

GAGOSIAN



NATHANIEL MARY QUINN with Eana Kim

Eana Kim



Portrait of Nathaniel Mary Quinn, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Nathaniel Mary Quinn paints the human figure as fractured yet deeply humane. Since his breakthrough in the mid-2010s, his canvases have staged confrontations of beauty, violence, and memory. Entirely hand-rendered, though often mistaken for collage, they draw from literature and music as much as from painterly legacies of Francis Bacon and Willem de Kooning.

His new body of work, debuting at Gagosian's West 24th Street location this fall, marks a decisive shift. Rooted in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the paintings take literary characters as subjects, weaving narrative and form into what he calls "paint-drawing." Here, fracture and beauty converge with lived history, extending his pursuit to make figuration a site where memory, struggle, and vision collide. In August 2025, I spoke with Quinn in his Brooklyn studio about visions, influences, and the discipline that sustains his practice.



Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Study for Grange Copeland, 2025. Oil paint and gouache on linen canvas stretched over wood panel, 30 × 30 inches.
© Nathaniel Mary Quinn. Courtesy Gagosian. Photo: Jackie Furtado.

Eana Kim (Rail): You've often described beginning with a "vision." What kind of image is that—does it surface from memory, research, or something more elusive?

Nathaniel Mary Quinn: They're just mental pictures that appear. Very natural. I don't force them, they just come. Maybe something in me conjures them, I don't know. But once I get the vision, I can see the painting. I can see what I want to make, and it's visceral. I feel attached to it, and I have to make the painting in accordance with that vision. For example, I once saw a woman in a bed—a diptych stretched out, long. That vision became a painting.

Rail: Once that vision arrives, do you sketch, or does it move directly to canvas?

Quinn: No, I never do pre-sketches. I work from here, from the heart. From a place of being present. That's why my mornings are about creating that state. I wake up, I give thanks, I take a walk with my

wife, I exercise. And then I stand in the studio and I become still. I become present. You feel your body, you feel your breath, your existence. And from that place, the work begins. Not the past, not the future—only right now. That’s all I have, and the painting has to come from that space.

As I work, the solutions for how to translate the vision into material form show themselves. The process has to be as organic as the vision itself. Doing a lot of preparatory sketches, overthinking—it can ruin it. You lose the immediacy. Years of labor sharpen your tools so that when the vision comes, you can trust them.

It’s like Michael Jordan. He practiced so much, but in the game he wasn’t thinking through the plays—he was just being. All those moves, all that instinct, it came because of the preparation. I’ve watched old footage of Usain Bolt’s training. His workouts were horrendous—pushing his body so hard he vomited on the track. But that’s why, in the game and on the track, Michael Jordan and Usain Bolt, respectively, could play with such ease. They trusted the preparation

When you overthink, you make mistakes. You always fail when you overthink everything. But when you’ve done the work—years of work—it becomes easier to be present. That’s how it works. The more you practice, the sharper your skill, the more vivid the expression. And you’ve got to keep going—always sharpening. There’s always more to learn. You’re never finished. You can always be better.

Rail: Your upcoming Gagosian show signals a shift in your visual language. What compelled that change, and how did you know it was time?

Quinn: With this show, I was thinking not only about the subject matter but also about my studio practice itself—about pushing my visual language in a different direction. Not too far removed from what I’ve been doing, but a stretch. It was instinctual, a need that kept gnawing at me. I wanted to push the boundaries of the marriage between figuration and abstraction. I’m a figurative painter at heart—I’m not an abstract painter—but I’ve always had great reverence for abstraction, especially when it merges with the figure.

So I went to London twice, and each trip changed me. The first time was to see Francis Bacon’s exhibition, *Man and Beast* at the Royal Academy of Arts in 2022. The second was at the National Portrait Gallery, where I’d been invited to give a workshop connected to the Bacon show. During the lunch break I walked through the exhibition with my class, and I was in awe. I went back again alone, just to take it in. It was the first time I’d seen those particular works in the flesh, and they floored me.

