you become increasingly aware of everyday sexism, that 'low-level' sexism that's pervasive which is described brilliantly in the book *Everyday Sexism* by Laura Bates. If you haven't read it, you should! That's why I am so keen to give women a voice in my art.

Traditional art is full of women, yet they are mostly objectified on canvas, beautiful maidens rather than real women, while almost all famous artists are men. In contrast, I show real people, everyday women of all shapes, sizes, colours, and interests. And issues too. It's helpful for people to see themselves in art, and see the challenges they face normalised, whether that's sexism, mental health issues or other things drawn and acknowledged. This all sounds very serious," Nina laughs, "but although my designs often have a gentle message or inspirational undertone, my illustrations are mostly friendly and light-hearted.

Generally, I choose to draw people who catch my eye or intrigue me whether they are from history, literature or very often from popular culture. They're often strong characters, pioneering or empowered. For example, just after she died at the end of last year, I drew Betty White, who made her name in the early days of TV and was one of the first women to be both in front of and behind the camera. It was my tribute to a female icon who made it big when things were very different," she says.

Nina is excited to be opening her studio to the public for the first time in May as part of Oxfordshire Artweeks (venue 385; 21st-28th May). She is exhibiting alongside her mum, a potter who creates vessels in pared-down shapes. Thrown on a wheel they are by inspired the natural world and a Scandi simplicity of design. Several other venues will also be open in Clanfield along a village art trail.

See full details at artweeks.org.