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NATHANIEL MARY QUINN

Anatomy

of a Vision

In Eight Acts: The Becoming
of Nathaniel Mary Quinn

THE LESSON OF CUT-RATE LIQUOR, 2021

Oil paint, paint stick, oil pastel, soft pastel, gouache, black charcoal
on linen canvas stretched over wood panel
36 x 72 inches (91.4 x 182.9 cm)
© Nathaniel Mary Quinn
Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian

Written by Patrice Peck



PORTRAIT OF NATHANIEL MARY QUINN
 Photo: Kyle Dorosz
 Courtesy the artist and Gagosian

Artist Nathaniel Mary Quinn builds a singular practice through collage-like figuration and excavation of memory and hard-won clarity. From a closet-sized studio in Brooklyn to Gagosian, his work continues to break form.

STUDY FOR INVADER, 2023

Black charcoal, gouache, soft pastel on Coventry Vellum Paper
 12 x 9 inches (30.5 x 22.9 cm)

© Nathaniel Mary Quinn

Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian



A man disappears into a studio that used to be a closet. The door closes. A face takes shape: eyes, nose, mouth. A fur hat. Nothing else. No backstory. No shoulder to carry it. Just the parts that speak.

This is what came to Nathaniel Mary Quinn, when he had four works and needed five. He had promised five. Time was tight. So the 35-year-old artist did what he knew how to do. He trusted the image that arrived in his mind and put it down on paper. He called the work “Charles,” after his brother whose mouth he had unknowingly portrayed. The brother he hadn’t seen since their mother’s funeral. “It came from somewhere off the shores of my subconscious,” Quinn says now. “I still carry it. That loss.”

With no connection to The Art World, he didn’t expect much. A few people. A few conversations. But that day, in the parlor floor of a student’s mother’s brownstone, people gazed at “Charles” the longest.

I

The piece came to Quinn in a vision. “I’m not trying to sound religious,” he says. “They’re just mental pictures. Forecasts of the work I need to make.” They come unannounced. Fully formed. He never forgets them. Never writes them down. He doesn’t analyze them. He trusts them. What he’s describing isn’t just intuition. It’s something as innate as a heartbeat. A fidelity to what comes.

Becoming a full-time artist was the dream, but not the plan. “I just wanted to be better at what I did,” says Quinn. “There’s no path in this thing. You’ve got a better chance of becoming a surgeon. At least there’s a road for that.”

Based in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, he worked long days as a teacher, mostly

with at-risk youth. Then came home. Spent quality time with his wife, filmmaker, actress, and producer Donna Augustin-Quinn. He painted for two, three hours each night in that second bedroom that barely passed for a studio. “My job didn’t drain me. That was important,” Quinn recalls. “I still had energy to make the work.”

He showed occasionally, at coffee shops, community centers. Back then, the biggest piece he ever sold was \$1,000. But that didn’t matter.

“That was my heaven,” he says. “To come home, spend time with Donna, and go into that little space to paint. I was happy. I had already won.”

Quinn didn’t know it then, but that face in the fur hat would change his life.



ROSEY, 2016
Oil, charcoal, gouache, pastel, oil pastel and paint stick on vellum
12 x 11 1/2 inches (30.5 x 29.2 cm)
© Nathaniel Mary Quinn
Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian

ARTWORK NAME
Photo credit: XXXXXX



FAREWELL, 2019
Black charcoal, gouache, soft pastel, and oil pastel on Coventry Vellum Paper
50 x 38 inches (127 x 96.5 cm)
© Nathaniel Mary Quinn
Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian



**NOT FAR FROM HOME; STILL FAR AWAY, 2021,
INSTALLATION VIEW**
© Nathaniel Mary Quinn
Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian



FIGHT BULLY RUN, 2019
Black charcoal, gouache, soft pastel, and oil pastel on Coventry Vellum Paper
50 x 38 inches (127 x 96.5 cm)
© Nathaniel Mary Quinn
Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian



III

After the show, he made five more pieces using the same process: vision, demarcation, charcoal, gouache. The body of work landed in Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Art, where in 2012 he became the first artist to feature in the Brooklyn institution’s window galleries facing the street.