The earlier show at the Royal Academy had already been overwhelming—so many Bacons under one roof, curated with such precision. I remember walking through and suddenly crying. I was so moved. I felt a kinship with him, even though we came from such different times, places, and circumstances—him born in Ireland, raised in London; me an American, living in another era altogether. What he endured socially and politically is not what I endure. But still, there was this strange sense of recognition, as though I had been there before. That experience completely shifted how I viewed my practice.

I would go on record saying that it's the best exhibition I have ever seen in my life. When I came back to New York, I couldn't shake it. The experience of seeing that show shifted my whole disposition as an artist.

Rail: You've called Bacon a turning point. What aspects of his work stayed with you?

Quinn: Bacon was a genius at merging abstraction and the figure. I was struck by how he solved spatial problems—placing the figure in space with those architectural lines, letting the background open up so the figure could breathe. That stayed with me. It was profoundly informative.

The contrast between his use of flatness and the activity of the figure was especially powerful—those two competing elements.

Rail: The constant distortion, an ongoing dynamic in the figure.

Quinn: Yes, but always within the context of flatness. The backgrounds were flat—not everywhere, but in the right places. And the need was always placed in the figure. So you had this tornado-like activity in the body, the grotesque of it all, set against the stark flatness of the background. That gave the figures room to breathe. It was perfect. And that stayed with me. I thought, “I like that. That's really, really good.” I didn't even know why, but it left an indelible mark on me.

There was also the anguish—you could feel the demons Bacon wrestled with, the distortion and the grotesque as unavoidable facts of life. And because those paintings exist, I can empathize with what he endured, both as a man and as a painter. There's joy in being able to do that.

But still—I'm not Francis Bacon. I don't share his history, his experiences, his demons. So I couldn't just take his solutions and drop them into my work. His practice is an inspirational reference, yes, but not something to copy.

And I never want to be contrived. If you're contrived, even a casual viewer can sense it—it feels fake, like pandering. I can't do that. So I had to ask myself: what's my defense? How do I get above that hurdle? I knew I had to bring myself into the work.



Nathaniel Mary Quinn, *Paint-Drawing Study for Down the River*, 2025. Oil paint, oil pastel, and gouache on linen canvas stretched over wood panel, 18 × 15 inches. © Nathaniel Mary Quinn. Courtesy Gagosian. Photo: Jackie Furtado.

Rail: You've said Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* became a structural model for you. How does literature offer a defense for abstraction in figuration?

Quinn: I've always had great reverence for literature. I love reading. I love good writers.

Years ago, I read *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Everyone knows Alice Walker for *The Color Purple*—that's the big hit. But many people don't know *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, her first book, published back in 1970. It's a tour de force—magnificent. I read it twice when I was teaching, and I never forgot it.

Years later, when I was searching for my own defense for using abstraction in the figure, that book came back to me. Walker structures the novel around different characters, but she never tells you exactly what they look like. She's not didactic or preachy. Instead, she gives you their experiences, their relationships, their inner lives. Through those dynamics you get a sense of them—but not a fixed description. That became the foundation for my defense of abstraction.

Because as a reader, your imagination mobilizes. You begin to picture the characters however you want, shaped by your emotional connection to the text. And that's what I wanted in my painting: figures that are legible and alive, but not locked down in likeness. Abstraction became the space for that.

And if you scan these new works, you'll notice something else—color. I never used color like this before. These swaths of yellow, orange, blue—it almost feels like a colorful resurrection in places. But that's deliberate, too. It's an homage to Walker. Her writing is rich, colorful, poignant, strong, in-your-face, and yet also subtle, soothing, deeply engaging. I was trying to find a way to bring that richness into my painting. The movement in the figures, the bursts of color—that's me trying to visualize the vitality of her prose, to let my paintings carry some of that rhythm. It's also my way of showing respect for great writers, because literature has always been so important to me.

Certain passages in the book produced visions in my mind—mental images that would just appear. Those visions became the seed for the paintings in this show. And while Walker gave me a kind of literary foundation, I also kept turning back to painting itself for answers.

Rail: You've spoken about Bacon and Walker as two key touchstones. But you've also suggested a third influence, rooted in painting's formal language. What is that for you?

Quinn: Yes, the third pillar came from looking at other painters like Willem de Kooning and Michaël Borremans. Especially with Borremans, you see an image and think the canvas must be massive, but when you encounter it, it's tiny. Yet it's packed with intensity. Johannes Vermeer does the same thing—small paintings with enormous activity. And painting on that scale is very difficult. That challenged me.

Even before de Kooning, I was already thinking about how to bring more line into my work, because my first love has always been drawing. The essence of drawing, for me, is line. So I started thinking about a style I call “paint-drawing”—painting and drawing at the same time. Bringing the qualities of drawing into the painted figure.

So those are the three pillars: the inspiration and shift that came from seeing those Bacon exhibitions; my reverence for literature, especially Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*; and then this attempt to introduce “paint-drawing” as a way forward in my practice. That's how I approached this body of work, and I think it will continue to develop as I go.

Rail: Figuration has remained your primary language. Even as abstraction dominates certain conversations, why does the figure remain vital for you? I've just always loved figurative art. Maybe it goes back to my childhood—my first introduction to art was comic books, Marvel comics and things like that. So maybe my love for the figure was born from there.

Quinn: I never felt pushed toward abstraction, or that I had to move away from figuration. The only pressure I felt was internal—this urge to keep pushing myself, to stretch what figuration could be. For example, these new paintings are a departure from what I was known for. My earlier figures had that collage-like aesthetic. People called it collage because I used to demarcate sections of the face and body with sharp lines—almost like construction paper. It created this trompe l'oeil effect, even though everything was done entirely by hand. I never used photographs like a traditional collage artist would.

But these new works are different. I stepped away from that process. Instead of using sharp demarcations to break up the figure, I replaced them with drawn lines. So I'm still working by hand, but in a new way. That was an important shift for me—to move beyond the collage aesthetic and to open the figure toward more abstraction.

Rail: Let's talk about those figures themselves. Who populates your canvases now, and how has that shifted from your earlier work?

Quinn: In this new body of work, the figures come directly from Alice Walker's novel. They're a reflection of her characters. In the past, my figures were based on people I knew—friends, acquaintances, people I met. Now I'm applying that same process to literature.

I've read this book four times. I feel like I have an intimate connection to the characters, to their experiences. This is a Black family in the South, from the 1920s to the 1960s. They live hard lives. Sharecroppers, working for pennies, poor. They dream of someday going north—to Chicago or Detroit—for better opportunities, to escape the terror of the South. They never get there—although Grange managed to go North but later returned to Georgia because life in the North was not as promising as he had hoped—but the dream itself is what drives them. I can relate to that. I grew up poor myself. I know that struggle, I know what that feels like. That connection allowed me to see these characters more vividly, to paint them from an honest place.

For example, one of the characters is Mem. She's the wife of another character in the book. Her story is impeccable. And I can relate to her, because so much of Mem's struggle reminded me of my own mother's struggle.

Now, the book is violent, reflecting the systemic conditions of the time. There's a lot of domestic abuse. And that's not surprising, given the time and place—Black families in the South during that period, facing not only poverty but systemic terror. That violence comes with the territory of that history. I didn't grow up with that kind of abuse in my own home. But I did grow up in Chicago, in a community where other families lived through it. Through my friends, I heard stories. I saw things. I witnessed patterns of behavior that were rough, that were violent. So I was able to draw on those experiences too.

All of that gave me a real basis for connecting with Walker's characters. It allowed me to paint them as though I had actually met them—as though they were people I really knew. Even though they are fictional, I understand them.



Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Study for Mary and Red Curtain—The Queen, 2025. Oil paint, oil pastel, and gouache on linen canvas stretched over wood panel, 80 × 60 inches. © Nathaniel Mary Quinn. Courtesy Gagosian. Photo: Jackie Furtado.

