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What Makes Us Clique: Niki Lopez (June)

🕒 May 25, 2020

Written and photographed by Andrew Armano | www.AndyArmano.com
(<http://www.AndyArmano.com>)

This series focuses on individuals who give to our community and make a positive impact on the lives of others. Often it is through our personal adversities that we discover who we are and transform the challenges into strength.

Niki Lopez is a multimedia artist and activist based in Fort Lauderdale and her art has been exhibited across South Florida, New York, and California. She is an independent award-winning graphic designer and social media enthusiast well known for her community spirit and avant-garde art shows. Niki is passionate about grassroots initiatives and community outreach and she is affiliated with non-profits like Women In Network, Island City Stage, and Arts 4 All Florida. Niki is the founder of the *What's Your Elephant?* movement and plays a major role with creative collaborations

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like 1310 Bandits, Artists for Black Lives Matter, and Thou Art Woman. She is the 2020 recipient of Howard County's Arts & Culture Visionaries Award by ArtServe. She has also donated artwork for fundraising initiatives for the Human Rights Campaign and Equality Florida. Niki recently sat down with us to discuss her work, her life, and her advocacy.

Andrew Armano: First, since COVID-19 is the topic of nearly every conversation, let me start by asking if you and your loved ones are OK.

Niki Lopez: Yes, thank you, we are all well.

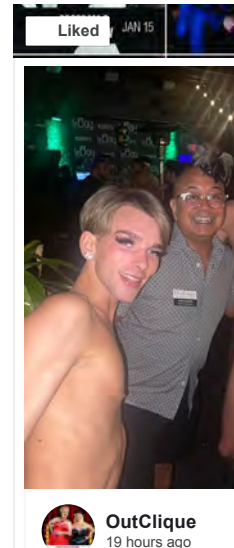
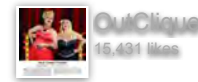
AA: How has your work adapted to COVID-19?

NL: Like many, I have increased my digital and online presence. It's an opportunity to grow and evolve.

AA: Your work is highly personal and you have been very forthright about the trauma from which your expression flows. Yet, I am drawn to it because there is hope and healing inherent in it. How did you find your voice?

NL: It was a journey to find my voice. I was in the art community, barely a budding artist, and I started doing some painting and photography. I started learning by trial and error. I had the raw talent, so I put myself through art school and I have a graphic design degree from the Arts Institute.

All along I kept asking myself, "What am I going to do? What's my thing?" I was going to workshops and studying and trying to find the answer. Then I turned inside – and just like that – out it poured. Sometimes we look so hard on the outside for our calling, when it actually comes from inside you. I'm getting goosebumps talking about it now.



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AA: I find it so admirable that your work speaks your truth, but you invite others to share their personal experiences as well. How did this happen.

NL: I had encouragement from other artists. One friend said, "Wow, you should show this to Women in Distress. They may be able to relate to your work and it may help them open up or to feel less alone." As I started to share my work, people began to confide in me things that happened to them. It was an honor to hold this space for them. In time, I evolved this give-and-take into the *What's Your Elephant?* movement, where the goal is to use art to create safe spaces to talk about all these unspoken things. My *What's Your Elephant?* series sprung from my experiences as a sexual abuse survivor and a survivor of being raised in a cult. But, for others, it may be different issues or experiences.

AA: You have overcome a lot. Can you share with us a little about your challenges and how they shaped your life and your work?

NL: I'm going to try to say it very short because I have a very long, crazy history. I was born in Queens, New York. My mother is Panamanian with roots in Panama, Cuba, and Jamaica. My dad is Jamaican, with Cuban and East Indian on his side. When I was a child, my mom got into a religious cult – an Islamic, Hebrew religious group. We wound up moving into the cult and that was a whole traumatic experience for me. There was all kinds of abuse: sexual, mental, physical, and spiritual



abuse. There was extreme isolation. After escaping the cult, there was a big court case. I was one of the key witness victims. I was awarded the Louis E. Peters award by the FBI because of my contributions to the case. It is the highest civilian humanitarian award given annually by the FBI.

AA: That is so admirable.

NL: I still have many members of the cult always trying to demonize me anytime I speak out.

AA: I read a lot about psychology, especially mental and psychological manipulation and gaslighting. I understand that leaving a cult and isolating communities is extremely difficult. What survival skills did you have when you left the cult?

NL: I left at 25, and I was completely alone. I found my real dad, thankfully, and started my life. I mean I was baldheaded, maybe 109 pounds if it rained, with nothing to my name. I didn't even finish ninth grade and for many years I had resentment about that. But, I got a GED and I put myself through college.

Photo Courtesy of Andrew Armano | www.AndyArmano.com

AA: How has your artwork helped you process the trauma?

NL: At first, I was expressing myself through my art, but I found myself emotional, depressed, and I didn't have the words for it. As I started sharing a little bit of my story through my art, that led me to go into counseling.

AA: What did counseling provide for you?



NL: I found out how past trauma was blocking my life because I hadn't dealt with it internally. Before counseling, I could be on a high, motivating and inspiring people, but then I would also be depressed because my internal dialogue was horrible to myself. I was so critical of myself. My way of coping was to pile work on myself. After all, I'd been working since I was 13 years old and that's all I knew. But what I needed was to go deep and heal myself. I sometimes hear someone say, "Oh, that happened 20 years ago, why is this woman or that guy talking about it?" I tell them we all have to resolve our past trauma. You have to deal with it at some point or another because it'll start cropping up in other areas.

AA: I admire the way you have taken your journey, shared it, and opened up the path for others. You are known for your events and exhibits and for creating a safe space for artists and audiences.

NL: Last year someone came to my show and they said, "You're not just curating the art, you're curating people." I'm pushing and encouraging people subconsciously to integrate with other people. There's gay people, there's white people, there's black people, there's straight people, there's people with disabilities – just really great diversity within sharing the same space. So, it's not just about the art, it's about community, it's about connecting. It's about bringing these people together. It's about giving to people.

Photo Courtesy of Andrew Armano | www.AndyArmano.com

AA: That's magic. It's so inclusive because it's about the conversation between the artist themselves and between the audience and the artists. Your ability as a communicator is showcased in *The Circle*. Can you tell us a little about that project?

NL: *The Circle* is a weekly video podcast that I do live on the Niki Lopez Creative Facebook® page and now on YouTube® and *OutClique's* Facebook® page, where I'm sharing stories from artists, activists, social entrepreneurs, and people doing great things in the world. It's a half hour show every Tuesday, 8:30-9:00PM EST.

AA: Beautiful. You are so amazing and I could sit, I don't know, for hours and talk with you. Some of the things you said really resonate with me and personally as well. Just on a really personal level, I've had a lot of trauma in my childhood, so a lot of my adult life has been trying to figure all that out and sort that out. One of the things I have found for myself is that there's really two important components to healing for me. One is that therapy is very helpful. I need to have a cognitive, intellectual understanding of things, but that's not enough. It has to be in "here," and it is



one of the most healing things for me when I am in any kind of situation. Whether it's one-on-one or a group situation and I hear someone else sharing his or her story, I look at them and I say, "Oh my God, my heart just breaks for you." I think I don't give myself that same compassion.

