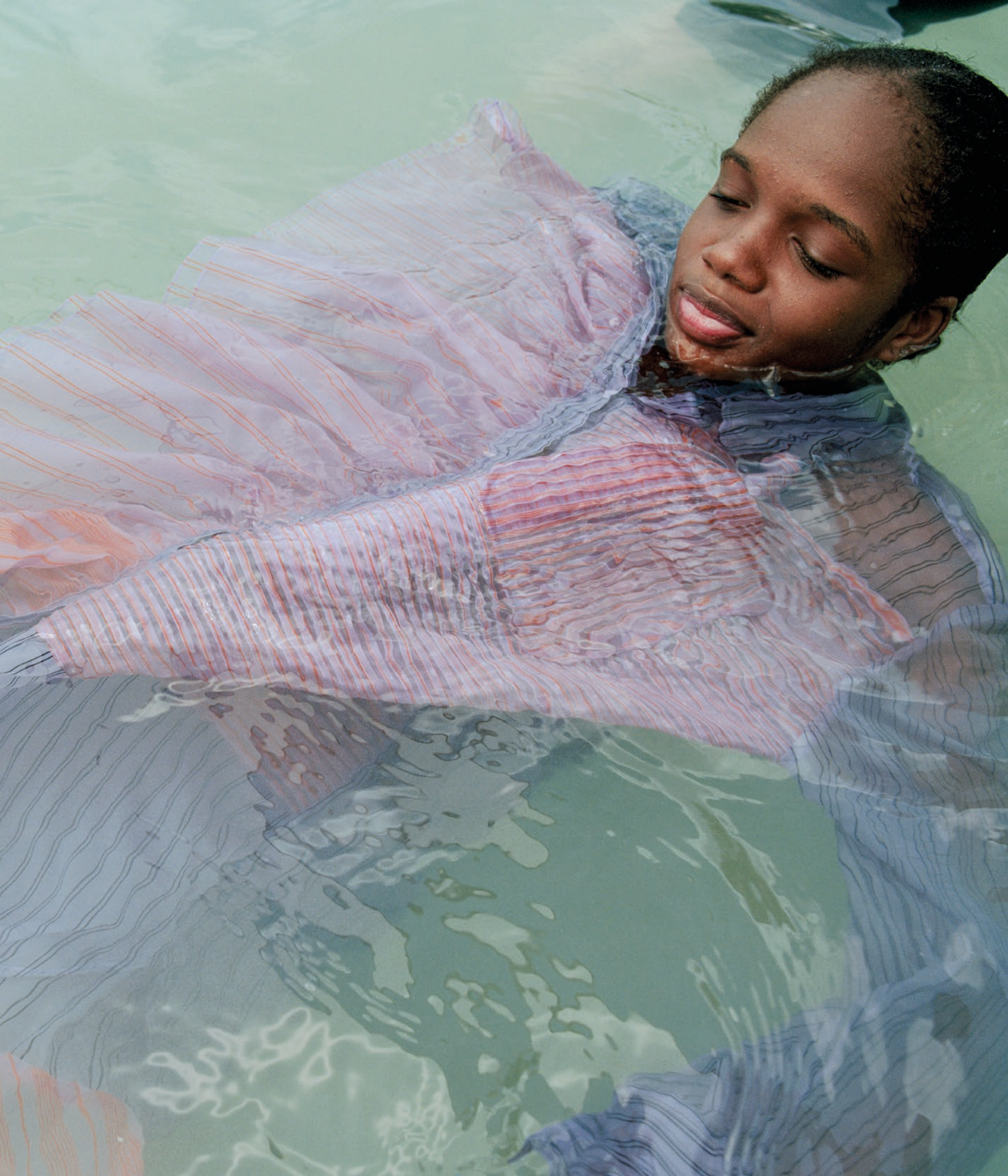
NADINE IJEWERE

OUR OWN SELVES

PRESTEL
Munich · London · New York

Nina Ricci, Spring/Summer, 2020



LYNETTE NYLANDER
London, June 2021

I remember clearly the first time I came across Nadine Ijewere's work.

As a young editor, I had become disillusioned and disappointed. Diversity had become a buzzword that was being peddled for relevancy but I felt it had little effect. While conversation felt progressive around who was in front of the camera, little conversation ever dwelled on who worked on creating fashion images. The stylists creating the sartorial language, the editors deciding the message, and of course the photographer – who is tasked with creating a timely but lasting image of beauty and allure –, I had observed, went under the radar of scrutiny as long as a model was of colour. I wondered who, what and when would ever lead the change.

