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Portraits that Feel Like Chance Encounters and Hazy Recollections
Nathaniel Quinn's first museum solo show features work which suggests that reality might best be recognized by its disjunctions rather than by single-point perspective.

Debra Brehmer



Nathaniel Mary Quinn, "Bring Yo' Big Teeth Ass Here!" (2017) (all images courtesy the artist and Rhona Hoffman gallery)

Nathaniel Mary Quinn is one of the best portrait painters working today and the competition is steep. Think of Amy Sherald, Elizabeth Peyton, Kehinde Wiley, Nicole Eisenman, Allison Schulnik, Mickalene Thomas, Jeff Sonhouse, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Chris Ofili, Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye to name a few. It could be argued that these artists are not exclusively portrait artists but artists who work with the figure. The line blurs. If identity, memory, and personality enter the pictorial conversation, however, then the work tips toward portraiture — meaning it addresses notions of likeness in relation to a real or metaphorical being. No longer bound by functionality or finesse, contemporary artists are revisiting and revitalizing the portrait as a signifier of presence via a reservoir of constructed, culturally influenced identities.

The outsize number of black artists now working in the portrait genre awakens the art world with vital new means of representation. It makes sense that artists who have been kept on the margins of the mainstream art world for centuries might emerge with the idea of visibility front and center. Without a definitive canonical art history of Black self-representation, there are fewer conventions for the work to adhere to. Much of this output feels urgent and compelling, either

expanding the language of figure painting or, in the case of Nathaniel Mary Quinn, using collage-like compositions to address the dynamic clamor of contemporary life.

Nathaniel Mary Quinn (b. 1977), a Brooklyn-based artist who grew up in Chicago, is having his first solo museum exhibition, *This is Life*, at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art in Wisconsin, curated by Leah Kolb. This exhibition of 17 works dating from 2015 to 2017 was culled from private collections and occupies a large, bright ground-floor gallery. It has only been a few years since Quinn's career skyrocketed with his first major solo show at Pace London in 2014.



Installation view, Nathaniel Mary Quinn: This is Life at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

On Instagram, Quinn's images look like collages. In real life they also look like collages. But they aren't. The viewer strains to translate the illusionistic mark making created with charcoal, pastel, oil stick, and gouache on paper. The result lies somewhere between human and machine made with his compositions running both hot and cold. Quinn withholds evidence of the hand, releasing the means of his *trompe l'oeil* trickery to viewers willing to lean in and decode the marks. The controlled surfaces, sourced from picture clippings, ooze and flow in cut-and-paste, smeary amalgamations. One senses Quinn's Chicago origins in noticing homologies with Ed Paschke's irradiated, blurred figures and the general free-wheeling cultural appropriation of the Imagist group. From Dadaist collage to Romare Bearden and African American quilts, Quinn joins those who believe that reality might best be recognized by its disjunctions, patchwork sensations, and complex social strata, rather than by insistent, single-point perspectives.

Quinn's subjects are based on memories of people he has known. His mother, Mary, appears in "Bring Yo' Big Teeth Ass Here!" (2017), with a pig nose and square, squat body, staring out of the picture. Quinn notes that this is a tribute to her love of pork hocks and ears. Mary, who was influential and supportive, died when Quinn was 15 and living away at a boarding school. He subsequently adopted her name. "My mother had never had an education, so this meant she would have her name on every diploma I received," said Quinn in a 2018 *British Vogue* article. Her name appears on his 2000 BFA degree from Wabash College, Indiana and his 2002 MFA degree from New York University. His parents did not read or write and no one else in his family had ever attended college.

Other characters are recollected from the neighborhood of his youth, the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago, built in 1962 to be the largest public housing development in the country with 28 buildings and more than 4,000 units. Gangs and drug dealers, including Quinn's four brothers who had dropped out of school, ruled the terrain. One of the strongest paintings in the show, "Junebug," (2015), is a portrait of Quinn's uncle, a drug dealer. "He was a walking Christmas tree," Quinn recalled. "He had nice clothes, gold chains." Quinn only met him once because his mother tried to avoid men like him having any influence on her son. The portrait is a gleaming, joyous celebration of Junebug's self-styled swagger against a gentle, star-flecked gray background. Multiple, pieced-together bits of eyes, ears, patterns and textures form a formal head and shoulders view held together by a large gold nose ring that is both slick and outrageous. One edge of the image's border is ragged to interrupt the otherwise smooth, round-cornered perfection of the piece. If the Dutch Baroque artist Frans Hals walked into the room, I imagine he would fall to his knees in admiration of where Quinn has taken the notion of "likeness": a blend of artifice and recollection. Human beings are compilations of inherited and adopted identities, of place and circumstance, luck and genetics, real messes of the vulnerable and volatile percolating within societal restraints. Quinn gets this down on paper. ["Discord in perfect harmony,"] is how one curator aptly described his style. What simmers under the human surface becomes the surface in Quinn's work. The sensations are unsorted but adhere with compassion.



Nathaniel Mary Quinn, "Junebug" (2015)

"Charles Re-Visited" (2015), renders his brother in a black-and-white hat with a pink, floral vest. Even as he mixes animal parts with human features, twists the face and abandons symmetry, Quinn still manages to represent character. I feel as if I know Charles with his measured but sassy gaze.

Quinn's process begins with a vision: "maybe from the universe or from God," he says in an interview published in the exhibition catalog. "I have a visceral, physical response to each vision, which means that I want to create it." He then looks to magazines and the internet for source material. He may find a mouth or an eye and work from there. When he starts to draw he creates one segment of the composition and then covers it with paper before he moves to the next section. This technique ensures more pronounced seams and jagged transitions. He doesn't want the compositions to fully settle. A controlled chaos of shape and pattern keeps them stirring. He

tries to protect his process, he says, “from the pollution of my mind,” meaning he doesn’t want logic or predictability to interrupt. There are no preliminary sketches.

Charles was the brother who convinced his mom that Quinn’s pencil drawings on their apartment walls, made when he was five years old, were actually good. His mom encouraged his artwork after that. Eventually a teacher helped him obtain a scholarship to a private high school in Indiana. One month after moving there, his mother died. When he later returned home for Thanksgiving, the family apartment had been abandoned. He never saw his father and brothers again until Charles recently resurfaced after hearing Nathaniel on the radio. That all of Quinn’s portraits are composites that emerge through intuition and chance encounters with images that trigger recollections makes sense.



Nathaniel Mary Quinn, “Charles Revisited” (2015)

One wonders where he will go next. Can Nathaniel Mary Quinn sustain such a highly mannered, identifiable style? Will he want to distance himself from the history of his childhood that accompanies discussions of his work? The framing and presentation of these images still feels unresolved. The images would better flourish if they were more confrontational, but they are entrapped by white frames and glass, like collections of butterflies. If Quinn could shed the box, however, and push the life forces he’s able to generate into the world without having them displayed at a safe distance, the full-throttle vivacity of these paintings would ignite. A recent show at Salon 94 in New York featured 15 portraits of his Crown Point neighbors and did include some new works on canvas (no glass). The show sold out two weeks before it opened. His collectors include Elton John, Carmelo Anthony, and Lenny Kravitz.

During a podcast interview on the Chicago-based show, *Bad at Sports*, Quinn said his goal is to create a new canon for artists, one that focuses on “the illumination of the human essence.” I’m not exactly sure what that means but perhaps any glimpse of a human essence must also contain echoes of the shifting cultural framework from which it emerges. Quinn achieves that, refreshingly, with fragmentation and the refusal to present an over-simplified, imposed narrative.