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Exquisite Corpse: A Conversation with Nathaniel Mary Quinn
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Evan Pricco

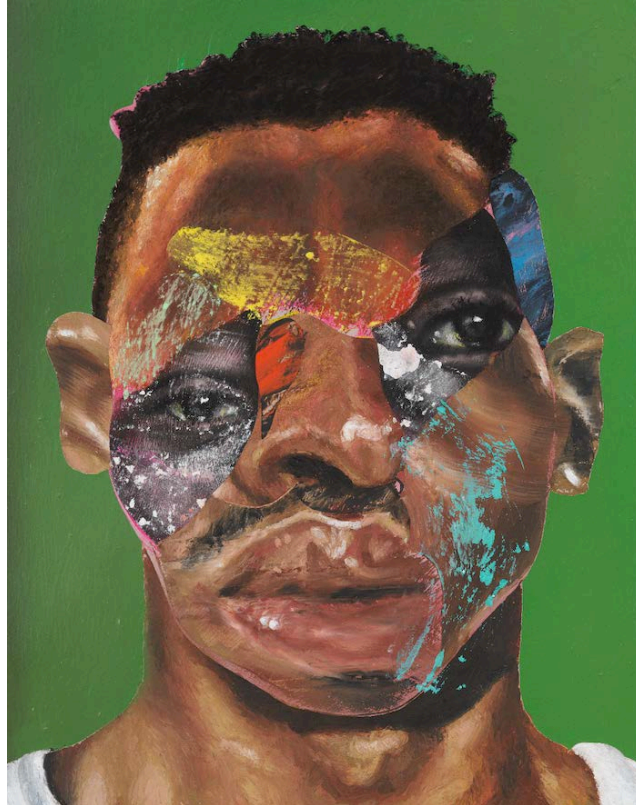


Mr. Nightmare, 2020. Oil paint, paint stick, soft pastel, gouache, black charcoal on linen canvas stretched over wood panel. 36 x 36 in. 91.4 x 91.4 cm. © Nathaniel Mary Quinn. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

Nathaniel Mary Quinn is a blast of fresh air in contemporary American art. His paintings pose fundamental questions about what it is to exist in the mirror of 21st century technological advances, but more importantly, he is at the precipice of defining the significance of the Black experience in America under the weight of an unleashed torrent of right wing propaganda and charged political empowerment. Just as life experience and identity is multifaceted, so too is Quinn's approach to his characters and his craft, as he constructs fragmented faces and figures to compose the fullness of being. It's jarring, stunning and beautiful.

Quinn's newest solo show opened at Gagosian Gallery in London at a pivotal moment in global history, especially amid America's polarizing conversations about race and how the country chooses to evolve as a democracy or devolve into autocracy. Of course, a pandemic is the titanic backdrop. Through whatever lens you choose to view 2020, what's illuminating is that Quinn's aesthetic feels most urgently on-point. It captures how we see ourselves and each other as the crisis ensnares us in a common conversation about survival and identity. "I have always been

interested in the ways that different groups of people view one another: how they internalize their own identities, how others perceive them, and how their own self-perceptions are physically expressed,” Quinn said about making his new solo show. “Working with portraiture during this tumultuous and historic time, as we reckon with racial discrimination and violence in the midst of a global pandemic, requires me to consider these perceptions in an entirely new way.”



