HANNAH EUGENE

IN CONVERSATION WITH BELINDA SCARLETT

**Belinda:** Hi I’m Belinda Scarlett, I’m curator of women in football at the National Football Museum, and I’m here today with Hannah Eugene who is an artist and has recently lent a painting of hers of Raheem Sterling which is Currently on display at the National Football Museum. I’m here to chat to Hannah about her influences, what she wants to achieve in her art, and a little bit about the painting itself and what inspired it. So Hannah, thanks for coming. Please can you tell us a little about you trained as an artist and developed your style?

**Hannah:** I’d say from as young as I can remember I’ve always been interested in art. I can vividly remember randomly asking my dad “can you draw me a puppy”, because I was never allowed a pet, so he did, and it was amazing, and from then I thought either I want to be as good or even better, so it was a little competition I’d say. From then I’ve just always loved art.

**Belinda:** And what are your artistic influences?

**Hannah:** My artist influences range from Jenny Saville, to Kara Walker, Kehinde Wiley, so many. I love the vivid paintings that they use in their art.

**Belinda:** And where did you train to be an artist?

**Hannah:** So I went to Brighton University. I did an Illustration and Graphic Design degree, and I learnt a lot because it was quite broad as well. There was scope to do graphic design, photography, and I’d definitely say from that I was able to branch into wanting to paint.

**Belinda:** Yeah so your work, or at least the Raheem Sterling painting to me looks like it’s very much influenced by traditional fine art approaches to portrait painting. How did that sort of work come about and that style?

**Hannah:** I’ve always been interested in photorealism from a very young age. Although I broadened my horizons and went into fashion and graphic design, that still remained the same. So as I got older, I did loads of different pathways in the creative field. I still wanted to capture paintings in my work definitely, and so I thought why not. I don’t want to live my life and think, oh I could’ve done that and I didn’t.

**Belinda:** What are you trying to achieve with your art?

**Hannah:** For me, because there’s been so many different experiences from different walks of life, capturing the experience of young black professionals, men and women, is very important because I feel like that’s something that isn’t spoken about enough. So I definitely believe you can reach a certain- a level of achievement or success in life, but still feel as though you don’t fit in. So that’s something that I feel that’s an experience that I’ve been through as well. To capture that in my paintings reflects on my experiences and that’s really important, just to open a conversation as well without things being awkward. Through art it can be…easier, definitely.

**Belinda:** Why’ve you chosen to represent football in your work?

**Hannah:** Football is like the nation’s sweetheart, definitely sport for sure. To be able to use that with would be able to echo what I’m trying to say as well because there’s so many footballers who’ve gone through that experience, so it does reflect the theme I’m trying to portray in my work.

**Belinda:** And why did you choose to feature Raheem Sterling?

**Hannah:** Raheem Sterling is just amazing. Everything he does on the pitch and from outside, he does a lot of charity work as well, which I believe has gone unnoticed in the media- they tend to highlight a lot of the negative things about Raheem Sterling. I do believe that is quite unfair, so to capture him in a positive light was very important, and a way that people can reflect and remember his legacy as a footballer.

**Belinda:** Have you ever featured any other footballers, or football in any other paintings that you’ve worked on?

**Hannah:** I’ve actually never featured any other footballers in my paintings so Raheem’s a great start. I feel like I’ve had a good response to my work from painting Raheem Sterling, so I’d definitely love to echo that and use other footballers in my work too.

**Belinda:** To explore the subject of football more, do you think you’d do that?

**Hannah:** Yeah, yeah definitely. I do feel like that’s a market that hasn’t been used that much, so I’d like to do that more.

**Belinda:** I think football generally often isn’t considered worthy of something that you can represent through art, so obviously here we’re trying to change that perception. It’s worthy of looking at through all different artistic ways I suppose. We have the Art of Football exhibition which looks at different types of art- I can’t remember what the oldest one is but people have been painting football or representing football for a long time so it’s really nice to see that that’s carrying on, but also that it’s tackling such important issues as well because I don’t think that they’ve been covered by football arts before to my knowledge. Do you like football and who do you support?

**Hannah:** I love football. I have two brothers who are very into football so I support Man United whoop whoop!

**Belinda:** How did you end up supporting Man United?

**Hannah:** I think it was just- my family supported Man United, so I just grew up around that from young, so that hasn’t really changed and won’t change.

**Belinda:** What are you working on now, and what’s the inspiration for work that you’re creating at the moment?

**Hannah:** At the moment I’m working on a series of paintings a lot of which are photorealistic, and they centre around microaggressions when it comes to the black experience. I’ve always been interested in history and to portray that and reflect on things that I want to see is really important. It’s an interesting way to broaden horizons and create conversation. I feel like art is a great way to start.

**Belinda:** Can you explain a little more about what microaggressions are because I feel that sort of terminology, some people are familiar with it

but other people especially from other generations don’t understand that terminology and how it relates to black experience at all. So could you explain what your understanding of that is and how you’ve chosen to display it?

**Hannah:** Yeah absolutely, so microaggressions can range from the smallest comments such as in the workplace someone might say “oh, you’re alright for a black girl” or you know like, small things like that that might just go over your head, but when you start to think about it you think oh that’s a very weird thing to say. Or people might make comments on your hair, or your hairstyle. Those things can be deemed as a microaggression. That’s why I also wanted to have golliwogs in my paintings, and that reflected on those subjects.

**Belinda:** And the stereotypes I suppose?

**Hannah:** Absolutely, yeah

**Belinda:** So Raheem obviously has been criticised a lot for the way he behaves off the pitch, and other footballers, white footballers, haven’t been criticised in the same way that he has. Would you say that that’s a type of microaggression, would you say that it comes from the same place?

**Hannah:** Yes absolutely because it is clearly unfair how he has been treated and they tend to focus on or highlight all the negative things that he might do because he is quite young and there are other white players of the same ages that might do things that are similar or even worse but those things aren’t highlighted at all so it’s clear to see that there’s a distinction between the attitudes shown towards particular footballers.

**Belinda:** Yeah they’re not given the room to make a mistake.

**Hannah:** Absolutely.

**Belinda:** How does it feel to have your artwork on display at the National Football Museum?

**Hannah:** It feels absolutely amazing. When I was approached, I thought “really, ok that’s great.” So the opportunity to show my work and conjure up a conversation on microaggressions and racial inequality is

really pivotal to the growth of many. And also representation is very key, so just to be able to expand on that is important too.

**Belinda:** I think for us it’s about visibility so at the National Football Museum at the moment, and lots of organisations that are around football, you see there isn’t a lot black people, you see less women, so for us I think it’s really great to have the visibility increased on the gallery it’s something that’s really important to us so thank you for letting us do that as well it’s great.

**Hannah:** Of course no problem, change is so important as well.

**Belinda:** Do you have any advice for other women looking to have a career in art?

**Hannah:** Yes I can say that I am still within the realm of growing into the artist that I want to be, it’s definitely a journey. But I feel as though if you continue to do what you love, then people will eventually see you. It’s that consistency that it pivotal to growth. We are out there so you just need to look.

**Belinda:** Would you say that you’ve had any particularly negative experiences being a woman working in the sector, or a black woman working in the sector, is there any advice you can give for women really trying to push through any negativity they might experience from that?

**Hannah:** I can say that in my experience there might be times when you feel somewhat dismissed, but if you know where you want go and you know your history then there’s no way of stopping you. It’s all about that willingness to have an attitude of positivity. You will come across negative experiences, but that shouldn’t deter you from the path you want to go down. Just keep persevering, that’s what I can say and eventually you will be seen.

**Belinda:** So what’s your opinion on women who work in football or in art being …louder, taking up more space and sort of overcompensating in a way for being pushed back. Do you agree with women like Megan Rapinoe who are very much sort of I’m a woman in football and I’m going to take up this space and I’m going to act how I want, I’m not going to stand in the side-lines? Do you think that’s a positive way to be as a minority of any kind in art or in football?

**Hannah:** It is so important as women and also women of colour to be bold, and I know in certain industries you might feel like there isn’t enough space, but if you make that space then there is scope for you to be part of…that space as well.

**Belinda:** And to influence?

**Hannah:** Yeah definitely to influence.

**Belinda:** How important do you think it is that the National Football Museum tackle issues such as racism in football and society?

**Hannah:** It is very important that the National Football Museum tackles these issues because it broadens people’s horizons. Someone can walk into a gallery and not expect to be seeing work that really challenges perceptions, and it does. The power of art is significant. So we do have a responsibility to make a change and make a stand and take a risk because it’s important to growth.

**Belinda:** I really like that about taking a risk because I think sometimes that’s what museums that are quite conservative overall in their approach to stuff, they need to take a risk to really alter people’s perceptions when they come in. They might not have come into a museum or this museum expecting to see a painting like yours but actually that’s what will maybe have an impact on them when they leave. I’d like to think so anyway. So how’s the public responded to your painting so far, has it been on public display before now?

**Hannah:** I have another painting as well as the one of Raheem Sterling and this is just the beginning of a long series. At first when I painted I wasn’t sure what to expect. I just painted and I thought this is what I want to do, this is the change I want to see. It actually has had a great response. It has helped me to want to continue going down that avenue and striving for a change as well. It’s been really positive.

**Belinda:** And finally, has Raheem seen the painting, and if so what was his response?

**Hannah:** So about that…I uploaded it on Instagram, the painting, and I wasn’t - I uploaded it with no expectation because at the end of the day this is what I want to do, I’m doing it for myself and also for other people to be able to see it and have that conversation. It just so

happened that he came across the painting on Instagram and he commented “wow” and that was enough to make my whole life!

**Belinda:** I’m not surprised!

**Hannah:** Yeah, so it has been a really really good response.

**Belinda:** That’s great, I’m really glad that he likes it as well. He’s very active on social media so to have that response from him is fantastic.

*You can see Hannah Eugene’s artwork on display in the National Football Museum’s Match Gallery until November 2019.*