Rail: In several works, there's a palpable tension between beauty and the grotesque. How consciously do you calibrate that balance?

Quinn: For me, that tension happens naturally. I'm not interested in painting your face as it appears on the surface. I'm interested in painting the essence of your face, or really the essence of you. And the essence of a human being is never seamless. Outwardly, people present a polished self—but inside, none of us are seamless. We carry shortcomings, losses, doubts, fears, insecurities. And all of that is wrapped up in the eyeliner, the hair, the nice clothes. So it's both beautiful and grotesque at once. I try to bring those worlds together, because that's life.

The figures are my attempt to articulate the spectrum of human identity, and human identity looks like this: beautiful, but also made of parts that shouldn't fit together, yet somehow must. Shapes that shouldn't harmonize are forced to, because that's the lived experience. History is built that way—through wars, death, pillage, mass violence. The grotesque produces the beautiful.

The same is true in nature. You look at a rainforest and it's breathtaking. But what you don't see is the constant killing—predators hunting prey, survival through violence. The animals look majestic, but that

beauty is inseparable from the brutality. That interlacing of soft and hard, hot and cold, beauty and grotesque—it's always there. There's no such thing as a pure, seamless self. That doesn't exist.

Rail: That's profound. Do you think of these as self-portraits in some way?

Quinn: Rarely, not often. But I've heard it said that every painting is a self-portrait. I'm not sure I fully agree, but I don't entirely dismiss it either. There is fragility in my figures, and that fragility does come from me. It's the expression of insecurity—the doubt I carry about my own work, about whether a painting is good enough, whether I'm good enough. I battle with that constantly, and I think it seeps into the figures. So in that sense, yes, there's a self-portrait element there.

Rail: Critics often situate your work in lineages of Surrealism, Cubism, or neo-Dada. Do you recognize yourself in those frames?

Quinn: Yes, I can understand why critics make those comparisons, and I'm honored by them. Whenever critics compared my work to Surrealism, or to Bacon, or to neo-Dada, I would research what they were talking about. I wanted to understand why they saw those connections, because when I was making the paintings, I wasn't consciously thinking in those terms.

I remember years ago, during my breakout show at Pace in London, *HuffPost* ran a review comparing my work to Francis Bacon. At that time, I wasn't really familiar with Bacon. But because of that article, I went and looked, and I thought—okay, I see why they made that reference. So in that way, the critical reception almost educated me about the lineage I was stepping into.

Rail: In your earlier works, you often turned to gouache, pastel, and charcoal—mediums known for their fragility. Was that delicacy part of what drew you to them?

Quinn: In this show, it's all oil paint, except for a few pieces where I incorporated oil pastel; in one of those works, I used black charcoal. But you're right, in previous work I often used those softer materials. I love their texture. Soft pastel, for instance, creates an effect you can't quite achieve with oil paint. When you put the two together, you get this push and pull, different surfaces working against and with each other.

Over the years I've learned how to make oil paint behave like those soft materials. For example, I'll apply oil paint and then scrape it with a palette knife so the grain of the linen comes through. That creates the kind of texture you'd get naturally with pastel. With oil, you have to invent processes to mimic that softness.

Rail: In a moment when AI images proliferate, what does it mean for you to remain committed to an entirely hand-rendered practice?

Quinn: AI is still new, and sure, I've seen some videos that are good—but you can always feel a stiffness in it. We're human beings; we can sense when something isn't human. And for me, at this point in my life, I have no interest in using AI in my practice.

Here's why: what AI will never have is what's at the core of human creativity—survival. So much of what we make is born from the need to adapt, to stay alive in a new world. That's where invention comes from. AI doesn't have to eat, find water, or live through loss or fear. It was not created out of desperation.

For me, everything I make comes from life, not machines: my own and the traditions I love. I pull from music, from comedy, from painting, from film. I'll listen to an old Kanye West album and hear how he layers a beat, and I'll think, that's how I could layer color. Or I'll watch Dave Chappelle weave a story, and I'll think about weaving lines and textures the same way. That's what keeps my work alive. AI can only imitate that—it can't live it.

Rail: What does a day in the studio look like for you?

Quinn: I've been working on this show for about nine months. Each painting takes time—I usually work on two at once: the larger canvases on this wall, smaller ones on that wall. While one is drying, I move to the other. This diptych here, *Paint-Drawing Study for Mem's Respite* (2025), for example, took me about two months to complete.



Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Paint-Drawing Study for Mem's Respite, 2025.. Oil paint on linen canvas stretched over wood panel, in 2 parts. Overall: 20 x 40 inches. © Nathaniel Mary Quinn. Courtesy Gagosia. Photo: Owen Conway.

Let me explain my workday. I wake up at 9:30 a.m., brush my teeth, and make the bed—always. My wife wakes earlier, around 6 a.m., but I make the bed because it's the first achievement of the day. It sets the tone: neatness, order. I've always believed every item should have its place—every cabinet, every closet, every shirt folded just right. I carry my life the same way I carry the studio.

After that, I stretch, then take a walk with my wife to get coffee—a tall hot mocha that lasts me all day. At noon I work out, every day. I didn't used to, and I would get shoulder stiffness and body aches. Now, no

aches. Lifting weights is hard, but it's good to do hard things. The body needs that, especially as you age. From 1 to 2 p.m., I read. At 2 p.m., I begin painting.

So the schedule goes: 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. in the studio, then from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m. I eat my first meal—usually fruit and oats, very light, because food is fuel, not indulgence. Heavy or fried food slows you down in the studio. I practice intermittent fasting: no food until 2 p.m., then I stop eating at 10 p.m.. 6 p.m. to 8 p.m., I work again. 8 p.m. to 9 p.m., dinner. 9 p.m. to 11 p.m., more studio time. A short break. Then 11 p.m. to 1 a.m., back in the studio. Another break. 1 a.m. until 2:30 a.m., studio again. Then I stop. That's the rhythm that allows me to finish a painting in two months.

While I paint, I listen to music and long-form YouTube podcasts. I'm drawn to conversations where people hash out ideas—about culture, current events, human behavior—which keeps me tuned into the world even while working alone.



Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Paint-Drawing Study for Margaret and Her Baby, 2025. Oil paint, oil pastel, and gouache on linen canvas stretched over wood panel, 48 × 48 inches. © Nathaniel Mary Quinn. Courtesy Gagosian. Photo: Jackie Furtado.

Rail: What's the most exhilarating moment in your practice—and what's the hardest to push through?

Quinn: The hardest part is wrestling with doubt—an internal critic that can take over if I let it. Every day is a fight to push past that voice, to keep going with all the strength I have. There's also the sheer stamina the work demands. I give everything—presence, focus, energy—because I can't accept mediocrity. I rate my paintings on a scale of one to ten, and I don't release a painting from the studio unless it's at least a seven, ideally an eight, which is tremendously difficult to achieve.

The best moment comes when everything clicks—when colors, proportions, and forms are in balance, like the lights on a perfectly decorated Christmas tree. It's the point where the painting starts to sing—when everything is in sync, like a band playing together flawlessly. That harmony is the moment I live for.

Rail: Much of the discourse around your work situates it alongside the histories of Black artistic histories. How do you navigate that positioning, and in your view, is your work political?

Quinn: I think of myself first and foremost as an artist, part of the full spectrum of art history—which includes artists of color, women, men, and so many others. I don't limit myself to a single category, even though I understand that others may see me through that lens. In the studio, my skin color doesn't help me make the work. It has no bearing on the problem-solving, the labor that goes into a painting. If my skin turned green tomorrow, it would still be the same process, the same challenges.

That said, I know that when I walk into the world, or into an art space, people see a Black man making these paintings. I don't reject that, but I also don't let it define how I work. My focus stays on the work: my relationship with the materials, the images, the story I'm telling.