The image was of a young Black woman sitting amongst an array of greenery while sitting calmly and gazing directly into the camera. It was a photo that was part of the series *The Misrepresentation of Representation*, which to me encapsulated how I had been feeling in a simple and powerful statement. It asked, in short: Why are we making images, for whom and what are they meant to stand for?

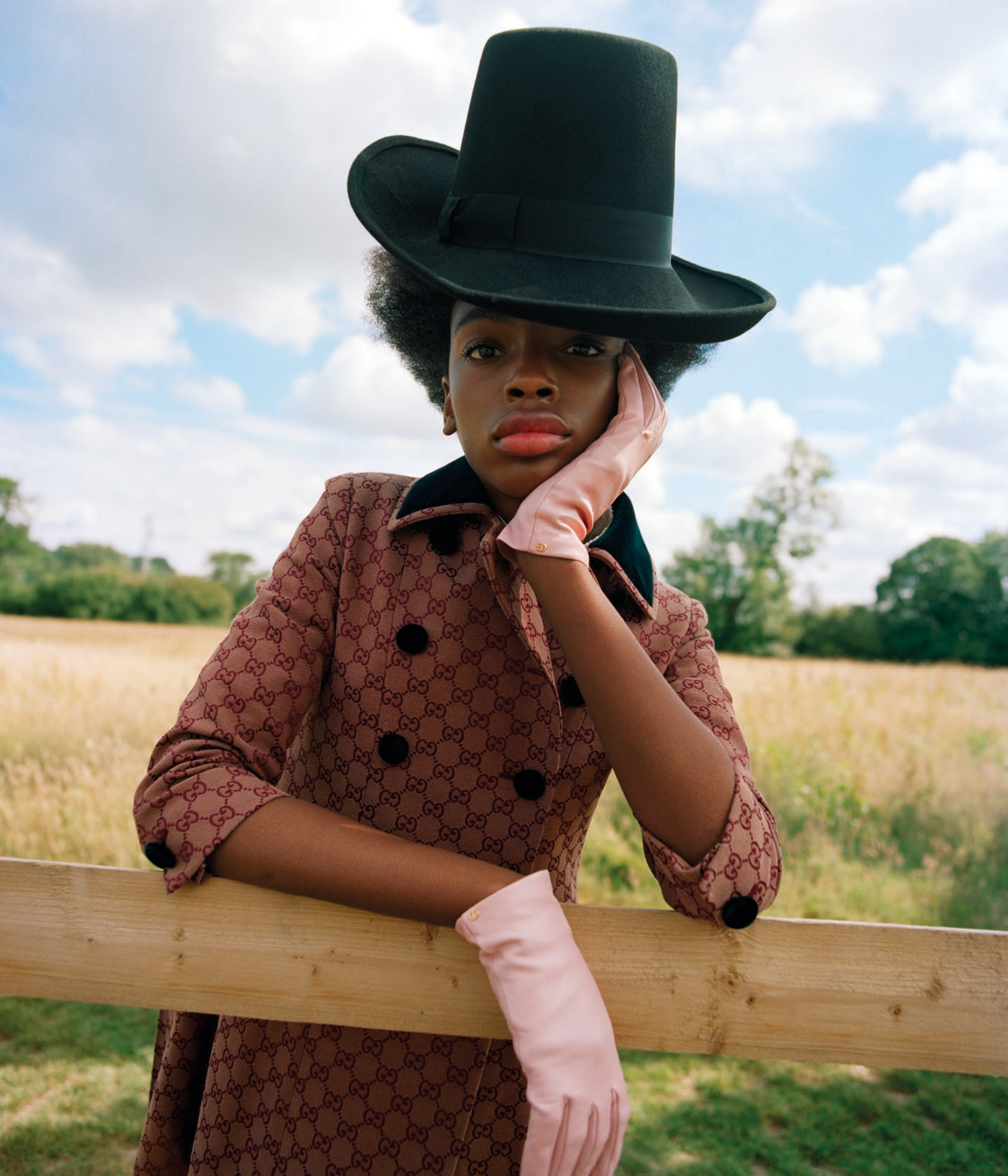
From the initial image, you could see all the potential of a wonderful image-maker and undoubtedly knew she had "the eye". A beautiful consideration of light and composition and colour, but what struck me and continues to strike me about Nadine's work is the comforting sense of familiarity. Hers are images that tell stories of people you know, or that you want to know. The stories of the women who raised me. Mothers, sisters, aunties and friends.

