

GAGOSIAN



The Deadpan World of Nathaniel Mary Quinn

The artist draws on searing stand-up comedy, personal grief and elements of surprise to create his expressionistic and avidly collected work. How Nathaniel Mary Quinn's show at Gagosian's Beverly Hills gallery has him primed for the big time

Rebecca Bengal



STUDIO AUDIENCE "That's me putting my wound on the table," says Nathaniel Mary Quinn, here in his Crown Heights, Brooklyn, studio, of one of his new autobiographical works. PHOTO: IKE EDEANI FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Before Nathaniel Mary Quinn became known as an artist, his friends urged him to do stand-up comedy—growing up on Chicago's South Side, he was raised on Richard Pryor and Rudy Ray Moore. Now, Quinn, 42, sees that kind of searing comedy as a model for his portraits. "I want to make works like Redd Foxx. I want to make works like Dave Chappelle," he says. He launches into a famous bit of Chappelle's, "Mickey Mouse Is Mexican," in which Chappelle knocks the head off a Disney World character, revealing the identity of the person underneath. "That kind of bait and switch, I find that so inspiring. How can I make works with that sort of fluidity and perfection?"

In his studio in Brooklyn's Crown Heights neighborhood, where he clocks 14-hour days, seven days a week, Quinn is dressed in sweats and a Tommy Hilfinger polo shirt, bearded, head shaved close. He calls himself short—he is 5 foot 8—but his sense of size may be skewed by the NBA players he's hosted here, such as Carmelo Anthony and Amar'e Stoudemire. His collectors

include Anderson Cooper, Ari Emanuel, Lenny Kravitz and Elton John. Quinn's works, which have earned comparisons to those of old masters, cubist painters and more recent stars like Francis Bacon and John Currin, are in the collections of New York's Whitney Museum of American Art and Brooklyn Museum, among others.

Most people these days, including his wife of nine years, Donna Augustin-Quinn, an actress, writer and producer, simply call him Quinn. The Mary in his name is for his mother, who was illiterate and never finished school. After her sudden death in 1992, he folded her name into his, so that Mary Quinn effectively graduated from high school and college. Following a several-years-long streak of acclaimed exhibitions worldwide—including the 2017 Rhona Hoffman Gallery show *Nothing's Funny* that included portraits of Pryor and Bill Cosby—Nathaniel Mary Quinn joined the Gagosian gallery roster of artists this spring.



PHOTO: IKE EDEANI FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

For his show with Gagosian, opening in its Beverly Hills location on September 11, his works focus on doubts and fears. "I thought Beverly Hills would be the perfect context for that," Quinn says, deadpan.

Viewing one of Quinn's disjointed, expressionistic portraits is a startling and visceral experience. Whether a disproportionately large nose, an abstracted mouth or mismatched eyes, each feature is made jarring and human through a mix of photorealistic detail and handmade execution. "All along the edges there's an element of surprise. There are things you wouldn't expect but they all serve the purpose," says Mark Pascale, Janet and Craig Duchossois Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Art Institute of Chicago, which has acquired works by Quinn. "There's this amazing heat from his hand."

Six years ago, Quinn had the kind of breakthrough that artists dream about. At the time, he was teaching at-risk youth and tutoring on the side, making figurative works by night. A mother of a student was hosting a private art salon and had requested five paintings from him. By the day of the salon he had completed four, and in mere hours he'd need to produce a fifth. He sourced internet and magazine images and photos from personal albums, and began to draw and paint a

face. The clock was ticking. He isolated only eyes, nose, mouth and a fur hat. “I remove the construction paper, and before me is a work unlike anything I’ve ever made,” he says. “And right away, the work told me, that’s my brother Charles—it was that smirk.

“I thought, to hell with the overintellectualizing,” he says. “This is real freedom. And I’ve been working that way ever since.”

More than two decades have passed since Quinn last saw Charles. Quinn’s biography is one of crushing loss, which he wrote about last year, at Elton John’s urging, in *British Vogue*. The singer, who owns three of Quinn’s works, invited him over to his home in L.A. “He’s in his Adidas jumpsuit and he’s all, ‘Hello, dahling, I’ve gone to talk to *Vogue* about you,’ ” Quinn recalls. Quinn grew up on Elton John; his four much-older half-brothers were big fans. Quinn was the baby; Charles was the second youngest.

