

STELLA MCCARTNEY

**Nia conquered the web (and Michelle Obama)
with 110 seconds of dance in honour of black excellence**

The dream and is her second life. "Oh god, I love to dance, to tell stories through my body and to do it every day on stages that are always bigger and bigger. Nia Dennis confesses smiling, connected from her light-white room in Los Angeles. But to say she smiles does not give the idea. The sunny expression of this 23-year-old girl from Ohio, a former gymnastics champion, model, pop character of African-American culture, is one of those moments that light up to impress the person in front of her. A year and a half ago Nia went viral with a free-body performance in honour of black excellence, to songs by African-American artists from Kendrick Lamar to Beyonce. One hundred and ten seconds of dance, rhythm, breathtaking somersaults, perfect geometry, fireworks in her legs. And that smile that seemed to say: now I am here and I want to have fun. The coach and her teammates dancing on the sidelines, the screams of the public, the 80,000 likes in a few hours on the video that went viral and was viewed by over 3 million people: none of those seconds were wasted. Michelle Obama called her a star, then a phone call arrived. "It was Stella McCartney," she says. "I thought: this is a joke. It wasn't. The stylist, daughter of the beatle Paul and Linda McCartney, environmental and animal rights activist, had chosen her to wear a diamond blue Adidas dress for the Met Gala in New York, dancing down the steps, part superwoman, part world champion majorettes. Bravura, sure. But Nia was also chosen for kindness. A now-unusual word. Dennis pert, considers it the key to the world, the chain that ultimately holds people together. He says this as a tough girl, capable of breaking down walls and overcoming difficult trials, including one that will emerge here for the first time in the course of our interview.

When did she discover she was kind?

'I think I always have been. When I was little, my mother taught me to treat people the same way I wanted to be treated.

Kind even when the world around was not?

"Growing up it was hard. I was one of the few black girls in a sport dominated by whites. I felt out of place 90 per cent of the time, I was bullied, I was teased because of my skin or my hair: I felt left out all my life. Until I arrived at the University of UCLA and, during my second year, began my healing journey.

While America tried to heal itself from the wounds of racism.

"That's right. There were Black Lives Matter protests. Unfortunately, I couldn't attend because I had shoulder surgery, I was bedridden, but the protest was fantastic. I wanted to contribute, too. I wanted to bring some light and levity into our culture.

And you succeeded on January 23, 2021. In Arizona, free competition on the platform. The performance became viral.

The goal was not to go viral, but to be recognised for what I had to say with sport and my body.

Former first lady Michelle Obama wrote on Twitter: 'You are a star.

"I discovered that message in the middle of a workout, stopped and started screaming. My teammates hugged me. We all jumped together. It was really incredible.

STELLA MCCARTNEY

Bringing black culture into white gymnastics in a divided America, with minorities under attack. Using kindness.

"I want to do things with love. If you don't know people's history, you don't know where they come from, it path the halm made, you can't conquer. Being nice will make you connect with more people. Kindness allows doors to stay open and everyone can get in.

Speaking of doors: tell us about the Met Gala in New York.

'Crazy. Stella McCartney calls me, I mean, she calls me. I thought there were hidden cameras to film me and make a TV joke. She said, 'I want you, I want you to represent me and wear my clothes to the Gala, let's make history.' I said: 'OK, let's make history'. So I got on board, willing to do anything. I like the way she thinks, the world she looks at. It's the same way I had always fought for.

Gymnast, with a degree in sociology and model. What's in your future?

I love dancing, I am so passionate about telling stories through my body. I imagine going out as an artist, as an actress, as a celebrity, to the world. But remaining a solid person, so that whoever needs me I will be ready.

What do you think about when you dance?

You stay focused. Good training makes everything perfect.

But will there be an extra thought in those moments?

You tell yourself that you're the best, no one can stop you, that you're just there with the platform.

You seem amused, even in difficult moments.

"And so. I do it better if I have fun and that's what I tell myself, to have fun even during rehearsals: "Don't forget it Nia".

You can hear a dog barking...

Ah, ah, yes excuse me. He's Cavalier, he's five months old. But I hear barking from her, too. Do you have a dog?

She's Luna, wolf mix, 12 and a half years old.

She laughs. "I want to see her, please. "Hello, baaabyyy...', and so relaxed>.

Glymastic, besides being a tough sport, also has a dark side in the US. The national team doctor, Larry Nassara, was sentenced to 176 years in prison for 20 years of abuse women. "Ever met him?" we ask her. Nia becomes serious, but without losing her composure, as she told us a unpublished episode.

I used to train in another gym, so I didn't have much chance to meet him. But then it happened. I remember this situation where I was with him in a public place and my coach was there. Everyone acted as if they hadn't seen anything, as if everything was normal. I didn't like that. I said I wouldn't go there again.

For 20 years a lot of people have anointed not to see.

STELLA McCARTNEY

Mine remained a negative experience, although not as horrible as that of other girls. It pains me to think what they had to go through. Gymnastics is a tough sport, in addition the pressures of coaches, parents, peers, friends. I will never forget that. I tell it now just to say the I fully stand by these comrades, I stand for all women and the feminist movement #MeToo.

To the Italian girls who will read it on what do you want to say?

Don't try to live through social media and don't make people approve of your life. Live it in the moment, be present, do what makes you happy. Don't let other people put you down. There will always be people who will criticise you, especially on social media.

How can I resist?

One day a week I take a break from social media and take a moment to be alone with myself, trust the girl I am and only give space to what I love. And as she says this, before saying goodbye, Nia widens her smile as she hears her favourite musics and a dance step take shape.

Nia Dennis is an American gymnast, born in Columbus (Ohio) on 23 February 1999. Throughout the shoot, Adidas by Stella McCartney dresses. Stylists; Chasidy Chevonne & Eliza Conlon. Hair, Johnnie Spong. Make-up, Chadd Bell.