

Nixon Leger: Local Artist Creates Palette of Plantains and Possibilities



Abstract. Surreal. Soulful. Musical. Spiritual. African-inspired. Social injustice. Women's beauty. All of these come to mind when we consider the works of North Providence artist Nixon Leger. Look no further than the cover of this issue to see for yourself: Leger chose a piece he calls *The First Regiment*. "I was just looking for something very RI," he explains. "They asked the slaves to fight in exchange for freedom, so they agreed to fight."

Leger hails from Belle Anse, a small town in the southeast of Haiti. The French name translates to "beautiful cove." It was in this picturesque place in the Caribbean that he developed his great passion for art at an early age. After studying under master painters in Haiti, he earned a degree in painting. He believes that painting is another way to share your life.



Leger continues to create amazing works in Providence using acrylic, oil, collage, burlap cloth, canvas, wood and objects found. His style has changed over the years as well: “There’s a fragmentary symbiosis,” says Leger. “A lot of fragmentation. There’s also expression of extractionism, a little bit of realism. This style emerged in 2020 during COVID.”

When Leger first came to the US as an honored artist, he discovered his painting degree would not be recognized. He had to learn English before enrolling at URI, where he earned a degree in studio art in 2017. His creations reflect symbols and images from his native culture, faith and vivid imagination. Having gained recognition for his personification of plantain leaves, he became affectionately known as the “Banana Leaf Man.” Often the heads of his subjects are shaped like the tail of a plantain leaf. “This speaks to my latest movement of people, protestation and insurrection. I use this same style in many of my creations,” he explains. Biomorph social commentary is just one of the many themes Leger employs, however. Many pieces symbolize Black pride, dignity and unity.

Alison O'Donnell (Motif): How is it you came to live in USA/RI?

Nixon Leger: After growing up in Haiti, I tried the other countries in the Caribbean. They suffer. They don't have the opportunities that we have in terms of economy, and politics are the worst. Haiti is one of them that suffers and has been trying to transition in these areas since 1804, so we have a lot of trouble — different presidents, etc. We have poor people, lack of work. The state can't offer them anything better. So many of us have difficulty living well, so you go to school, finish school but you don't really have a future you can count on. Most of us suffer from a lack of work and have to travel to look for a better life. I had trouble with that.

The major reason I traveled was that I wanted to stay in the United States to continue my career in terms of the possibility to paint and eventually sell more. I have more family here in RI. But I want people to know that even though I'm looking for a better life, I'm also looking to show my art because I know if I have the opportunity, I can have success in my life and live better. The major reason is for my career.

AOD: What makes your work unique?

NL: In 2002, I would create a person in banana leaves. I didn't see anyone doing that. It was amazing that I started this process early. The funny thing about it is, after 14 years there would be a Haitian president who had this nickname. Jovenel Moïse had a plantation of plantains, so they called him the banana leaf man too, but I had this name 15 years earlier. They gave me a lot of plantain leaves to produce, so I fell in love with them. But not everyone can paint these. I had to figure out how I could use the leaves to represent something else. I had to sketch the leaves to make them look human. I played with them very early in my work. I don't show the leaves [in the background], I incorporate the leaves into the painting. There is freedom in the pieces. I play with lines, with cloth additions. With the freedom, I can do many things.

AOD: What's your favorite piece and why?

NL: I do not have a favorite. If I had to choose, it would be *Symbiosis Fragmentary (Mutation 67)* because of the process. Some of my paintings I don't show, so I go through the process. This image, I can't recreate it. It just happens. If I lost this painting, it would be *heart-wrenching*. That's the only reason I can answer this question.

[Another special piece is called Unity, which depicts two humans intertwined.] I took everything from the plantain tree. The leaves and the tails — the tail of the plantain — is the shape of the people's heads. If I replaced this, it would be the actual banana.

AOD: What is your artistic process?

NL: I can't choose one. Surrealism and abstract because I love the way surrealism portrays the object because I love them, and abstraction makes me feel like, wow! It may say more than a realist image. My mind sometimes produces them together without knowing. Those two give me a freedom to find myself and do whatever I want. The purpose is for the artist to do his own thing. What can you show the people as to your originality? My style keeps changing, otherwise I would feel like I was in prison.

I don't draw before I paint. Very early I took my freedom to paint because I want to be free. That's why I don't stand on religion, only because I don't have my freedom. I have too many woes to respect. If I

have to do a portrait, I have to make sure the eyes are well done, the light, the shadows. I have to follow the process, so I don't have much freedom. But when I'm free on the canvas, I can go all over with the lines, without judgment, able to produce a beautiful landscape, seascapes, anything. I do photos in that kind of style, in my own understanding. Pictures say more than just a sentence.

I don't consider myself in any specific style because I work by emotion, by what I feel. If I want to do something abstract, if I want to do something in realism, I would take time to do it. It's happened that I have a lot of pictures [that are] abstract and surrealist. That's why most people who see my work assume I'm an abstract painter. I have a range of abstract, a range of abstract mixed with impressionist.

AOD: Do you incorporate a visual hierarchy in your work?