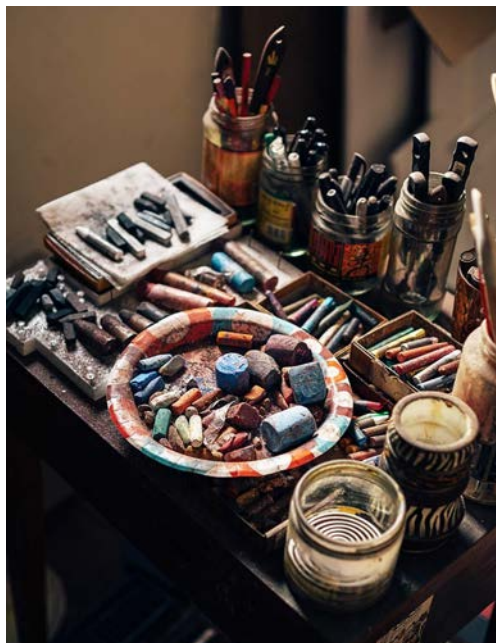


PHOTO: IKE EDEANI FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

It was Charles who pointed out Quinn’s talent when their mother scolded him for drawing on the walls of the family’s apartment in Chicago’s Robert Taylor Homes. So she relented, washing away his sketches between sessions. “My mom was always cleaning—my parents didn’t have a lot of money, but she was very prideful,” Quinn says. “And she did all that with one arm! There’s people with two arms, lazy as hell, and here’s my mom with one arm doing all this work.”

Two strokes had left Mary Quinn impaired. Quinn remembers her as a wisecracking woman who loved gospel music and church. The Thanksgiving dinners she cooked for gang members in the notoriously violent projects offered one measure of protection. “I was Mary Quinn’s son, and nobody messed with my mother,” he says. Art was another—gang members liked seeing themselves featured in the comic strips that “Lil Nate,” as they called him, drew for them.

All his half-brothers had dropped out of school, but Mary got Quinn on a tumbling team that performed at halftime shows for the Chicago Bulls. An assistant principal helped Quinn apply for a scholarship to Culver Academies, a boarding school in Indiana.

In October of his freshman year at Culver, Mary Quinn died—possibly of another stroke. Quinn went home for her funeral and then back to Culver, feeling the gulf widen between himself and the other students. A month later, it would widen impossibly. When he returned home for Thanksgiving, Quinn discovered his family’s apartment empty, the door ajar. A neighbor told him his father and half-brothers had moved out weeks ago.

“My family had abandoned me,” Quinn wrote in *Vogue*, “scattered by poverty, addiction and grief. I was 15.” He spent the night in the vestibule of another building and made his way back to Culver, the only place he had to live. After he earned a diploma, he kept going, all the way to an M.F.A. at NYU.

Quinn says he takes nothing for granted now, least of all his wife. “Marriages are an everyday date,” he says. Therapy has revealed, he says, how abandonment had perhaps saved him: “I used to think I’d be dead by the time I was 18.” A few years ago, he finally spoke with Charles. “I said, ‘You knew I was coming home, so why weren’t you there?’ And he couldn’t own up,” Quinn says. He told his brother he forgave him, and added, “but after this phone call you will never hear from me again.” He now has some contact with a nephew, the son of his oldest half-brother, who is closer to his age.

Works in the Gagosian show include *Jekyll and Hyde*, a diptych of asymmetrical halves of a face, with intensely watchful eyes. Quinn says it is, in part, about rage. “That’s me putting my wound on the table,” he says. Another new piece, *Farewell*, is based on a memory of his mother, waving goodbye as Quinn left for boarding school—the last time he’d see her alive.

“The reality is, we all have to come face to face with things that are inescapable,” he says. “You too will confront death and loss. And you will confront heartbreak.... Even in the thicket of the gorgeous plan of beauty, this machine of pain is going to penetrate through all of that. It’s coming, and nothing can stop it.” He is smiling cheerfully as he says all of this.

“We spend a lot of time presenting ourselves as super confident and strong, but we’re not,” Quinn says. There’s power, the work around him suggests, in making that fragmentation visible. “We don’t have it together. That’s OK. I think it’s beautiful to embrace that.”