The happiness, joy and warmth that can be missing from contemporary fashion images are abundantly free-flowing through Nadine's work. She carefully considers the symbiotic relationship between her own point of view and her subject with every frame, and with it something magical happens with every click of her camera.

A woman photographing a woman is a beautiful thing; a Black woman photographing other Black women is beautiful and validating. Nadine is acutely aware to celebrate the majesty of Black hair, Black skin and Black faces. This is not to say she doesn't do justice to people of all skin tones, but the presence of Black women in her photographs feels like a potent freedom of expression and one, as a fellow Black woman – whose beauty is often miscommunicated as otherness – that feels affirming and an ascension of our cultural identity.

It doesn't surprise me at all that Nadine's first monograph has come relatively early in her career. Culture has finally caught up with her work. Nadine has often been the "first" to shoot a lot of milestones as a Black female photographer, but to categorise her in such binary terms feels like a waste of her individualism and identity.

I instead ask myself: What is next, and, more interestingly, what will it look like? How will Nadine's insight set a standard for what one sees and how one sees it?



Lynette Nylander: Let's start. Honestly this is going to be fun because I really don't know that much about your beginnings. Tell me a little bit about how you grew up, where you grew up and what your formative years were like.

Nadine Ijewere: Well, I've been in South East London my whole life. First in Peckham and then we moved to the Plumstead area.

LN: Who's we?

NI: My parents separated when I was nine. I pretty much grew up with my mother. I saw my Dad on weekends. He lived in Kent, in Canterbury, so I'd go see him every two weeks. I don't think it played too much into my childhood but I always remember just feeling like I stood out a little bit in Canterbury.

LN: From an outsider perspective, I think I probably see elements of those places in your work. Peckham High Street, regardless of any sort of optics, had this incredible vibrancy that I see in your photographs. Peckham back then would stimulate all my senses. The colours, the sounds, all of the hair salons, which of course comes to mind when I think of your work. Peckham still is a resplendent show of Black pride, to be honest.

NI: I didn't appreciate all of that when I was younger, but actually as I got older I valued that as part of my identity a lot more. I cherish that way of life. It clicked more as I matured. When I was younger, I was just like: "I need to get out of here, I can't wait." But now, I love it. The people watching, the uncles that come from Nigeria and Ghana, their personalities and their style and all that they wear, I really appreciate it. It brings a smile to my face.

LN: It's frustrating we are so cynical when we are younger. I think one doesn't have the foresight. One doesn't have the distance of being away from it for you to always come back and appreciate it.
I don't know if you believe much in Saturn returns or know much about them. Your Saturn return is meant to happen between the ages of around twenty-nine to thirty-one, I think, and it's a belief based on star signs and interplanetary connections. It's a belief that you go through sort of a homecoming or a return to self around this age.

NI: I do feel really nostalgic at twenty-nine. Like I just miss the way things were. You know what I mean? Perhaps things just felt simpler.

LN: I agree, though I try to stop myself. I think nostalgia can be really dangerous. You idealistically look back.
So, tell me a little bit about what you were like as a child. What were your friends like? Were you quiet or loud? Was your creativity encouraged?

NI: I was kind of in the middle. I wasn't very loud, I was quite shy but I had a good group of friends. A lot of banter. I did get bullied in school because of my height, which was quite difficult for me. I didn't like walking down school corridors because there were certain people that would make comments. I still get self-conscious because people still stare because I'm very tall. It bothers me less now because I can't change it. I just roll with it.
I think in terms of my friends, I had two sets of friends. I had my Black friends and my white friends. I think with my Black friends it was the way I spoke or I wasn't really deep in the know about Black culture, so that's why they referred to me as being more white. Plus my Black friends were from my previous school and I would hang out with them more on weekends.

LN: What did you do and what were you into?

NI: We'd have barbecues, hang out at each other's houses. Clubbing, shopping... normal stuff. We'd get like thirty pounds and we'd go shopping for whatever we could get. I always remember my hair being a big thing. I just never felt comfortable with it. It's not until probably like last year that I've been comfortable with my own natural hair and wearing it out. Wigs, weaves, braids, I've done it all and I guess I really internalised this whole thing of braids not being accepted or not being seen as beautiful. It's only in recent years that I love wearing braids. Before that, I straightened my hair and had my hair relaxed.

LN: Do you remember cutting it all off?

NI: Yes, I remember cutting it off. Jawara [Wauchope] cut it off for me right before the pandemic. I think as you get older, you just get on with it. And it doesn't matter. It's not a big thing, but it took me all that time to figure out. I used to not be able to leave the house if I didn't have a wig.