NL: There is a focal point. To me, it's part of creation. It's not something that I just paint. There's a process ... In most of my work, I do a simple background. I put more importance on my abstract than my surrealist work. For me, I'm showing the importance of creativity. I like a picture that says a lot. Look at it, analyze it. But for me, I know some paintings are deep in thought. That's the kind of painting I take pleasure in producing and creating.

Indicating a painting he's titled Next Generation, depicting a woman carrying a son on her shoulders, Leger continues, "Sometimes I consciously do the next generation. They will pave the path for us. The woman is carrying a child. You can see a different way. You can extrapolate the image. This mother is carrying the way for him and for her. If we extend it, this generation is above the next. It would be the same in the process. My kids now already do a lot of things I did as a kid. Things evolve, and their kids will do the same."

AOD: How has your religion influenced your work?

NL: I was born Catholic, and I became Protestant in 1993. In 2016 I stepped back from Christianity. There were subjects not specific to one religion but there were more pictures displaying Christianity before 2016. After a while, I learned more about my story. There's a complication for us in Haiti. We can't embrace our (original) culture. One thing in our culture is Vodou, which is portrayed by many as evil and bad. We don't have a chance to explore and know what it is. You are afraid to ask questions and go on this path. Now what's happened to me in my life, being in church many years, knowing many things, I figure I didn't know the right story about Christianity. I now embrace Africanity. There are many things I didn't know about Africanity since they hid it from us. That's our roots, we're connected to it. During this period of 2016, I would embrace my Africanity. I knew what beauty was, but I then embraced African beauty because scientists/scholars say Africa was the first. If we want to know about religion, we have to go to the first civilization and follow the process of what the correlation is between them. The process of this awakened me from before when I was a Christian.

It was a difficult path because growing up as a civilization we live as Frenchmen because we were colonized by the French, forced to be Christian, so we never embraced our culture. Vodou is a package - the way people live, eat, act in their nature. People tend to see the mysticism only and make it look bad or evil because they don't want you to know about it, but it's a beautiful thing where people respect each other, and nature. If Western civilization tells us something is either good or bad, we tend to believe it. They know what kind of different leaves to take for medicine. This is knowledge: They go to laboratories to make pills but it's from the plants. Even though I was connected by music, at four years old I discovered and consciously portrayed forms of trumpets and drums. Before Passover, the popular band Rara goes throughout the country. Haitians like these sounds. When we have those together it's a

great harmony, but people call it evil.

My quest is to learn more. I don't see Vodou as a religion, because religion is like a cage you have to stay inside and follow the rules. The question of religion is to understand many things. Even in Vodou they're not sure because they made people believe them. It's a good thing when you ask yourself questions. It's an opportunity to have modern knowledge. Without this you wouldn't be able to see the difference in the information. Vodou in Haiti is complicated because it would be mixed with Christianity, the French spirituality. This quest requires information and knowledge because people often do something for a while without knowing why. That's our job as people. We try to understand. It's our job to question, to search for information.

AOD: Favorite places to go in RI?

NL: You would be amazed. When I came to RI, I was Christian and very limited in terms of going into different places... Just church, exhibitions or different types of events and festivals. I didn't explore other places like bars. But I discovered a place on Westminister Street, a space for Salsa on Thursdays, Roots Café (formerly Aurora). You feel like you're welcomed. They talk about music, games. It's a space where artists can go and chat together.

AOD: What does the future hold for you and your work?

NL: I dream to have a space that can handle all my paintings because lack of space puts a wall on your creation. There's sometimes a large canvas you can't show if you don't have space. That's important for artists. You need to create more space for artists because we have many who can't afford a studio. We're happy to say we have a lot of artists in the city but there isn't anything being done to create the opportunity to offer space. If we had a space here in RI for artists to create, people would travel just to visit artists' studios. This is important to the artist.

AOD: How do you choose which pieces to exhibit?

NL: Mostly I choose the ones I think speak to a current theme. I have an African theme, I have a range of religious themes, political injustice. I have a range of new geometric abstraction mixed with surrealism. This particular exhibit [at URI, see details below] is to celebrate my 25 years. People will have a chance to see all of my different styles. My place is too small to show favorites. That would require a larger space to show all the paintings I could choose, so I chose by theme. These best express your time, not favorites.

I use my medium to tell a story, to put out things that people can see. One of the two big pieces in the exhibition is called *The Wait*. The other one is a piece portraying a small group of people using violins to change people because they've been so affected by terrorists and let a few people dominate them and suffer. That's what we're experiencing in Haiti right now. People are terrorized en masse. I can't say anything where people will hear me, but I use my painting to express myself. Hopefully, this will reach a large population instead of just friends on Facebook. It's happening all over, it's the reality of the world. When I do something, we have a different way to see it.

You can see these amazing works of art for yourself. Leger is currently holding an exhibit, free and open to the public, which celebrates 120 pieces of his work over the past 25 years:

URI Providence Campus Urban Arts and Culture Programs present CELEBRATING NIXON LEGER! 25

Years of Art From Haiti to Rhode Island: A Solo Exhibit, which runs through Feb 24, Mon-Thurs 9 - 9, Friday 9 - 5. Gallery Reception to be held Feb 17 from 6 - 8pm, featuring an artist talk, celebrity guests and the music of Sidy Maga. events.uri.edu

For more information on Leger, visit his home page at nixonleger.com.