NL: "Thank you OutClique Magazine for sharing my story. Thank you to the many people who have collaborated with me and supported my work over the years. My work centers around visibility, building community, and creating safe spaces where we can share, bring awareness and understanding, and create change. If sharing my elephants empowers even one person to consider their choices and its impact, speak up when they see injustice, or be a voice for the many who are still living in fear and denial, my job is done.

Keep up Niki Lopez at:

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Dr. Steven chats with Niki Lopez



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What is that (Under her Blue)

Proposal

Lopez proposes, *What is that*, a ritualistic, site-specific installation in nature to explore some of the traumas concerning Black women within the current climate of the pandemic and racial reckoning as a significant tool in the world. Lopez states “I am a mother, an artist, a healer and a safe space for community engagement, an advocate for human rights and justice.” The installation will be built and documented at Hugh Taylor Birch State Park or a similar location. The intention of this work is to bring awareness to the inequity and socially underserved in communities of color. “We struggle because of not having what it takes to advance. We struggle in silence because the world needs for us to be strong. This piece will be an attempt to make space for all that is broken within me, within the world, to share it with nature as I share a silent prayer for strength for us all.”



Biography

Niki Lopez is an Afro-Latina, Queer, interdisciplinary visual artist, activist, social practitioner, cultural programmer, explorer and art teacher. Lopez is best known for her vibrant color palette, masks and a collection of works dealing with some of her

trauma and healing through the arts. She is the founder of “What’s Your Elephant,” a movement that creates a safe space and uses the arts to address the unspoken.

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THEMES

Niki Lopez challenges social injustice with new workshop



Nikki Lopez

By Deon C. Jefferson

Art can be used to communicate a number of different things. The marriage between art and activism has been on full display, especially after the way the world was treated in 2020. In Broward County, artists like Niki Lopez and the LA Lee Mizell YMCA Community Center have partnered together to host a series of sessions affectionately named “The Art-Making as Catalyst for Social Justice and Collective Action”.

Highlights for the program include but are not limited to social justice geared presentations, artist-led workshops across literary, visual, and performing arts. The Art of Justice Session is definitely something you don’t want to miss.

This project invites and encourages the community to engage with several talented local artists whose passion for activism and outreach informs their creative work and the creative process. There have been quite a few sessions already, with one planned for next Saturday. For the upcoming workshop, artist Alana Dacosta will be the facilitator. Artist Alana Dacosta considers herself to be a creative rebel. She uses a variety of mediums to express her art. She is a vocalist, musician, creative community builder, yogi, educator, and phenomenal mother. They will focus on what “agency” means and how to think critically about the world to develop their agency. It is asked that you come with supplies. Items needed to bring are paper, scissors, glue, a magazine to cut from, pencil, markers or paint. Alana will start the session at 1:00 p.m. and it ends at 3:00 p.m. The workshop will be virtual.

This is the first time Lopez is collaborating with the LA Lee YMCA. “LA Lee YMCA is one of the organizations that serves an underserved, predominately Black/ POC community and one of the organizations I’ve done several arts and community projects with over the years,” says Lopez. “As a multi-disciplined visual artist, curator and social practitioner, the intentions of this project aligns fully and draws from elements – What’s Your Elephant. This is a movement I founded back in 2014 that uses the arts to create safe spaces to address the unspoken. Because of that work and other works I’ve done, the LA Lee YMCA invited me to be the lead artist in this project that is funded by The Community Foundations of Broward’s Art of Community Grant and The Art of Justice program was birthed. The main focus of the program is Social Justice. Though this program is open to all, to me, Social justice is working with underserved communities (and) giving a voice to their concerns. I’m honored to create a program that showcases how the arts can be a catalyst for social justice, community building and self-expression.”

Programming and advocacy work is nothing new to “What’s your Elephant”. They create safe spaces for people to utilize the arts to have healthy dialogue, heal and to bring awareness to the unspoken. By way of exhibitions, visual and performing arts, interactive arts, creative community building, hands-on projects, talks, workshops, and events.

Established in 1984, the Community Foundation of Broward assists families, individuals and organizations to produce personalized charitable Funds that deliver game-changing philanthropic impact. Altogether, Four hundred and seventy-nine charitable funds represent more than \$200 million in assets, distributing \$131 million in grants over the past 36 years. The Community Foundation supplies bold leadership on community solutions and fosters philanthropy that connects people who care with causes that matter. The Foundation empowers visionaries, innovators and doers to create the change they want to see in the community – and to BE BOLD. www.cfbroward.org

Support for this project has been provided by the following Funds at the Community Foundation of Broward: Oakland Park Woman’s Club, David and Francie Horvitz Family Fund, Ann Adams Fund and the Mary and Alex

Mackenzie Impact Fund.

For more info on how you can join the next session, visit <https://whatsyourelephant.org/theartofjustice/>

News

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Niki Lopez. Photo by Carina Mask.

Niki Lopez is the founder of “What’s Your Elephant,” a movement that provides a safe space so that people can create art as therapy and have an open discussion.

She is also co-founder of 1310 Bandits and Artists for Black Lives Matter.

Lopez is a creative advocate, multi-disciplinary activist, and social media guru with a multi-faceted approach to intentional networking and community engagement.

Lopez’s life revolved around Malachi Z. York’s teachings, in which his compound seemed inescapable.

From age 11 to 25, Lopez was trapped in a doomsday cult where she suffered years of sexual and emotional abuse until she finally managed to escape.

The United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors preached Black supremacist ideals, Islamic mysticism, a hybrid of extraterrestrial references, the significance of ancient Egypt and pyramids, and occult Judaism.

Grooming, sexual, and emotional abuse were rampant.

Lopez recounts the innumerable times that she was beaten within the compound by men and women with belts, brooms, and buckles.

Lopez shared stories regarding the time she was living in the Georgia compound. York had used material goods and food as incentives and rewards for the children. There was a strict caste system in place on the compound. Dresses and trinkets were used in the reward system.

While she was in the compound, she was not even allowed to see her own mother. Visits were allowed once a week at most. She was raised with 20 to 30 other girls in a single room under the constant eye of room workers.

Local police and FBI had taken notice of an abundant amount of ammunition and illegal firearms and were worried about an event similar to the 1995 Waco massacre.

Four years after her escape, Lopez testified against York, which led to a 135-year prison sentence for a multitude of charges.

“I literally started my life from scratch at 25 years old,” she said.

She was reunited with family members she hadn’t seen since she was 11 years old.

Lopez left Georgia and moved to Florida to become one of the original members of the Sailboat Bend Artists community. During this time, Lopez feverishly dove into work and absorbed herself in her art and her work. Art was always her refuge, her sanctuary, but she realized her work had become stagnant. Her past trauma was still untouched and it began to take a toll.

“I realized when my voice was taken away and through all the things I had to survive, art has always been my refuge,” she said.

Lopez began to speak on panels at symposiums about her experiences as a survivor, her work as an artist, and the various forms of activism she’s involved in.