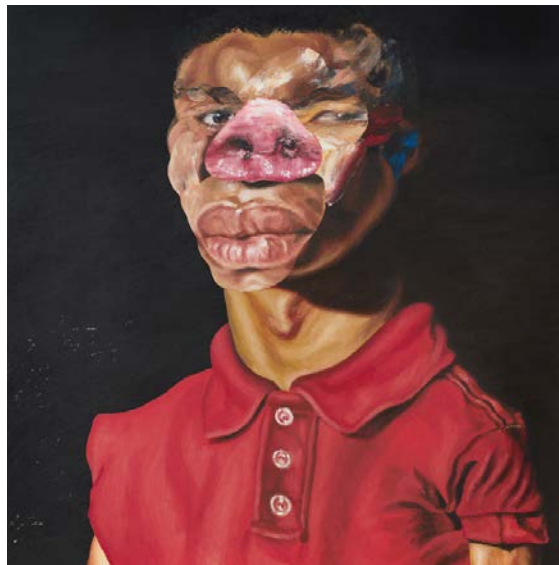
I was lucky enough to share a conversation with Quinn this past week, and truth be told, his work has always been a showstopper for me, and I would do a disservice to the reader if I didn't mention that I place him on a pedestal of what is great about art in America this decade. As his show is on view through November 21, 2020 at the Davies Street, London space, we talked about the pandemic, Surrealism and how fantasy is now a reality.

Evan Pricco: I'm not sure I have even asked the most simple of questions this year, but does anything change for you knowing that maybe, just maybe, no one will actually see the works in person? This whole year has been one big uncertainty, but realized I haven't even asked about something so basic. How do you approach making art that may not be seen by a live audience...

Nathaniel Mary Quinn: Well, knowing that nobody, or not many people, will see the works in person did not, and does not, particularly bother me because I possess genuine concern for the health and safety of people rather than the physical visibility received by my work. Of course, I love for my work to be seen by any given audience; but, no doubt, we are navigating a surreal time in human history.

I think that is the best answer you could give. I couldn't help but notice, both literally and figuratively, that these new works are more muscular. They possess more strength and density. I'm curious when you started this series and what might have triggered this shift?

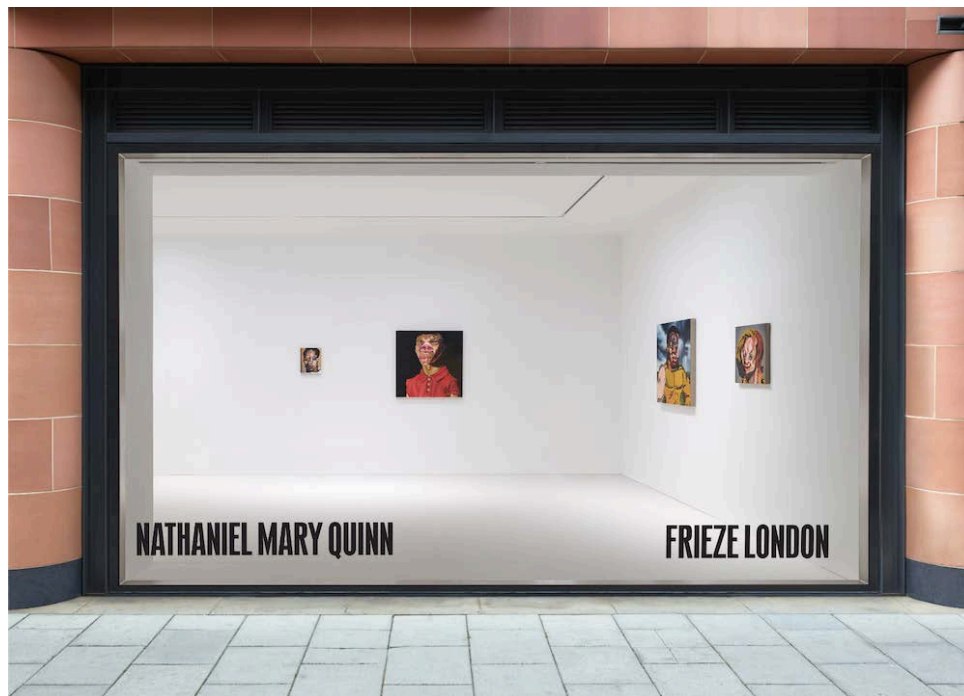
Highlighting the muscularity, literally and figuratively, in the new works is a thoughtful revelation for me; such has never been considered or contemplated prior to your question. Nonetheless, it is a rather insightful unpacking of the work, no doubt a testament to your keen and dutiful eye. I began the series about three months ago — eight paintings, one large work on paper, and nine small, performance drawings on paper — and I certainly was not thinking about muscularity but, more to the point, I certainly find that I was working relentlessly to find strength in the midst of our times, pursuing the means by which to remain strong and vigilant. Also, I was compelled to push the application of my materials with more rigor and intention.