As for whether my work is political—some say all art is political, and I see that argument. My paintings can raise political questions, especially because many of the figures I depict are Black bodies, which are always politically charged in this society. But I don't start from that place. I start from the work itself, from the narrative or image that compels me. Everything else—the conversations, the interpretations—is for others to engage with. In the studio, it's about labor, attention, and integrity, and making the best paintings I can possibly make.

Rail: As your work enters major collections and institutions—many with layered, sometimes fraught histories—how do you want them to be contextualized?

Quinn: Museums have historically missed out on great works by Black artists because of institutional racism—bad business, in hindsight, because those works are now worth a lot. When my work is shown, I want it in the right context—alongside artists of the same caliber—not just under a “Black art” banner. My first outing with Gagosian was in a group show anchored by a Rembrandt piece, with my work next to Bacon, Lucian Freud, and Jenny Saville. That's where it belongs. Good art belongs with good art—period.

Most collectors buy my work because it's good, not out of tokenism. Museums, though, have a responsibility to present the full breadth of the art historical canon, from its beginnings to now. If you're showing figurative painting, Lucian Freud and Barkley L. Hendricks should be in the same show. I want the same freedom Freud had—to paint whatever I want, without being pushed toward certain imagery because of my race.

Museums should have that same openness. Many do, but others are still stuck in an antiquated way of thinking. For me, it's about learning from the best, no matter who they are—whether it's Liu Xiaodong,

Kerry James Marshall, or Lucian Freud. Good art is good art. Music producers like Kanye West or Timbaland don't limit themselves to one tradition—they sample across genres and cultures because it makes the work richer. Museums should operate with the same conviction and spirit.

Rail: Your recent exhibitions—including the major Paris show—came with wide reception and many conversations. How, if at all, have such experiences shaped your current work? You've spoken before about not letting external reception dictate your practice—how do you maintain that focus amid success and recognition?

Quinn: No, it hasn't shaped the work. Perhaps you're also speaking about success, the public reception, the press, the critical reviews, the fame. I'm not naïve—when people see me, I know they're probably thinking, “Oh, that's Nathaniel Mary Quinn, the artist.” That exists, but I've never allowed it to dictate my studio practice.

Just because someone likes the work doesn't mean it's actually good, and just because someone doesn't like it doesn't mean it's bad. That's just subjective opinion, and I respect that. But I've never allowed myself to be pulled into the projections of others. My only concern is what happens in the studio: Do I find the work meaningful? Have I hit the balance I'm after? And when I finish a painting, even if people love it in the gallery, my first thought is always: *I can make a better one*. No amount of praise changes that.

Some artists do get caught up in the fanfare, and that starts to dictate their work—they end up making art for an audience. That's not a good place to be. You want to make work you have convictions for. In fact, since becoming more “successful,” my insecurities have only grown—more responsibility, more doubt. My life is different, but as a person, I feel the same.

I still live in the same neighborhood. I talk to my neighbors, shake hands with people on the block—most have no idea what I do for a living, and I don't tell them. That's not required. It's about human connection, not boasting. None of us get out of here alive, and you can't take any of this with you. So it makes no sense to brag. It does make sense to be grateful, to give thanks, to recognize it could have turned out otherwise. And of course, I hope people like the work—that's my number one concern on opening night—but the real work happens back in the studio, where the only standard that matters is my own.

Rail: Looking ahead, what ambition or goal keeps you painting?

Quinn: I always say this, and it may strike you as profoundly irrational, but it's my dream. My goal is to become so efficient, so proficient as a painter that I could make a painting of my mom—so alive that she could walk off the canvas and back into my life. That's the goal. Rationally, I know it's impossible. But emotionally, I believe it. I have faith that maybe, someday, I'll become good enough to paint her so attuned, so alive, that she could step out of the canvas and I could have my mother again. That's what drives me. That's my force. I'm not there yet. I have much work to do. And so I keep working, because this is the only route I have to make that possible.