“My intentions for #WhatsYourElephant are to create a safe space where people can share and bring awareness.”

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Lopez weaves art and therapy together by using art as an outlet and to bring about difficult conversations as a vehicle for healing and empowerment.

For the first time, Lopez started to develop a project that addressed some of her “elephant” issues. It was restorative and cathartic, so she wanted to share the experiences with others.



“‘What’s Your Elephant’ — it’s those things that you want to ignore, you see it, but because it’s uncomfortable, you don’t want to talk about it. The [birth] of ‘What’s Your Elephant’ came out of my own, personal journey of being a survivor of sexual abuse and multiple types of trauma while growing up,” she said. “Even though I was really into art, I never went to counseling. I just kept busy. After a while, certain things began to take a toll.”

One piece of Lopez’s artwork stands out starkly from the rest of the colorful paintings that hang in the 1310 gallery space. That is a 3-foot tall mixed media sculptural piece.

The face is a molding of Lopez’s own face: her eyes are shut tight, and her hands dangle by her sides. The figure is of Lopez as a child. The words, “Homegrown,” “No longer silent,” “Why?” are scribbled on sheets of paper. These words and feelings welled to the surface — Lopez explains and she kept writing these words down. Lopez was confronting her childhood trauma as a child sex slave.

Lopez takes a moment to reminisce, then continues, “Why, if I am doing all this work, why is my work becoming stagnant?” She continues, “One of the pieces I [created], ‘Home grown,’ where I started writing all these words that just came out of me. As soon as I started [reconnecting] with some of the things I went through as well as going to counseling, that’s when my work took leaps. Me, being able to share these traumas was cathartic.”

In 2014, a movement was born: “What’s Your Elephant.”

The movement uses arts as an agent to tackle discrimination, abuse, unspoken trauma, and then sharing the work in safe spaces in order to heal and empower.

Lopez shares an anecdote: “Last year, I did a workshop for ‘What’s Your Elephant’ that focused on overcoming trauma which culminated in an event. In a low-income community, we have high crime rates. One thing that goes unspoken is the unprocessed trauma. These kids are in and out of jail, but they have had rough lives, they have been sexually or emotionally abused. They don’t have access to health care [nor behavioral health care], and there is a stigma. Many people are uncomfortable talking about mental health. We need to normalize it.”

Lopez adds that she isn’t a health professional but works very hard to stay updated with all the support and services that are found locally.

“I brought in some mental health counselors to be part of that conversation with a safe place and safe environment,” she said.

The attendees were creating art, and would then take turns discussing it.

“There’s stigma about mental health, especially in the Black community and counseling,” she said. “Or even the Caribbean community, we’ve always had, ‘keep it in and keep going’ modeled to us.”

Talking openly about the trauma is not easy, nor comfortable, but Lopez sees the direct impact it has on people. Talking openly and honestly, or being heard sometimes makes all the difference.

Lopez is reminded of an incident, when she was working with SunServe’s youth during a workshop, she explained that she has endured due to the trauma of molestation.

One of the young adults then felt compelled to share her story. Subsequently, it opened up the conversation into seeking counseling for their trauma for the first time.

“Many elephants cause us shame, and we then isolate ourselves,” she said. “So being able to talk about it is cathartic in some ways. Someone else might be grappling with similar things.”

“For me personally, I have always done art since I was little, but really making an effort to be a professional artist,” she said. “What is this thing I can create and connect to? It was self-discovery that led me to find this power inside of me. I was always looking outward. But it was always there.”

Engaging the Community

“When I take projects, it has to be something that makes a difference, even if it’s a small ripple. Eventually it will create a tidal wave.”

Lopez is involved with the Housing Authority of the City of Fort Lauderdale (HACFL) to create a call to artists and curate artwork that will be selected for a permanent installation in the Sailboat Bend II building. The Aya Arts Project is a community, art engagement and acquisition project.

Lopez is a huge fan of symbolism and explains that the name “Aya” is a Ghanaian Adinkra symbol, the Aya, or fern, is a symbol of endurance and resilience. It’s known for being a hardy plant that can grow on infertile soil.

Lopez chuckles and then explains, “It’s a fern, it’s known for its resilience. The Black and Brown and indigenous people are resilient. All that we’ve gone through, we’ve been through the ringer, and we’re still here!”

This endeavor is an affordable housing project dedicated to seniors and in the heart of downtown Fort Lauderdale.

Lopez’s goal is to create a sense of space and pay homage to the rich history of Broward County. Using the arts to highlight the First Nation people and their fertile hunting grounds to the immaculate sea of grass to the rich Black history of a thriving Fort Lauderdale lined with Black-owned businesses.

“We are occupying indigenous spaces, but I still want to show how interconnected we are,” she said.

She is collaborating with local artists specifically for this project to create a deep appreciation and sense of place.

Lopez says she will continue to share her story in hopes that it will empower and encourage people to speak out about their trauma and abuse. She encourages everyone to find a creative outlet, whether it be writing, drawing, performing, in conjunction with counseling.

Lopez firmly believes that no matter how much time passes, the trauma will not heal; ignoring it will only make that elephant in the room bigger. As difficult as it is, confronting your elephant will be the only way to defeat it.

This is a part of an SFGN series on local BIPOC leaders making a difference in the community. Check out the other stories at sfgn.com/bipoc (<http://sfgn.com/bipoc>).

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Niki Lopez-Photo by Micheal Anthony Clark

Talking About

🕒 August 4, 2019

The Elephant in the Room

By John M. Hayden

There is art you hang on your fridge. Some art you put on a wall to fill space. And then there is art that leaves you speechless. And that's the type of art Niki Lopez creates and inspires. But instead of leaving you speechless, she wants to get you talking. Niki's groundbreaking art project, What's Your Elephant, is a thought provoking venture with the purpose of making you feel uncomfortable and giving you a safe space to talk about those feelings.

"What's Your Elephant uses the arts to create safe spaces and talk about anything unspoken," Niki told me. "Whether it's sexual abuse. Whether it's gender equality. Whether it's racism." The project gets its name from the old phrase 'ignoring the elephant in the room,' a situation everyone knows

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exists but no one wants to talk about. "It's about acknowledging the elephant and owning it, so that doesn't define you. It's really vulnerable talking about those things. Other people have been 'Wow, me too. I want to go home and look at my own elephants.'"

She knows what she's talking about. Niki has a few elephants of her own. She was raised and sexually abused in a "religious" cult. It was there she began developing her artistic instincts. Then it was an escape from reality. It wouldn't be until many years later and well into young adulthood, that she would begin to see art as a calling. "I had a regular job but didn't fit into anything like that. But I was always drawn back to art."

Taking her raw talent to the next level turned out to be easier said than done. "At that point, because I didn't have traditional training, I was actually intimidated to paint because I never painted before. I just knew I wanted to."

"Each piece has significance and shares segments of myself and journeys of self discovery."