I think people often mistake your work for collage, but in a way, would you say it informs what you do? I love how you described this show, "I have always been interested in the ways that different groups of people view one another: how they internalize their own identities, how others perceive them, and how their own self-perceptions are physically expressed." Maybe this is naive, but I think the way we perceive others is inherently collaged, disparate ideas can formulate a singular idea. This year, this summer in particular, has been a reckoning and awakening at the same time for so much of America and the world. I wonder what that collage mentality means to you?

I never think about “collage” or “collage-making” in creating my work, nor do I refer to other collaged works or similar references for source material. I just find that such an approach as a visual language serves as a great conduit for the effective expression of my visions as I attempt to grapple with ideas of empathy and vulnerability.

I like to think that my work reflects uninhibited harmonious diversity — at times fluid and seamless, at times grotesque and discordant — but, surely, an embrace of reality as it is and the pursuit of what is possible. Rather than being a “collage” mentality, it’s an “expressionist cubism” mentality, where one is able to embrace the rainbow-like spectrum of humanity, and as such, reflect our internalized worlds as a people.



What struck me this morning is that this show in London is at the beginning of Frieze, but feels like a conversation for America right now. Even though this is a historic moment for the world, do you hope an American audience is paying attention here?

I would like to believe that this conversation with which we currently grapple is built into the fabric of the country; it's just that the circumstances propelled by the pandemic have made this conversation more heightened and palpable. And this conversation impacts the world because of the global strength of the American Empire. No doubt, I hope that an American audience is paying attention here, but, believe me, time and grievances will present for me another opportunity to mount such a body of work on American soil: American brutal habits and immoral and ominous behavior against humanity and civil liberties die hard; I am relentlessly sure that its breath will continue to proceed for many years to come — I guarantee it. It's as American as apple pie. That dark and heavy, inhumane breath embedded in America's bloody fabric has been thriving since the birth of this country. It will certainly be here in 2021.

In the show's press release, there was much consideration given to surrealism, and its tradition of cadavre exquis, which roughly translates to "collection of words or images is collectively assembled." I never thought of it this way, but do you feel a kinship to early Surrealists? Or Dadaists? Or was it the technique you enjoy?

I find that I am more effectively influenced by the technique as derived from the Surrealist tradition of cadavre exquis — exquisite corpse — and although I do not operate within the plane of traditional collage, I do pursue a practice of unearthing my unconscious mind, which is why empathy and vulnerability are such important tools in my studio practice.



This has been a year that defies conventional definition. What have you learned about yourself during this time? Or have you begun to create differently, or even take on a new study?

I have come to learn a great number of things about myself, although it is rather difficult to articulate such in a coherent and intelligent way. I have certainly learned to be more relaxed and calm, and I have learned to understand the remarkable way in which my studio practice provides for me a sustainable and impenetrable escape from the world.

You have had immense success over the past few years, and if you reflect, there is something really special about having a solo show, London, Frieze week, Gagosian, and on and on. What do you think of the rather odd circumstance of not being present at your opening (or maybe you were and I missed it) and seeing the work in situ?

I was not present for the opening of Frieze on occasion of my solo booth in London with Gagosian, as I am beholden to my safety and health; but, there are, without doubt, times when I do sit back and ponder my career, my success, and the journey of my life—even now—and I certainly acknowledge, with humility and gratitude, how fortunate and blessed I am. It continues to be quite surreal; it never gets old or boring: I am living in the dream I had once imagined; what was once a fantasy is now my reality.