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Nathaniel Mary Quinn's Fearless Leap into Abstraction

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From Fractured Faces to the Fluid Unknown

When [Nathaniel Mary Quinn](#) emerged on the art scene in the early 2000s, his fractured portraits—psychological mosaics stitched together from shards of memory, emotion, and identity—felt like a revelation. His faces, composed of hybrid features and collaged visages, seemed to mirror the fragmented

experience of modern life itself. Over time, these haunting, tender works earned him comparisons to **Francis Bacon** and **Romare Bearden**, and a place within **Larry Gagosian's** formidable roster.



Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Paint-Drawing Study for Brownfield's Daydream (2025). Oil paint on linen canvas stretched over wood panel. 50.8 x 50.8 cm

Now, at the age of 48, Quinn stands on the precipice of transformation. His latest exhibition, *ECHOES FROM COPELAND*, on view at **Gagosian Gallery, New York**, marks a daring evolution—from figuration to abstraction. It's not a rejection of the past but an expansion, a new way of seeing and feeling. I couldn't keep on doing what I had been doing, I needed to do something different. – **Quinn admits.**

The Catalyst: Alice Walker and the Language of Empathy

At the heart of this metamorphosis lies **Alice Walker's 1970 novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland***, a story of generational trauma, poverty, and redemption in Jim Crow-era Georgia. Quinn first encountered the book while teaching literature to at-risk youth. Its intergenerational narrative of pain and resilience struck him with intimate force.



Nathaniel Mary Quinn, *Paint-Drawing Study for Mr. Shipley* (2025). Oil paint, oil pastel, and gouache on linen stretched over wood panel. 45.7 x 38.1 cm.

Walker doesn't over-describe her characters, she gives you space to imagine them. – **He explains.**

That invitation—to participate emotionally and imaginatively—became the bridge to his new aesthetic language. In his studio, literature and painting began to merge, not as illustration, but as resonance: **the prose became pigment.**

The resulting canvases are dense and rhythmic, alive with gestural energy. In *Paint-Drawing Study for Brownfield's Daydream* (2025), a lone figure sits elegantly within the confines of a sparse interior, the walls humming with movement. The paint ripples between control and chaos, mirroring the turbulence of longing. In *Paint-Drawing Study for Mem* (2025), the titular character's body—mechanical, fragile, luminous—seems assembled from fragments of trauma, yet she radiates dignity. Quinn's marks oscillate between tenderness and violence, between wound and repair.



Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Study for The Traveler (2024). Oil paint, oil pastel, and gouache on linen canvas over wood panel. 91.4 x 91.4 cm.

Between Bacon and Walker: Fear as Freedom

Quinn has long worn his influences with humility. He speaks of Bacon’s emotional candor as “a kind of courage—showing your wounds without flinching.” That vulnerability is what drives his own shift into abstraction. His process, he says, now involves “layering, scraping, and rebuilding until the canvas feels alive.”

Each work functions as both **excavation and emergence**—paintings that carry the ghost of figuration while slipping into pure rhythm and tone. He uses brushes, rags, and even paper towels to blur and reconfigure lines, coaxing form from formlessness. The hybrid term “paint-drawing,” appearing in several titles, reflects this dual fidelity: painting’s freedom joined to drawing’s precision.

Quinn admits the transition terrified him.

This tension—between fear and liberation—forms the emotional spine of *ECHOES FROM COPELAND*. Like Walker’s characters, Quinn’s paintings wrestle with the past, but they also imagine its transcendence.



Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Paint-Drawing Study for Mem (2025). Oil paint on linen canvas stretched over wood panel. 45.7 x 38.1 cm.

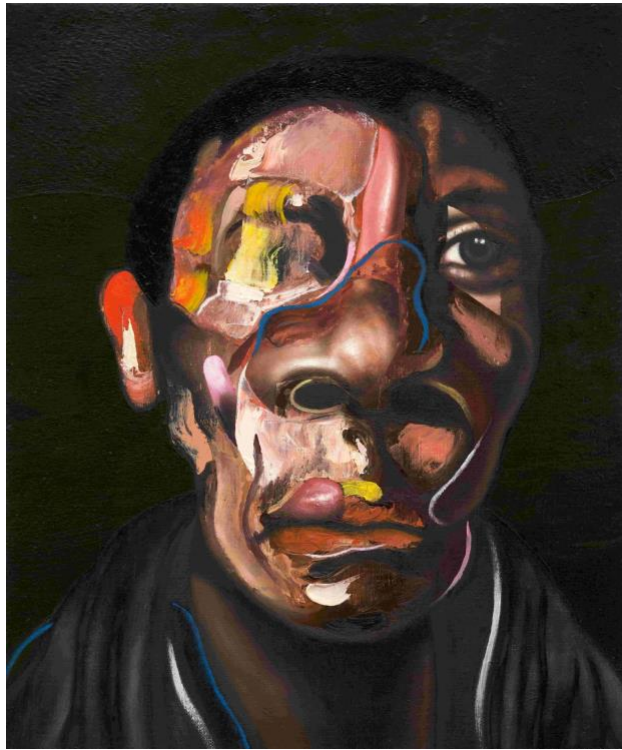
Figuration's Echo in the Abstract

Though his new works drift toward abstraction, the ghosts of his earlier portraits remain. The human figure persists—blurred, fragmented, or dissolved into gesture—but always present.

It's not my intention to completely eliminate figuration, I aim to create a stronger connective tissue between figuration and abstraction. – **Quinn says.**

That connective tissue is empathy. His marks are not random but deeply felt, tracing the emotional weight of generational struggle and redemption. In *Study for the Traveler* (2024), the artist revisits his own past, evoking his childhood in Chicago's public housing. The piece radiates both hardship and transcendence: the dream of escape painted into existence.

Throughout, Quinn's **palette glows with unexpected luminosity**—vivid blues, ochres, and golds offsetting the somber themes. Where Bacon's tones often closed in like confinement, Quinn's light breaks through. His abstractions shimmer with a quiet optimism, echoing Walker's conviction that beauty survives even amid despair.



Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Study for Grange Copeland (2025). Oil paint and gouache on linen canvas stretched over wood panel. 45.7 x 38.1 cm.

The Courage to Change

ECHOES FROM COPELAND represents more than a stylistic pivot—it's a declaration of artistic renewal. In embracing abstraction, Nathaniel Mary Quinn joins a lineage of painters who view fear not as an obstacle but as an entry point to truth. His art, now unbound from the literal, feels newly alive—its surfaces vibrating with narrative residue, its gestures resonating with moral gravity.



Nathaniel Mary Quinn.

Quinn's evolution reminds us that growth in [art](#) is rarely comfortable. It demands surrender—to uncertainty, to vulnerability, to the raw pulse of becoming. What emerges from that surrender is not merely a new style, but a new voice—one that speaks in the universal language of courage.