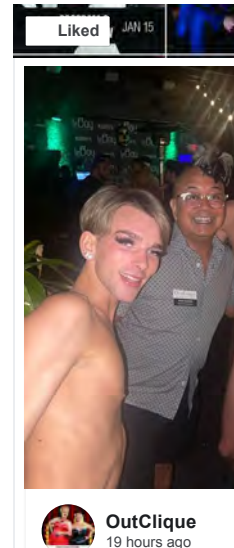
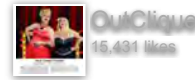
Niki's work consists of paintings, mixed-media sculptures, video and installations. "Some of my work allows me to explore symbols and concepts from ancient cultures and ideologies, as well as provoke thought as to the probability of life in other dimensions and galaxies and how we are all inter-connected." When speaking on some of her alien themed works, "People feel we're the only life force on Earth in all of the galaxies, which I feel is silly."



Tabatha Mudra, Niki Lopez, Dr. Naomi Ruth Cobb, Cindy Shay and May Reign - Photo courtesy of Don Parchmen

What's not silly is her What's Your Elephant project and using divisive topics to unite people. "It shifted in my work in terms of still doing the artwork but having a much larger meaning and impact in community building." Step one, is getting people to come together, even when they know just showing up can be uncomfortable. "We do exhibitions and artist talks and workshops, and seeing the impact these people are getting. Not all elephants are about abuse. Sadly when I do workshops I can count at least two, three, four projects being about sexual abuse."

From there, Niki helps them use art to go to an uncomfortable place. "Everybody works on a piece about an elephant they want to share and then talk about it. Using the arts, but definitely the discussion is a huge part of it." One person sticks out in Niki's mind to this day. "An elderly woman said she was molested by both of her parents and never told anybody until that day. She never felt safe to tell anybody, she never dealt with any of those things."



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Many come to deal with other issues. "A woman participating in the workshop said she didn't understand why people needed to say black President. She said she didn't see color. Through the discussion she became aware of her privilege. My kid doesn't even have to doubt whether he can be a president one day, because our presidents are typically white."

"It gives people the space to talk about those (issues). People aren't going to be comfortable saying 'I'm a racist' or 'I went through a period of time when I was a racist.'" Niki welcomes those opinions, because unless you open up, you stay closed off. "The thing is you can't get to the solution if you can't even give people a space to say 'I have a prejudice.' 'I am racist.' 'I have homophobia.' Now we can deal with it."

The next What's Your Elephant workshop and discussion will be August 4 and 14, 2019, with an exhibition and performance on Saturday August 17, 2019. To check out What's Your Elephant or more of Niki's work, go to [www.Facebook.com/WhatsYourElephant](https://www.facebook.com/WhatsYourElephant) (<http://www.facebook.com/WhatsYourElephant>).

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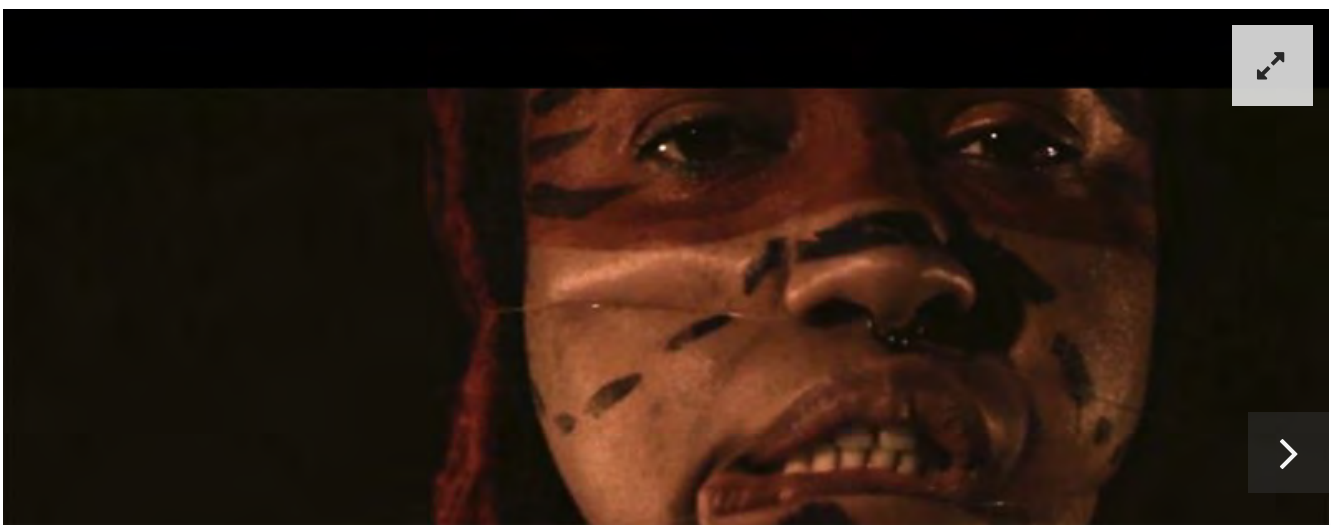
How Fort Lauderdale artist Niki Lopez survived a doomsday cult

By PHILLIP VALYS

SOUTHFLORIDA.COM | JUL 13, 2018



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"What's Your Elephant?" art exhibit

A still from Fort Lauderdale artist Niki Lopez's performance-art video "Caressed." The piece will be on display during "What's Your Elephant?" at 1310 Gallery. (Niki Lopez / Courtesy)

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Niki Lopez's home art studio in Fort Lauderdale is filled with elephants. Her workspace at Sailboat Bend Artist Lofts has porcelain figurines of Ganesha, a many-armed, elephant-headed, Hindu deity who is believed to remove obstacles. There are pachyderm-shaped stickers and coffee-table sculptures.

But the biggest elephant in the room lies in Lopez's "Homegrown," a waist-high, light-gray sculpture of the artist with her eyes closed. "Homegrown" stands behind a wall emblazoned with handwritten notes, such as "No longer silent" and "Don't want to be special," which address her childhood as a sex slave in a New York black-supremacist cult.

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Investigates: Cults,” which aired earlier t
television network. (The episode is available on demand at
[InvestigationDiscovery.com](https://www.discovery.com/shows/investigates-cults).)

A still from Fort Lauderdale artist Niki Lopez's performance-art video "Caressed." The piece will be on display during "What's Your Elephant?" at 1310 Gallery. (Niki Lopez / Courtesy)

Between ages 11 and 25, Lopez belonged to an end-times cult called United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors, headed by pseudoreligious leader Dwight “Malachi” York. First at his Brooklyn headquarters and later at his Egyptian-themed compound in Eatonton, Ga., York molested Lopez and other children from the 1980s until 2002, when the FBI arrested York. York pleaded guilty in 2004 and was sentenced to 135 years in

federal prison for transporting minors across state lines for sexual purposes.

The title of “Homegrown,” Lopez says, refers to York’s vulgar term for girls and women he groomed to be his concubines. Her mother joined the cult when Lopez was 11. York raped Lopez when she was 15, taking her virginity, she says.

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“The man who abused me taught me to think the world was going to end, that we were going to burn,” says Lopez, who is uncomfortable saying York’s name. “I internalized a lot just to survive. We were voiceless and being tortured for no reason.”

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Like many followers of York, a former Black Panther who preached ideas of black supremacy and mystical Islam, Lopez and her mother believed even his most outrageous claims. Over the years, York claimed to be a direct descendant of the prophet Muhammad, to be a member of the Sudanese royal family and to be an extraterrestrial.

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“He lied constantly,” Lopez says. “But everyone looked up to him as the spiritual imam of the community.”

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“All the Pretty Dresses,” another installation in the “What’s Your Elephant?” show, concerns one of York’s lies. It’s a sculpture of Lopez wearing a gold-and-purple dress, a reference to the cult leader’s manipulative “reward system” of giving soda



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For her performance-art video “Caressed,” Lopez appears nude and partially cloaked in shadow, her body bound with wire that presses deeper into her flesh as she recalls one conversation with York. She asked him about an unfamiliar phrase from a song lyric — “caressing your fingertips” — to which York replied, “When you’re older, you’ll find out.” “How was it fine to [be molested], but I’m not mature enough to grasp ‘caressing your fingertips’?” Lopez asks in the

video.

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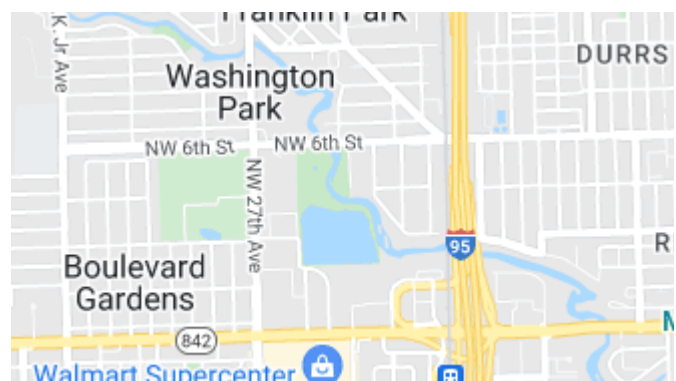
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Artists [can submit works for the show](#) through July 23, and Lopez is partnering with Stonewall Gallery in Wilton Manors to present a "What's Your Elephant?" workshop on Aug. 2.

"When we hold things in and feel isolated, we always have art to heal us," Lopez says. "I share the elephants in my life in the hopes that other artists share their own."

The "What's Your Elephant?" exhibition will open Aug. 18 at 1310 Gallery inside Sailboat Bend Artist Lofts, 1310 SW Second Court, in Fort Lauderdale. The show will accept artist submissions through July 23. Admission is free. Go to NikiArtStudio.com/Whats-Your-Elephant.



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Speaking Out About the Elephant in the Room

How grant recipient, Niki Lopez and her upcoming exhibit "What's your elephant" will continue to touch trauma survivors and speak up for being silent.

Aug 16, 2018 EMILY MCLAUGHLIN

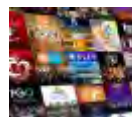
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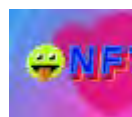
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Growing up, artist **Niki Lopez** believed fitting in was something appealing. At the same time, she didn't understand why she stood out or how to move forward with her experience surviving abuse and now essentially becoming a modern advocate for speaking out.

For a while, the idea of being the odd-ball and being different from other kids was something that Lopez felt uncomfortable with. Yet, in recognizing this feeling of alienation, Lopez stood up for herself and the dozens of others who have trauma to bear.

Her valor and spirit are seen now in her artworks, workshops and with her upcoming exhibit, **What's Your Elephant** (WYE), opening August 18th at the 1310 Gallery in Fort Lauderdale.

This year will mark the fifth anniversary of the taboo touching, multi-faceted exhibit for artists to display their 'elephant in the room' and will be a safe place to contribute to the conversation of abuse, survivors and the beauty of not being silent.

"Putting my foot forward, taking responsibility for how important this project is has given me more confidence in what I'm doing. I've come a long way and want to have the largest reach possible" Said Lopez, who has recently been incorporating art

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from her WYE workshop attendees into aspects of the program.

The participating artists of WYE has doubled, the number of survivors speaking out continues to grow and by giving people access to be a part of the conversation Lopez feels motivated to continue her movement.



Niki Lopez with her piece "Home Grown"

"These are artworks not normally displayed because they might be too heavy. Meanwhile, I am pushing interaction of the viewer- using your trauma to help empower people and develop relationships" Lopez said.

For the last 10 years, Lopez has been practicing art in South Florida and at first, she struggled with the notion that, as an artist, one must have a single 'style' or specific method to their expression. "I don't and it's okay to not have one". Lopez says, "I kept asking 'what can I do to be that one

thing that everyone says I need to find?’ then I looked inside and said, ‘I already have that’, I don’t need to develop this or create that, it takes being courageous”.

Historically, it has only been Niki responsible for curating, marketing and installing her exhibit: This year, as part of the Cultural Division’s **Creative Investment Program** and being one of seven recipients to receive additional support provided by the following Funds at the **Community Foundation of Broward**: Fonda and H. Wayne Huizenga Jr. Family Trust Fund, Gary J. Scotto Fund and Mary and Alex Mackenzie Community Impact Fund, Lopez was able to bring on a new team to help take her project to the next level.

This was the first year, Lopez notes, that she could gather volunteers and a crew to help cover the logistics she once handled on her own. Creating marketing capital, streamlining set-up processes and upgrading the production efforts were made possible with support provided by the Community Foundation.



“Stand Up Speak Out” by WYE Artist Mary Catello.

The overwhelming response to Lopez's story, her art and the individual "elephants" of people who feel empowered enough to speak out, are reasons she feels a responsibility to keep going.

"When people see the work, I'm honored they feel they can come to me to express something". Lopez notes, "This is activism. When so many don't get the opportunity or space to share, it helps to see someone starting a movement. I have to recognize that this is a reason I'm here".

This project and its awareness have grown immensely and Lopez hopes to be able to turn What's Your Elephant into a program that she can take to other cities.

Lopez has taken her works to various festivals and shows over the years; continues to curate art exhibits around the community; and in the future, looks to create larger interactive pieces and hold solo exhibitions. She said, "There are so many parts to your past, the growth is in saying I am the elephant and taking ownership of that".

2018 WYE pre-exhibit workshop. Photo

Connect:

Learn more about Niki's story from People Magazine and ID Discovery **here**

Watch her weekly series **The Circle** on
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Niki:

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Here's her story:

There has always been something calming and frightening for me in the water. The water calls to me, it calms me, it sparks creativity. I feel a sense of connecting with the Yemeya, connecting to nature, the life, to energy. I love to go and create until I feel my breath is one with the sea and the wind. There is also a sense of fear, growing up having nightmares of drowning as well as dealing with anxiety and trauma in and out of the water. I gave up thinking it was even capable for me to swim until I met [Thaddeus Gamory, DIA Swim Club powered by Diversity in Aquatics, and the SWIMS Foundation](#). His connection to what he refers to as 'Blue Mindfulness' with sensitivity to people with traumas and anxieties and the historic information that debunks the stigmas that Black people cannot swim. It has brought the possibility that I too may be able to navigate my fears and anxieties to connect to the water in a way that connects mind, body, and soul with history and education about our ancestors and our spiritual connection to the water.



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the water together and feel it strengthens our bond and mother and son.

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It's extremely important for me to be visible as a Black woman, as an Afro Latina woman, as a Queer woman in the water. For myself, for my son, for others who are conditioned that 'we' don't swim, to push and break the barrier. To connect with our ancestors, to connect to the power and grounding of nature. Diversity and visibility matter. It gives others the permission to be visible too.

What are your hopes for the future?

I invite all people, especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Color to get in the water. To seek out a safe space to practice and to connect with someone who can teach you about water and water safety. It is so important for the BIPOC community to create, strengthen and rebuild its connection to the water.

Three fun facts about me:

- 1) I love working with causes, activists, women empowerment groups, community leaders and change-makers
- 2) I have a show on [Facebook & YouTube: The Circle: LIVE with Niki Lopez](#). A series sharing stories of our creative community, activists & social entrepreneurs. The 1st and 3rd Tuesday of the month 8:30-9 PM EST.
- 3) I love music and dance.

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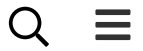
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Learning to swim is a human right.





Ali Cultural Arts Hosts Dramatic And Revealing Exhibit By Artist Niki Lopez

by Julie Musbach Apr. 25, 2018



The Historic Ali Cultural Arts is proud to present a dramatic and revealing exhibit by multi-media artist and activist Niki Lopez. *These Eyes: A Retrospective Exhibition* delves into several distinct topics, drawing upon Niki's personal traumas, inspirations and fascinations. Lopez, who survived a childhood trapped in a cult, has garnered acclaim for her *What's Your Elephant?* series. These works stir profound conversations among viewers and will be included in the exhibit, which will also feature art inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement and her interest in other life forms. The exhibit runs through May 26, 2018. For more information, www.aliarts.org

"What's Your Elephant is a cathartic experience for me and the viewer," said Lopez. "As a child, my mother joined a cult and I was brought into that world against my will and ended up a victim of molestation."

Art, which had always been an interest for her, became a coping mechanism as she coped with feeling voiceless. Her art often reflects those emotions along with an intense feeling of being watched as there was never any privacy growing up. When she was able, she stood up to the powers that be and forged her own life. Now she is using her past experiences and talent, to help others deal with big issues that can overshadow their lives.

After exploring this collection, Lopez encourages others to share their stories about the past pains and problems they are grappling with. "The power of sharing and bringing these issues to the fore is an important part of the healing process," she said. "We all have 'elephants,' and we need to challenge them."

Another aspect of Lopez's art deals with ancient cultural references such as the history of the Olmec civilization to life. With a vast array of colors and symbolism, she interprets the ancient people who populated the tropical lowlands of Mexico in c1000-400bc. She also delves into the African-American experience in the Americas before the prevalence of slavery.

In addition, this exhibit will include her creative reflections about alien life forms. "It seems unlikely that we are alone," she shared. Her work explores that possibility.

About Historic Ali Cultural Arts

The Historic Ali Cultural Arts, a performance and cultural venue, is located in the former home of the late Frank and **Florence Major** Ali, who had emigrated from Cuba and The Bahamas respectively. As the first African American business owners in Pompano Beach, Frank operated a barbershop and Florence, who was a skilled seamstress, cosmetologist and fashion designer, also operated her business in the building. This two-story property was built in 1933 and placed on the City of Pompano Beach Historical Register in 2016.

The City of Pompano Beach, Pompano Beach Community Redevelopment Agency and the Rock Road Restoration Historical Group preserve the northwest corridor history and culture by telling

positive stories of the African American experience through performing arts, visual arts and intellectual work that educates and celebrates all people of color throughout history.

About the Pompano Beach Redevelopment Agency (CRA)

A Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) is a dependent district established by City government for the purpose of carrying out redevelopment activities that include reducing or eliminating blight, improving the economic health of an area, and encouraging public and private investments in a CRA district. The CRA is governed by State Statutes, Chapter 163, Part III. The Pompano Beach Community Redevelopment Agency is funded through Tax Increment Financing (TIF). The funds are collected as property values increase and a portion of that increase is captured by the Agency. TIF raises revenue for redevelopment efforts without raising taxes.



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ARTISTS' TALK TO ADDRESS DISCRIMINATION AND DISPARITY



STAFF REPORT— JANUARY 4, 2018

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Black Lives Matter

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Delray Beach, FL – Socially conscious artists will have a chance to speak about what's on their minds on Jan. 6, during a free Artists' Talk on "Discrimination and Disparity," from 11 a.m.- 12:00 p.m. at the Spady Museum, 170 NW 5th Avenue, in Delray Beach, FL.

Held in conjunction with the current exhibit, "Discrimination and Disparity: Relentlessly Persisting," the Artists' Talk will invite local and regional artists to participate in a conversation, Q&A and panel discussion about their inspirations and processes.

Confirmed presenting artists include Artists For Black Lives Matter Collective, Emilio Martinez, Kandy G. Lopez, Onajide Shabaka, William Cordova and Yanira Collado.

In December, The Artists for Black Lives Matter held a panel making workshop to create a piece of art to be included in the current exhibit, 'Discrimination and Disparity: Relentlessly Persisting,' on display through Feb. 28. Free supplies were distributed for people to create additions to the community-sourced, panel wall installation.

The Artists for Black Lives Matter collective is a safe space for artists to creatively express themselves around issues pertaining to Black Lives Matter. It combines exhibitions, workshops, social engagement and peaceful awareness campaigns surrounding Black Lives Matter issues, including police brutality and the loss of life due to racial injustice.

Artists and activists Niki Lopez, Allison Kotzig, Richard Wright and Alana D. Da Costa run the collective.

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[Warrior Woman: Niki Lopez speaks her truth through art](#)

Posted on 03 July 2019 by LeslieM

By Rachel Galvin

That which tried to break her only made her stronger. Battered and scarred, her body has suffered the blows. Her will has suffered the abuse, but she has emerged a warrior in more ways than one, expressing her truth through art in the hopes to help others. Like the Japanese art of Kintsugi, she has been broken but put herself back together, scars and all, and has revealed herself to the world ... Indeed, Niki Lopez has a tale to tell and she does it as often as she can. She *is* the elephant in the room that no one wants to discuss. But you would never know it by giving her a cursory glance.

The first impression of Niki, with her magenta braids and shining smile, is only that this is a girl you want to know. Friendly, talented, charming all describe her but, when you get to know her story, you realize she is much more. You realize you can add words like brave, hero and survivor to that list.



A slideshow showing a piece of Niki's artwork

You may have seen Niki's story in *People Magazine*. The front page has her picture in the top right hand corner teasing to the article, telling you that her story is about how she escaped from a child sex-cult. It was also featured on TV on *Investigation Discovery*.

