

# CONVERSATION WITH AISLINN FINNEGAN

Artist of the Region for Southern Africa



Aislinn Finnegan is a mixed media artist. Aislinn's work is an afro-futuristic personal response to the perceived lack of representation of black women that she has come across over various forms of media and art. As a woman of mixed-race heritage (Zambia and Ireland) she concentrates on concepts of race, identity, and femininity in an attempt to disseminate and celebrate aspects of black culture and beauty in an art world dominated by Western concepts and aesthetics.

## On their journey to arts

*I am a Northern Irish/Zambian artist and designer based in London. My work focuses on themes of identity, race, and femininity, using an Afrofuturistic lens to celebrate and unapologetically put Black women in the forefront. The work mirrors my journey of personal reclamation of my complex heritage and life experiences. My early life was marked by constant movement until my relocation to Belfast, my father's homeland, during my teenage years.*

*This transition proved to be a profound culture shock, particularly as I navigated the complexities of being a mixed-heritage teenager with a distinctly Irish name yet speaking with an American accent. In Belfast's politically and religiously charged atmosphere, I frequently found my heritage questioned and my claims to Irishness challenged and rejected. Finding solace in creativity both inside and outside of school, I used artistic expression to explore my complex identity - this was when my artistic journey began.*

*My journey led me to pursue art studies, first in Manchester studying textiles, which developed into more of an illustration focus, and later in London to study history of art, where I was forced to face the intricacies of my identity while grappling with a deep-seated longing for belonging. These challenging years of self-discovery would eventually find their resolution through my creative practice.*

*During my undergrad, it took me until my final year for me to begin creating the portraits that I do now. I had frequented so many exhibitions and lectures where I saw such an alarming lack*



*of diversity and I started to create portraits solely as a tool for representation - creating a space for myself and eventually others to feel seen and to connect with my art.*

*I had a lot of pushback from tutors and I eventually ended up listening to my own desires and created whatever I wanted, even when it didn't particularly resonate or make sense to them. Through portraiture, I delved deep into understanding my dual heritage. Using the foundation of a Western higher education in art, with its practices and principles, I integrated Afrocentric inspirations into my work, creating a unique artistic language that bridged multiple cultural traditions.*

*Throughout this journey, I found crucial support in my father, who nurtured my artistic inclinations, and my mother, who intimately understood the feelings of displacement and isolation that shaped my experience. This combination of personal struggle and familial support enabled me to develop my artistic practice into a distinctive style characterised by an idiosyncratic point of view. I think my work stands as a testament to the power of art in navigating complex cultural identities and finding one's place in the world and the power that representation truly holds.*

*As a digital artist, I have learned everything on my own. Since the beginning, I have been inspired by artists who influence and nourish my creativity. I have also learned a lot through the resources available online, which have helped me develop my skills in illustration, graphic design, and photography. These tools have been essential for refining my art and finding my way in the digital field.*

*In Haiti, a country known for its economic challenges but also for its incredible wealth of talent, creative education is unfortunately not sufficiently supported. Although many young people possess remarkable artistic potential, the opportunities to develop in this field are limited.*

*I believe it is crucial to create support structures and specific educational programs for young artists to provide them with the necessary means to flourish and contribute to the local and international art scene. Globally, creative education must be valued and accessible, as it is an essential key to innovation and cultural diversity.*

*My self-taught journey proves that passion and perseverance can take you far, but with adequate support, imagine how much further we could all go.*

## On personal education, and creative education viewed locally and globally



*I took quite an academic path in my education – started with a Foundation of Art in Belfast, then got my BA in Textiles in Manchester, followed by a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching, and finally a Masters in History of Art at SOAS in London. After spending so many years in academia, I never really got to focus properly on my creative practice because other things were always taking up my time. The biggest gap for me was never getting any real work experience in the industry.*

*Looking at creative education today, I think the most important thing is staying determined and constantly looking for opportunities to learn and grow. If I could talk to my younger self, I'd tell her to intern, get work experience, and volunteer more. There are so many students competing for the same jobs, and the ones who took work outside of university seriously have a real advantage.*