LN: I know that well. There is both an internal and external battle of acceptance with Black hair. So tell me about where photography became an interest?

NI: I went to study in sixth form and that was when I first started to dabble in photography. I was actually going to study medicine. My parents thought I should do something more academic. Well, it was more my Dad, my Mum was always like: "Do what you want to do." They had a darkroom so we could process the film ourselves.
I just got this incredible rush of excitement of shooting a roll of film and not seeing it until you'd processed it yourself and being so excited to see the images come up on the paper.
I loved the patience of really thinking about the image you were going to take and the limit on how many frames you have on a film roll.

LN: Do you remember the first photo you took?

NI: Yeah, it was a radiator in school! We were learning about depth of field and I got this camera from an old car boot sale in Canterbury. It was an old 35mm camera. A Zenith, I think that's how it's pronounced. Russian, made in the USSR, 35mm camera with a couple of lenses for fifteen or twenty pounds.
I think my passions for taking pictures just started to unfold more. I'd always loved looking through fashion magazines. My Mum's very into that. I think at that point, when I started exploring photography in the magazines which I'd flick through, I would think to myself: "Well..." I never saw anyone that really looked like my friends or anyone I could relate to in those images. If they were people of colour or Black women they were all light-skinned, and had European features. If they had curly hair, it was blow-dried straight to match the white women. None of my friends really looked like that.
When I was learning photography, we'd explore different techniques. We'd do still life, we'd do portraits, we'd do landscapes. I was drawn to photographing people the most. So I then started shooting my friends. We'd get suitcases full of clothes from our wardrobes and we'd drag it to the park and we'd just take pictures and have fun. I became the designated photographer and I quickly realised I didn't want to study medicine, so I had to redo a year to be able to do art so I could study photography, but I never ever saw the possibility of photography as a career.

LN: What were you trying to do?

NI: I actually have no idea! I think in my third year you get to explore as part of your dissertation. That was my point of thinking: "I'm just going to take photographs of people who look like me and question why there's only one type of beauty?" I was sick of the stereotypes. In an editorial of Black woman you'd see there'd always be references to animal prints or animals. The same for Asian women. It was

this connotation of being obedient. I started to question: "Well these must have come from somewhere", and that led me on to my study of the other. Flipping those ideas in reverse, if that makes sense. So, you could never really know where someone is from, you never really know their true identity. Proposing the question of "Why is it that we place these stereotypes on certain types of people?"
From there I just started taking pictures with my friends, celebrating hair with someone who has an amazing afro for a beauty story. I really felt like I resonated with that because even though I had my own relationship with my own hair and my own identity, I didn't want to conform to what the industry was saying was beautiful. From that exploration of my socials, brands and the galleries became interested in my work.

LN: I'd be very interested to know if you remember what grade you got for the final project?

NI: I think it was a B.

LN: Okay. It wasn't misunderstood but it wasn't an A.

NI: I think my research wasn't up to standards. They don't really grade you on your final images because art is subjective, so they have to grade you on your research and how you got there. I didn't like sticking pictures in a research book and telling you why something is the way it is. I am more: "Just let me do it!" I still struggle with that.

LN: What's your relationship with your work on social media? Instagram is where I first saw your work. Did you start posting it on there because you thought you could get something out of it?

NI: I have this love-hate relationship with Instagram. Social media – I think it was super helpful for me, but it's something I think can be quite toxic. I don't want to be thinking: "I have this idea but will people like it?", because ultimately I don't take pictures for people. I take pictures for myself. I just needed to separate that. I want to take my photographs because I love and believe in the idea. I do think a good thing about social media is that it gives an opportunity for different sorts of images to be seen. For example, when I'm doing my research for inspiration I can never find those sorts of images because they don't exist. Even today, they haven't been created yet. That's what's so exciting about this generation of artists. It's like we're creating those references and those images to inspire people and share them with the world.

LN: I suppose it's really about thinking: "What do I really want to say?" And to go at your own pace. I think that's the thing about fashion, it sometimes doesn't really allow that much time or space for people who want to go at their own pace. Giving the space to understand everything you do. You've also broken so many boundaries. You are the first "this" and "that", and, don't get me wrong, every boundary that you break is really important. They normalise things and that's what we really want to get to, but I would imagine it's a lot of pressure. I remember this idea of being the last first. And I really loved that as an idea.

NI: Being the last first?