At an event on May 30 at the Pompano Beach Cultural Center, she told the audience more about her journey. At age 11, she and her brother and sister were taken by her mother to join a cult, the United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors. There, men and women were separated, and the children were put into age groups. She was exposed to physical and later sexual abuse by the leader of the group. When she finally was able to escape at age 25, she was malnourished, lacked proper schooling and only weighed 100 lbs.; she had nothing and had no idea where to go. When she left, she wanted to leave and never go back, not think about it and



Niki Lopez

— a sculpture inspired
by the Japanese art of
Kintsugi.

try to build a new life. But when she tracked down her biological father, he said that she needed to go back and save the other children, including her siblings ... and she did just that. Not only that, but she worked with the FBI to put the leader of the cult away. He is still serving time. The FBI gave her a humanitarian award for her efforts.

But these actions caused a toll on her, not only having to relive her tale, but because she still is receiving ridicule and threats from people. It has not been easy, but she has persevered and, today, she speaks about the ordeal hoping to help others who have suffered abuse by letting them know they are not alone, and also that it is OK to share their own stories. It took many years for her to be able to speak about it, but now she conducts “What’s Your Elephant?” events to encourage people to discuss or artistically communicate their “elephant,” the thing people don’t want to talk about that affects their lives.

She also does a lot of mixed media artwork, graphic design and filmmaking as well, including being involved with the award-winning all women (mostly LGBTQ) film team 1310 Bandits in Ft. Lauderdale.

As part of her presentation, she showed a powerful short artistic film she did called “Caressed.” In it, she is artistically lit, dimmed, shadowed, standing naked with fishing line wrapped around her body being tugged by hands on each side, causing marks on her body, rippling of skin, yanking at her mouth, disfiguring her – all physical manifestations of the feelings she has felt inside of what it is like to be manipulated and forced to do things against her will. Over the images is a poem she wrote focused on a traumatic memory from her experiences in the cult.

She has become well-known in the LGBTQ community. She was just made Grand Marshal of the Wilton Manors Stonewall Pride Parade, in which she rode in a car alongside her girlfriend, and was recognized as the ‘Future of Advocacy.’ The duo just worked on producing a performance called “I’m Coming: A Performance Project” featuring stories of coming out by members of the community, presented at The Vanguard theater. She is also one of the co-founders of Artists for Black Lives Matter. She also has started her own online broadcast on Facebook live called The Circle in which she often interviews local activists, social entrepreneurs and creative sorts. It is on every Tuesday from 8:30 to 9 p.m. on <http://facebook.com/nikilopezcreative>. She has even been a curator and taught art.



Sheila Alexander & Grecia Garrett, of FeminAfrika, drummed world music at Niki's event, May 30, at the Pompano Beach Cultural Center.

At her event at the cultural center, she had two women – Sheila Alexander & Grecia Garrett, from FeminAfrika, drumming world music as a precursor to Niki's talk, which included a slide show showcasing some of her art, her film and pictures from some of her events and workshops. The event was emceed by spoken word poet Eccentric, who said the center is three years old now and that Niki's performance was part of a series called “Montage,” which focuses around film. This was the 5th installment. She talked about other local centers that people may want to check out, including the nearby Bailey Contemporary Arts (BaCA), Ali Cultural Arts and the Blanche Ely Historical Museum.

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OCTOBER 19, 2018

Art & Life with Niki Lopez



LOCAL STORIES



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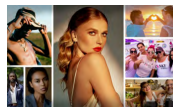
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Today we'd like to introduce you to Niki Lopez.

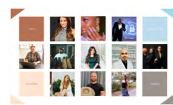
Niki, please kick things off for us by telling us about yourself and your journey so far. I held a

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Today we'd like to introduce you to Jordan Mars....

THE FOLKS SOLVING THE
PROBLEMS YOU NEED SOLVEDCOMMUNITY MEMBER
SPOTLIGHTS

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ever held a
pencil. I've
always
been into
art... and
my
grandmoth
er held on
to some art
I 'sold' her
as a child—
which for
me
validates
that I have
always
been an
entreprene
urial spirit.
In the art
world, I'm
an explorer
of sorts,
working
with
various
media and
have used
my creative
talents,
skills and
passions as

CONNECT





contribute
to many
organizatio
ns over the
years. Be it
my art,
cultural
programmi
ng, sharing
resources
or graphic
design
skills, it
has always
been an
honor to be
a part of
creating
change in
the
community
and
working
with others
who impact
the LGBTQ
and Afro-
Latina
communiti
es,
women/fe
minists

CONNECT





color and
sexual
abuse
survivors—
of which I
am one.

I grew up
in a pro-
black,
religious
cult that
was
recently
featured on
Investigati
on
Discovery
Channel
and People
Magazine.
Members
experience
d sexual
abuse,
emotional
abuse,
grooming,
and other
traumas. I
survived
multiple

CONNECT





get out,
grow, and
help to put
the
perpetrator
behind
bars. I
literally
started my
life from
scratch at
25 years
old. I put
myself
through
school,
found my
biological
father and
reconnecte
d to a
family I
was
separated
from since
I moved
into the
cult at age
11. In 2004,
I was
awarded
the Louis E.

CONNECT





Service
Award—the
highest
civilian
humanitari
an award,
given
annually by
the FBI in
connection
to my
involvement
with the
case.
Looking
back, I
realized
when my
voice was
taken away
and
through all
the things I
had to
survive, art
has always
been my
refuge.
After
leaving the
cult in
Georgia, I

CONNECT





my
childhood
love of art.
I moved to
Florida and
became
one of the
original
members
of an art
community
in Fort
Lauderdale
—the
Sailboat
Bend
Artists
Communit
y also
called 1310
Gallery. I
started
exploring a
new
medium,
painting
with
acrylics,
while
developing
skills as a
curator and

CONNECT





designer,
while
volunteerin
g for many
local
organizatio
ns within
the South
Florida
region. I
have a son
that was
born and
raised in
the art
community
and I can
remember
sometimes
doing live
art events
with him
right on my
hip.
During this
time, while
I busied
myself with
art, my
past was
still
untouched.

CONNECT





was born:
'What's
Your
Elephant.'
It uses the
arts to
address
various
unspoken
topics
including
gender
discriminat
ion, abuse,
the power
of sharing
and how
the arts can
be used to
heal, to
empower,
and to
educate.
For the first
time, I
started
developing
work that
addressed
some of my
own
'elephants.'

CONNECT





cathartic,
and I
wanted
others to
share in
that
experience
as well. My
intentions
for
#whatsyour
elephant is
to create a
safe space
where
people can
share and
bring
awareness.
I started
speaking
out on
panels and
at
symposium
s about my
experience
s as a
survivor,
my work as
an artist,
and the

CONNECT





activism
I'm
involved
with.
My creative
activism
includes
being a co-
founder for
Artists for
Black Lives
Matter, as
well 1310
Bandits,
nationally
recognized
award-
winning,
visionary
team of
female-led,
predomina
ntly LGBTQ
filmmakers
.