*I'm now drowning in student loans from following the academic route so strictly, and I came out barely able to compete with people who didn't even go to university. With the huge pool of applicants for art world or creative jobs, you really need to stand out and show your dedication. I think work experience should be presented as a positive option to students rather than the "well, if you fail at university, I guess you can try an apprenticeship" attitude.*

*When I was at university, there was a real lack of diversity in teaching about artists from different backgrounds. Even when I moved to study History of Art specialising in African art, the university I attended—despite being the only one in the UK focusing on African and Asian studies—was seriously lacking in African modules and topics. I think it's really important for artists to see art and artists they can relate to, otherwise you start feeling isolated and I feel that this is something that needs serious attention in the curriculum. Maybe it has improved over time, but I can only speak from my experience and conversations I've had with others.*

*I focus mainly on themes of race and identity in my work. Throughout history, Black women have been measured against Western beauty standards and told they don't measure up. This is still visible in media and art today. Black women have been forced into misrepresentations and stereotypes, which my work aims to challenge. My art places Black women at the center, allowing us to exist and take up space exactly as we are.*

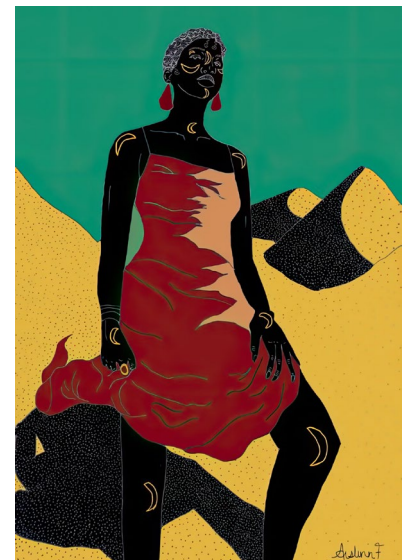
*Most of the women I draw have melancholic or upset expressions, reflecting my own struggles with appearance and identity. These expressions also counter stereotypes like the "angry Black woman" or the smiling "mammy" figure. The melancholy places these women somewhere in between, offering a more nuanced, well-rounded perspective.*

*I incorporate both traditional and contemporary references to Black and African culture and heritage in my work. This helps me stay connected to my roots while highlighting diverse hairstyles and adornments that are important cultural expressions. In particular, I'm drawn to traditional African textile patterns, beadwork, and the symbolic meanings behind various hairstyles across different African cultures. By weaving these elements into contemporary portraits, I create a visual dialogue between past and present, honoring ancestral knowledge while addressing modern experiences.*

*My work is also a therapeutic practice for both personal and collective healing. I've struggled with mental health, and drawing became my creative outlet. The intricate linework and patterns in my pieces often take hours to complete, putting me in a drawing trance. Sometimes the complexity of a pattern in an image reflects my mental state at that moment—more elaborate, dense patterns often emerge during periods of heightened anxiety or emotional processing.*

*This meditative practice has become essential to my wellbeing, transforming difficult emotions into something visually captivating. The time invested in creating hair patterns mirrors the time and care that goes into maintaining Afro and Black hair—whether through protective styling,*

## Messaging with art







curl maintenance, or dreadlocking. This parallel honors the cultural significance and intimate relationship many Black women have with their hair. Hair has historically been a site of both oppression and resistance for Black women, and my detailed renderings celebrate this complex relationship while highlighting its beauty.

My art is about existing, taking up space, and the importance of self-acceptance and self-expression. For a long time, I felt unconfident and tried to stay small and quiet, taking up as little space as possible. My work demonstrates that regardless of appearance, everyone has the right to express themselves however they choose. I want viewers, especially young Black women, to see themselves reflected in my art and feel affirmed in their identity. Aesthetic choices—especially adornments and hairstyles—are important expressions of individuality and personal choice. In my work, these elements become visual affirmations of self-worth and cultural pride. Each piece serves as both personal catharsis and a broader political statement about visibility and representation.

Ultimately, my work is about accepting who you are and prioritizing yourself despite life's challenges. It's a visual resistance against systems that have historically marginalised Black women's beauty and humanity. Through my art, I hope to contribute to a broader conversation about healing, identity, and the power of self-representation in challenging dominant narratives.