William Villalongo came to that show. A critically celebrated artist, known for his subversive, shape-shifting portrayals of the Black figure, Villalongo had known Quinn for years. Used to joke he should go into stand-up. “That gives you an idea of how he felt about my work back then,” Quinn says, laughing. But this time was different. Moved, his friend ultimately introduced Quinn to fellow artist Matthew Day Jackson, who offered him a solo show at Bunker 259, his critically acclaimed dance hall-turned-gallery in Greenpoint, Brooklyn known for exhibiting a single piece each show.

Quinn’s sole piece was called “King Kong Ain’t Got Nothing on Me.” His father, seated, looking out, positioned high in the upper right corner of the page. So when you looked at it, you had to look up. “Because that’s how I saw him,” Quinn says. “As a kind of king.”

He added a frayed vintage couch, like the one from the Robert Taylor Homes. Let a loop of soul music—Marvin Gaye, James Brown, the Stylistics—float through the air. The space held memory like sound holds breath.

We’re on Zoom when he tells me this from his and Donna’s brownstone in Bedford-Stuyvesant. His camera catches glimpses of airy rooms and wood detailing behind him as we head to his studio. “It’s the whole floor now,” he says, smiling. “Like The Jeffersons, we moved on up.”

THE TIME IS ALWAYS NOW: ARTISTS REFRAME THE BLACK FIGURE, 2024, INSTALLATION VIEW
© Nathaniel Mary Quinn
Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian

I

Before the brownstone. Before the studios. Before “Charles.” Before any of this—there was Chicago. The Robert Taylor Homes. Quinn remembers the smell of poverty, yes. But also the flavor of joy. “We were broke, but we were together,” he says.

His family lived with the compounded weight of systemic inequity. His mother, disabled having suffered two strokes, couldn’t read or write. His father, shaped by the same poverty, was also illiterate. His older brothers dropped out of high school. There were nights without food. Hunger that lodged itself into Quinn. “The body never forgets that,” he says. “It bores itself into your genetic material.” But that wasn’t the whole story. “We had good times too,” he adds. Cookouts, Thanksgivings, Christmases. “You made the best of it,” Quinn explains.



DAVE FORSYTHE, 2019
Oil paint, paint stick, gouache, black charcoal, soft pastel, and oil pastel on linen canvas stretched over wood panel
47 5/8 x 47 5/8 inches (121 x 121 cm)
© Nathaniel Mary Quinn
Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian



Three Black women, his “North Stars,” guided him towards a different path. Like the artist, his grade school educators Ms. Hunter, Ms. Pilcher, and Ms. Jackson also had a vision: a young Quinn attending Culver Military Academy, an all-boys boarding school in Indiana. Groomed grass. Horseback riding. Ice hockey. “It was the first time I ever saw groomed grass,” he says, remembering the glossy brochure. He took the test and got in on a full scholarship.

NO WEDDING, NO CAKE; NO PROM, NO DATE, 2020
Oil paint, paint stick, oil pastel, gouache on linen canvas stretched over wood panel
48 x 48 inches (121.9 x 121.9 cm)
© Nathaniel Mary Quinn
Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian

MAMA, JOE, AND JAMES BROWN, 2023
Oil paint, oil pastel, soft pastel, gouache on linen canvas stretched over wood panel
36 x 36 inches (91.4 x 91.4 cm)
© Nathaniel Mary Quinn
Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian



V

A month into school, his father called—Quinn’s mother had passed away. Accompanied by Ms. Pilcher and Ms. Jackson, he returned to Chicago for the funeral, reuniting with his father and brothers. Unknowingly, for the last time. When he returned home for Thanksgiving break, the 15-year-old noticed the apartment door was ajar. Inside his family home: nothing. No furniture. No note. A half bottle of RC Cola. A few scattered clothes. Gone. “I was effectively abandoned,” Quinn says. “And I have not seen them since to this very day.”

