

GAGOSIAN

FAMILY STYLE

Dissolve the Real

Nathaniel Mary Quinn made his mark in figuration. Today he's looking into the great unknown.

Annie Armstrong



Well into a successful career conjuring fractured, figural portraits with a [Francis Bacon](#)-esque grotesquerie, [Nathaniel Mary Quinn](#) is eyeing a new terrain: abstraction. He sees it as an aesthetic

practice that you evolve into, not one that can be casually embraced out of interest. “I wanted to be honest about it,” says the 48-year-old of his arduous research into the movement’s history and his deep reverence for its heavyweights.

A gifted artist from a young age, Quinn burst onto the scene in the early 2000s after accidentally stumbling upon his signature figurative style. In a frantic rush to finish a piece for his first show, he painted, off the top of his head, a piece in four scrambled hours—only to look up and realize he had, from memory, rendered the likeness of his brother, Charles. It was someone he hadn’t seen in years, ever since becoming estranged from his family as a teenager.

Through the 2010s, Quinn continued to paint from a studio in Los Angeles and later Brooklyn, creating collage-style faces spliced from different psyches, eventually drawing the attention of [Larry Gagosian](#). “This black S.U.V. pulls up with tinted windows,” he recalls of the gallerist’s first visit to his studio in California. “The back window rolls down, and he goes, ‘Hey, buddy.’ I couldn’t believe it.”

Four shows later, he is stepping away from the imagery that cemented his acclaim, changing course toward the storied expanse of abstraction. It’s a significant step: Abstraction, for all its formal freedom, challenges Quinn’s current practice, which is rooted in more directly tangible representations of people he knows, and people who have influenced him.





There is still a narrative basis, though. [Alice Walker](#) helped him build a bridge into the form. Quinn drew from her 1970 debut novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, using it as raw material for the narrative arc of his new paintings. The book traces three generations of the Copeland family in Jim Crow-era Georgia, charting how the titular character's cycles of trauma and abuse ripple down to his grandchildren—until, late in life, he finally chooses to break the pattern.



The resulting paintings don't illustrate the story so much as they visualize the author's writing sensibility. "Alice Walker doesn't write in a didactic way," Quinn explains. "She doesn't spoon-feed you what these characters look like. She invites the reader—like me—to get involved, to fill in those gaps." Quinn's corresponding paintings abstract Walker's story arcs and character profiles, giving small hints through his bespoke visual language.

Though the body of work, on view this fall, marks a new chapter in Quinn's career, his essential visual language is still present. "It's not my intention to completely eliminate figuration," he says. "But I do aim to create a stronger connective tissue—a more fluid, harmonic relationship between figuration and abstraction."

"Nathaniel Mary Quinn: ECHOES FROM COPELAND" is on view through October 25, 2025, at the Gagosian Gallery at 541 W 24th St, New York, NY 10011.