

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

Charleston  
How Lisa Brice set Nina Hamnett Free  
Katy Hessel  
7 July 2021

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## How Lisa Brice set Nina Hamnett free



Image: Lisa Brice, Untitled, 2021. Oil on tracing paper, Copyright Lisa Brice. Courtesy the artist; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and Salon 94, New York.

A woman stands over a mirror, naked, painting a likeness to Gustave Courbet's 'The Origin of the World' (1866). Another, also nude, sits in a café reminiscent of Edgar Degas' 'L'Absinthe' (c.1875). Her expression no longer blank, but rather saddled with defiance, a glare in her eye. There's also the woman evoking the in-profile character in Felix Vallotton's 'La Blanche et la Noire' (1913). She could be any one of the mighty, formidable women smoking. And then there's the figure in a long, chequered dress and thin, cross-lace boots. This is Nina Hamnett, from Roger Fry's portrait. Set free, like the others, into the 21st century.



Image: Lisa Brice, Untitled, 2021. Oil on tracing paper, Copyright Lisa Brice. Courtesy the artist; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and Salon 94, New York.

'I like to think of her setting all these women free. Free from a history which tried to suppress them, and instead unleashed into the wild as commanders of the canvas.'

Commanding, unruly and powerful, Lisa Brice's blue-toned works reinvent figuration for their contemporary audience. Physically reincarnating female characters from historic paintings, she charges them with power, lifts them from passivity, removes their male chaperone (where necessary), and fills them with determination. For me, it's their forthright stares and unfazed stances. Minding their own business her protagonists inhabit a hot, hazy, liminal space, complete with a beer bottle, and/or cigarette which they puff into a sea of rich blue textures. At times, Brice also gives them a mirror, a canvas, a paintbrush, and palette as if rewriting themselves into history on their terms how they would have wanted to be remembered: confident, defiant, dominant, strong.

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'Brice has reincarnated her as an artist, not model: free from misogyny and the objectification of the day.'

Working around a century apart, it makes sense for Brice to re-immortalise Hamnett. Typically remembered by history as a model and muse, like most Hamnett was 'deadly serious' about her art. A successful professional artist working at the height of British and French Modernism, Hamnett captured the spirit of the age with her angular still lifes and psychologically-charged portraits. From dancers, writers and landladies to fellow artists, she painted them with an unflinching gaze, and was unafraid to tackle the fully nude male. Teeming with intensity, emotion, intimacy and expression, for me, the

work of Hamnett almost feels like a precursor to paintings by the great Alice Neel.



Image: Nina Hamnett, *'The Landlady'*, 1918. Courtesy: private collection; photograph: Bridgeman Images.



Image: Nina Hamnett, *Reclining Man*, 1918. Private Collection.

Going beyond the surface of her subject and into their mind, recording the encounter (tension has never been more present than in *'The Landlady'* (c.1917), Hamnett painted her community and people from all walks of life. (I find a striking familiarity between Hamnett's *'Reclining Man'* (1918), and Neel's *'Ballet Dancer'* (1950): their cramped bodies, and the closeness of them). And like Neel with her bold, commanding (some might say obnoxiously flattering... but who's counting?) *'Self Portrait'* (1980), holding a paintbrush at aged 80, Hamnett also portrayed herself as a controller of the canvas.

To our knowledge, her self portraits are lost with only images now existing. All that remains are the portraits of her by men. That is, until now.

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Image: Nina Hamnett, Self-portrait, 1913; Published in Colour magazine, June 1915

As if to liberate her from the male-gaze-controlled lens, Lisa Brice has re-immortalised Hamnett's 'Self Portrait' (1913) as one of her blue works. No longer remembered as the gaunt, androgynous model, Brice has re-introduced Hamnett to her 21st century audience. Fully clothed, her hand on hip, sporting a large hat and with her arm off to the side (as if applying paint to canvas), which she does exuding confidence, Brice has reincarnated her as an artist, not model: free from misogyny and the objectification of the day. Or, take Hamnett as the bronze nude by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, which we meet in the Spotlight Gallery between the two exhibitions. As if to take ownership of how he sculpted her, Brice has a nude model (who I like to think of as Hamnett) parade in a similar pose, to reclaim his gaze. Taking Hamnett's sketches and recasting them in canvases taller than her body, she also presents Hamnett with the work she would have been offered had she had the opportunity in her day.



Image: Lisa Brice, Untitled, 2021. Oil on tracing paper, Copyright Lisa Brice. Courtesy the artist; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and Salon 94, New York.

Existing in what Brice refers to as the 'gloaming hour' (when day becomes night), I like to think of her setting all these women free. Free from a history which tried to suppress them, and instead unleashed into the wild as commanders of the canvas.