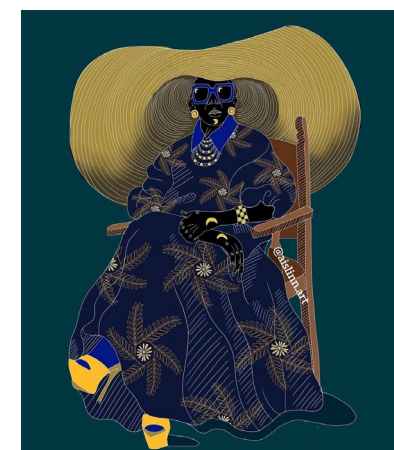
historically had their work dismissed or overlooked. I think there is no better time than the present for these perspectives to be heard, as there seems to be growing understanding of the diverse experiences and statements artists communicate through their work.

Although my personal practice centers on traditional mediums like drawing, painting, and textiles, I deeply appreciate other art forms that have gained prominence in contemporary society. Performance art and sculptures using unconventional materials particularly interest me when they carry meaningful messages. The materiality of these works often speaks directly to our current moment in ways traditional mediums sometimes cannot.

I do think there is a tendency in today's art world to create work without substantial meaning or purpose behind it. What resonates most with me is art that challenges me to reconsider aspects of our society, identity, politics, and other critical issues. The most powerful contemporary art doesn't just reflect our reality but actively questions and reshapes it, creating dialogue about who we are and who we might become.

In many ways, the best art manages to be both firmly rooted in its historical moment while speaking to universal human experiences that transcend any particular era. It captures the specific tensions, contradictions, and possibilities of our time while connecting to deeper truths about what it means to be human in an ever-changing and evolving landscape. This balance between the contemporary and the timeless is what makes art such a powerful force for understanding ourselves and our world.

I don't have much experience with online galleries. Although I have previously said that an online presence is helpful, I haven't necessarily made more sales via an online gallery than a physical one. I think it also depends on the medium of your work as I find that photographs of your work can be a double-edged sword—sometimes they can be deceiving in making works look better than they are, or vice versa – they look horrible in the photos but in real life they look ethereal.



On Art as a representation of reality or escape from it

I believe art reflects both our contemporary reality and transcends specific time and place. As a lover of contemporary art, I appreciate its freedom and lack of constraints. While I can certainly see the beauty in Renaissance paintings, they often feel similar to me and don't take the risks that modern art embraces.

Today's art landscape feels particularly vibrant because there is so much to express. Even though innovative work can still face criticism, digital platforms have democratized access, allowing people to engage with art without physically visiting galleries. This shift has been especially significant for marginalised voices who

Online galleries and marketing artwork online

*I believe it is important to get your work out there whether it's online or in physical spaces. You should always be applying to artist opportunities and open calls—and for me, I find it's more about quantity overall. The chances of you applying to 20 opportunities and hearing back from a handful is much better than applying for 2 or 3 and not hearing back from any.*

*I think you shouldn't let the lack of response or feedback discourage you from continuing to apply. I had to learn that at the end of the day, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. You will always have people that like your work and others that can't stand it. I see it as our job as artists to apply to opportunities, and the job of the people running the opportunity to choose it or not—but it's important not to get down if you aren't chosen, as it's just part of the process. Just keep putting yourself out there and you never know who will come across your work and think, "Wow, I'm enamored with this artist's work. I need to buy this." All it takes is one person who really connects with what you create.*

*I think it is also important to build a supportive network around you, preferably virtual and in-person connections. Some opportunities have come to me directly from a small conversation at a gallery opening or a message on Instagram. You never know what lead a connection can have in the long run.*

*I am aiming to get a studio space this year so that I can have more immediate connections with a community around me but I understand how hard this is for many due to the cost of living crisis.*

*I think creating a cohesive portfolio and having some social media accounts is crucial in this day and age as storytelling has become so important in understanding art. People like to see the artist and their connection with their work to humanise the work and understand what the artist is trying to say. Although it is difficult, I know it's important to maintain consistency in in sharing your work and story is key to build the audience that will eventually support your practice financially.*