One of my
favorite
quotes is:
“You must
be the
change you

CONNECT





world.” -

Mahatma

Gandhi

**Can you
give our
readers
some
backgroun
d on your
art?**

My body of
work spans
across
paintings,
mixed
media,
mixed
media
sculptures,
installation
and video.

There are
several
mask
pieces.
Many of
the works
are
representat
ional and
colorful.
You will

CONNECT





swirls,
mark-
making and
symbols.
Each piece
has a
layered
story. Many
of them are
fragments
of my story
and my
way of
making
sense of my
past and
present.

I love to
explore and
share
subjects
that are not
always so
easily
acceptable
or known.
The
intention is
to create
dialogue,
explore

CONNECT





and
concepts
from
ancient
cultures
and
ideologies,
as well as
provoke
thought as
to the
probability
of life in
other
dimensions
, multiple
universes
and
galaxies,
how they
are all
inter-
connected
with us
here on
planet
earth. For
example,
one of my
pieces
titled
'Olmec-

CONNECT





meant to
touch on
the
Africans
that are the
noted as
the father
of the
Mayans
and Aztec
civilization
and came
to the
Americas
thousands
of years
before the
slave ships.
Some of my
pieces
dance with
the Yoruba
culture,
which
predates
these
modern
religions
such as
Christianit
y. I'm
fascinated

CONNECT





many
meanings—
the masks
we wear
and the
masks I am
uncovering
as a
journey
within. I'm
connected
to the
process and
exploration

,
sometimes
more so
than the
final piece.
There is an
energy
exchange
as I touch
the
materials. I
love to
explore
with paper
mache,
pulp, clay,
and other
materials.

CONNECT





work to
music,
which can
have an
impact on
how the
piece and
the colors
develop.
There are
several
layers to
my work
and I invite
people to
explore
them and
ask
questions.

**What
would you
recommen
d to an
artist new
to the city,
or to art,
in terms of
meeting
and
connectin
g with
other**

CONNECT





Living in
an art
community
like I do,
offers
many
opportuniti
es to be
connected
with other
artists,
however,
for artist
who
doesn't
have that
access,
finding a
community
that
nurtures
you
supports
your
growth is
very
important.
There are
local art
incubators
that foster
growth and

CONNECT





online
communiti
es on
Facebook
and other
social
media
outlets.
There are
also
meetups
focused on
the arts,
various art
walks, and
small
pockets of
art
communiti
es
throughout
South
Florida and
beyond.

Don't be
afraid to
get out of
your
comfort
zone and
your norm.

CONNECT





and
connect
with other
artists even
if they in a
different
field of art.
Visual
artists can
benefit
from being
around
performing
artists and
visa versa.
Don't give
up on your
passion.
Consistenc
y is the key.
Even when
you can't
fully see
the
financial
benefit.
If you can't
find a
community
you fully
connect
with, start

CONNECT





If you build
it, they will
come.

**What's the
best way
for
someone
to check
out your
work and
provide
support?**

I recently
closed my
10th
annual art
exhibition
at the 1310
Gallery. It
is also the
5th annual
'What's
Your
Elephant'
art
exhibition.
I curate
this annual
group
exhibition
at this
artist that

CONNECT





performanc
e and
cumminity
outreach. I
also show
work or in
various
exhibition
or curate
within
South
Florida.
The best
thing
would be to
follow me
on
Facebook,
Instagram
or Twitter
or log on to
my website
and sign up
for the
email.
Currently I
have a
mixed
media
sculpture
titled 'The
Guardian'

CONNECT





November
25 at Tedds
ART Works,
2422 North
Dixie
Highway,
Wilton
Manors
Florida,
33305.

If you are
local, you
can contact
me to
schedule a
private
studio visit.
People can
support my
work by
purchasing
my pieces,
as well as
booking me
to speak on
certain
topics,
hiring me
as a
curator, or
cultural

CONNECT





facilitate
one of my
‘What’s
Your
Elephant’
workshop
at their
gallery,
organizatio
n or group.
I’m an
interdiscipl
inary artist
and have
several
works from
paintings,
sculptures,
mixed
media, and
video
installation
s. There is
a branded
art t-shirt
that
supports
the growth
of ‘What’s
Your
Elephant.’
Support is

CONNECT






work, my
links and
my
projects.
You can
tune into
my weekly
Facebook
live
broadcast
called The
Circle every
Tuesday
8:30-9PM
EST on
[http://face
book.com/
nikilopezcr
eative](http://facebook.com/nikilopezcreative). The
Circle is a
weekly
series
sharing
stories of
our
creative
community
, activists,
and social
entreprene
urs.


CONNECT




- **Address:**
1310
SW
2nd
Court
Studio
O
#109
Fort
Lauderdale,
FL
33312
- **Website:**
<http://nikiaartstudio.com>
- **Phone:** 305-975-6262

CONNECT







kilop
ez@
gmai
l.co
m

- Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/nikilopez19> and <http://www.insta-gra-m.com/w/hats/your-elephant>

- Facebook

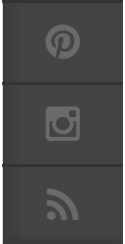
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.face
book
.com
/niki
lope
zart
and
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CONNECT



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ram.
com/
nikil
opez
crea
tive

CONNECT



(Main image) courtesy photographer Micheal Anthony Clark.

(2nd Image with me with black dress with my hand on my sculpture with all the words behing me,) courtesy photographer Robyn Martin

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VoyageMIA is built on recommendations from the community ; it’s how we uncover hidden

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someone
who
deserves
recognition
please let
us know
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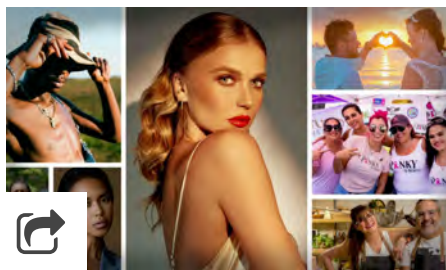
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next time I
comment.

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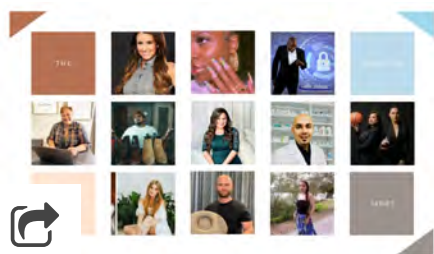
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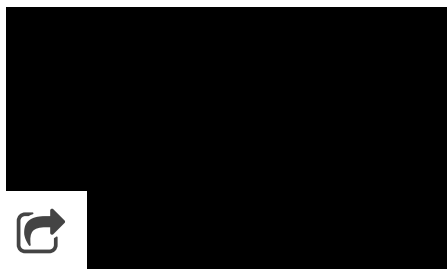
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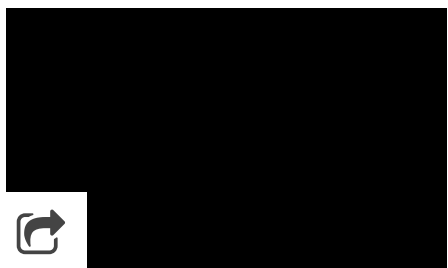
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