LN: Yeah. Someone asked someone in an interview: "Well, how does it feel to be the first Black woman", or whatever, right? And they spoke about only be satisfied when all these glass ceilings are broken – being the last first.

NI: Whilst I'm grateful for the opportunities to have been able to do these incredible things and be the first on some occasions, immense pressure is also something that comes with it. It's almost like you become this spokesperson for your community and you have this responsibility. Of course this wasn't something I had set out to do and I used to battle with this, but I have learned that it's going to be a constant as

society likes to categorise and create labels as such. Instead, I now look to use these opportunities to open up spaces for others and break down those boundaries. Speaking of pressure, another side to it is that people are waiting to see what you do next; it's a lot like you have to constantly perform. I'm getting better at it but it's taken me a while, getting back to the space where I take pictures because I love taking pictures, you know.

LN: Yes, as frustrating as this is, I often think about those who never even got a chance to be the first. Those who gave up because they never perhaps got an opportunity to try.

NI: We are that first wave, if you like, of our generation; there's not really been this group of Black photographers before us. We have an attachment to our skin colour and our background and where we're from, but we aren't all the same. We are going to have a completely different experience.

LN: Completely! There is such nuance in people's individual experience. For example, there's such a whimsy and lightness to the sort of world that you're creating. How conscious of that are you about creating a purposeful kind of world?

NI: I think it's just something that comes naturally with my style of photography. It's something that's quite fluid, but I always want to capture someone in the most elevated and beautiful way possible. I like to play around with composition and angles. I want to create something that excites me.
I get super anxious before every shoot I do; I can never go in and just take the picture. There will always be this feeling I need to push for more, whether that's through what I get the person I'm photographing to do or the emotion I'm trying to evoke or the perspective or the composition. I struggle to take just a "straight-up" image. I think that can be interesting, but I couldn't do stories and things that are all the way through like that. There has to be something dynamic in the photography aspect as well.

LN: When you say dynamic, what do you mean?

NI: The perspective, for instance, I love a sense of movement within the images so that they're not quite static. Sometimes some people are kind of cut off or their full body isn't in frame. I don't mind that because that's the energy I like, to go in and it's in the moment and there's a flow to it, if that makes sense.

LN: And where did that come from? Are there photographers that you feel inspired by and that have that kind of dynamism in their own work that you try to apply to your own?

NI: There's always an element of documentary photography I guess. There's a moment going on. It feels real.
Does that make sense? I don't know. I always love the photographs in the 1990s and stuff where they had group stories and there was this energy to them. There was this presence to them.

LN: Why do you think that is?

NI: Maybe because of the focus on the product. I always want my model to come through. I don't really see them as a flat canvas in a way, like "a model wears the clothes by X", and that's that.

LN: In person, you're quite subdued, in a really calming way, but your photographs suggest a kind of almost bombasticness. I wonder if you use your photographs as a vehicle to almost speak or have a different side of your personality come through?

NI: Maybe. I think when people get to know me, I like to joke and not take stuff too seriously. I think it's just a

preference for communicating what visually stimulates me and what I'm interested in capturing. For me it's about more than just the fashion or the garment. For me it's the whole story. I like to be part of the whole process. I don't just rock up and then it's just the photography because I think all those elements tie together.

LN: How often do you get to shoot your own personal work?

NI: Maybe I'll shoot a personal project once a year or every two years. I just think it's when the time is right. That's how I get projects like *Tallawah* or *Same/Difference*. It has to be something where I have a concept that I'm really, really passionate about.
Fashion photography is very male-dominated and I think I do what I do in the hopes that it just encourages more women of colour to pick up a camera and feel that they can be photographers, stylists and make-up artists. There's space for them in this industry. We need more of you please.

LN: It's weird because the industry is geared towards the purses and the identity and the insecurity of females, particularly younger females. It's actually younger females and older females. Young females who are more susceptible to feeling insecure and older women who are being told culturally that they're irrelevant, but they have the money and then the industry is ruled by men, mostly white men. Mostly older white men who don't fit into any of those demographics at all.
With all that in mind, how do you feel about, I guess, the future of image-making? What are your thoughts on where we're going and how do you want to show up within that space?

NI: I think there are so many images out in the world. I think about what I'm doing each day. I'd rather be putting out less images, but I'm putting it into stories or projects that I'm super in love with, and have space to develop. I'd much rather do that than be churning out images constantly. I like to have the time and space to really develop and really work on an idea and a concept and really be in love with it, and then shoot it. Then I know that all those elements have come together and that's it.