He stayed with his estranged grandmother briefly, but the relationship was difficult. “She said I was the reason my mom died,” he recalls. “And that was it. I told her she’d never see me again.” And she didn’t. School became a refuge. At Culver, he had food, a bed, clothes. “My GPA became my currency,” he says. “It was how I survived.” He got another scholarship to Wabash College, where he graduated magna cum laude before earning his MFA from New York University. “Not because I’m smart,” he says. “Because I worked. I took notes. I paid attention.”



ARTWORK NAME
Photo credit: XXXXXX

VI

Following his Bunker 259 debut, Fairfax Dorn of Ballroom Marfa visited Quinn’s studio. Taken by the work, she asked which galleries he liked. “I said I liked the Pace program,” he says. Dorn smiled. “I’m friends with Mark Glimcher.” Quinn didn’t know who that was. “She told me he ran Pace,” he says, laughing. “I said, ‘Oh yeah, of course.’”

Glimcher visited the studio. Loved the work. Said he’d follow up. Weeks passed. Nothing. Then one morning at 6 a.m., Quinn’s phone rang. It was the Pace Director. “We want to offer you your first solo show.”

Quinn remembers stepping into the shower, turning on Daryl Coley’s “When Sunday Comes”—a gospel song he’d listened to each and every Sunday for years—and crying. “That song had always been about the day when your time would come,” he says. “And that was my Sunday.”

The show opened in London. Ten works. Eight sold. HuffPost wrote, “Quinn’s portraits would make even Francis Bacon shudder.”

“To be in the same sentence as Bacon,” he says, “was surreal.”

THE GETAWAY, 2023
Oil paint, oil pastel, black charcoal, gouache
on Coventry Vellum Paper
37 x 30 inches (94 x 76.2 cm)
© Nathaniel Mary Quinn
Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian

VII

THE BATHTUB, 2023
Oil paint, paint stick, oil pastel, gouache on
linen canvas stretched over wood panel
30 x 30 inches (76.2 x 76.2 cm)
© Nathaniel Mary Quinn
Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian



This fall, Quinn opens a highly anticipated solo show with Gagosian in New York City. It will be his first exhibition composed entirely of oil paintings. The work pulls from three streams: his evolving practice, the influence of artists like Romare Bearden and Francis Bacon, and Alice Walker’s 1970 debut novel, “The Third Life of Grange Copeland.”

“It’s a gorgeous book,” he says. “But devastating.”

One piece, nearly complete when we spoke, depicts Margaret, a tormented Black woman who fatally poisons herself and her child, perhaps as a last-ditch shot at mercy. The canvas is large, commanding. Margaret sits at the base of a tree, child in one arm. In her other hand, not yet fully painted, is the bottle of poison. Her expression is gentle. Still. The child appears asleep. The earth curves beneath them in a wide, grassy arc. Below them, a sense of burial.

Quinn approached the painting with a deep respect for the “captivating” way Alice Walker wrote the scene, using paint as a way to honor her language while visually confronting the heart-wrenching nature of what unfolds.

“She loved that child. She wanted to protect them from the world,” he says before pausing for a beat. You can almost hear the brush hitting the canvas in his mind.

“It’s grotesque, but beautiful.”

IF IT WASN'T FOR THAT HOSPITAL VISIT, WE WOULD STILL BE FRIENDS, 2021
Oil paint, paint stick, oil pastel, soft pastel, gouache, black charcoal on linen canvas stretched over wood panel
20 x 20 inches (50.8 x 50.8 cm)
© Nathaniel Mary Quinn
Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian



VINE STREET #2, 2024
Oil paint and oil pastel on linen canvas stretched over wood panel
18 x 15 x 1 1/4 inches (45.7 x 38.1 x 3.2 cm)
© Nathaniel Mary Quinn
Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian

VIII

Quinn still lives in Bed-Stuy. The visions still come. The discipline still holds.

“I’m not trying to be a star,” Quinn says. “I just want to keep making the work better.”

What matters isn’t the studio size. Or the accolades.

What matters is the face in the fur hat. The bottle in the hand.

What matters is making it real.



FROG, 2021
Oil paint, paint stick, oil pastel, soft pastel, black charcoal, gouache
on linen canvas
14 x 22 inches (35.6 x 55.9 cm)
© Nathaniel Mary Quinn
Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian