M+B

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Nathaniel Mary Quinn

Interview by Dexter Wimberly
Images by Michael Mundy

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— NATHANIEL MARY QUINN

I met Chicago-born artist Nathaniel Mary Quinn in 2013 and have had the pleasure of working with him on a number of exhibitions. I recently talked with Quinn about new developments in his career, the new challenge of being a recognized artist and Highlights, his upcoming exhibition at M+B Gallery in Los Angeles. Known for portraiture that blends sophisticated painting and drawing techniques to achieve the fractured, disorienting appearance of collage, Quinn's highly-coveted work depicts an array of people from his childhood who had an indelible influence on his life. Sitting in his new studio in Brooklyn, NY, the artist discusses the lessons he's learned, the importance of humility and the transformative power of imagination.

Dexter Wimberly: Quinn, we've known each other for a few years now, and during that time quite a lot has happened for you. I know it's been a really strange and interesting journey. Can you give me a capsule of what has happened in your career during the past two or three years?

Nathaniel Mary Quinn: First, in the last three years I went from being a full-time teacher to being a full time artist. Second, I made a transition from being an obscure artist to being acknowledged and discussed, becoming more known. My work has become more recognizable to where viewers can identify, "That's a Mary Quinn." Third, I graduated from having community-based exhibitions—i.e. coffee shops or people's brownstones, which were significant shows for me—to having exhibitions in reputable galleries. I even have a museum show coming up in 2018 in South Carolina at the Halsey Institute of Art at the University of Charleston and had a prior installation that you curated at the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA) in Brooklyn, New York.

DW: Making that transition from obscure to recognized is both rewarding and challenging in many ways because with recognition come scrutiny and criticism. Some artists begin to change under the weight of that. Change isn't necessarily a bad thing. Change can be good. But from your perspective, how has this shift in your recognition and acknowledgement affected you both personally and in your work?

NMQ: I feel happy. Personally, it's exciting. It really is. There's a saying that because a gallery gives you a show, it validates your work. I understand that concept but don't subscribe to it. I believe that true validation comes from within in the very beginning—it's just icing on the cake that other people get on board. Artistically, it hasn't changed my work at all. I just always focus on pushing my art. Because I am a full-time artist now, I have more time to push it further, but I'm not trying to appease the audience or give them what I think they may want. I try to remain extremely authentic no matter what, in the way I would have if none of this had happened.

DW: I remember our first encounter and visiting your studio a few years ago—I immediately had a positive reaction to your work. I've also been quite fascinated by the scale of some of the new pieces. A lot of artists have the tendency to work in a particular size range, but you've been able to use scale to your advantage. I recall seeing your exhibition at Rhona Hoffman Gallery (Chicago) last September and was very moved by the fact that the smallest works in the show had so much power and energy in them. How are you making these decisions about scale and content?

NMQ: Everything I make is born from a vision, a visual idea, that becomes the blueprint for the work. In that vision, all details are provided: the subject, the way the subject is constructed, the color palette, shape, form and size of the work. If it calls for a large-scale work, then that's what I do, but if it calls for something small, I do that. At some point, I had this appetite for doing small works. I really wanted to explore a more intimate relationship with my work, and small scale allows that to happen because you're up on it the whole time. I wanted to make the small works as powerful as the big works. I think there's a permeating ideology that small works tend to be less strong. But if you think of a painter like Vermeer, all of his paintings were small but he had very powerful and beautiful textures and ways to control light in such a small scale. I think that's as time consuming, laborious and challenging as making a large work.

DW: And for those who are not as familiar with your practice, I want to talk a little bit about what's behind it. Could you talk to me about your subject matter?

NMQ: My upcoming show is titled Highlights, and every piece in it represents a figure who has transcended or overcome in a way. These are people I actually know who transcended very dire circumstances and managed to get out of the community from which I come, the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago. That doesn't mean that they all became teachers and lawyers. Many of them went on to just get regular jobs, but they didn't fall prey to the volatile monstrosity of the community we shared. A lot of the images have comic book superheroes attached to them because, to me, the subjects are heroic. They are uncanny. These are highlights: those who were lifted, who lifted themselves.

DW: We're here in your studio, so tell me a little about your process—the materials you use to make your work.

NMQ: I use black charcoal, gouache, oil pastel, oil paint, paint stick, sometimes acrylic gold or silver powder. I work from photographs, and I pretty much manually render everything. Other people might look at the work and believe that there's traditional collage taking place. There's no collage. Everything is drawn or painted by hand. I use construction paper to produce form or shape with sharp edges. Or I use other materials that can be adhered to the surface of the paper without ruining the work. It's two-dimensional sculpture. My process is intuitive, so I never make preliminary sketches of anything. It's like being a surgeon. I use an X-Acto knife everywhere and cut right on the paper. It's an insane amount of work.

DW: Being an artist in your position is quite exciting. There's a lot of demand for your work now and a lot of demand put on you—you're working with multiple galleries in different ways. As you mentioned, you have a museum show coming up in 2018. Between then and now, one can only imagine what will happen. Can you talk to me about one or two lessons that you've learned in this process of going from being obscure to being recognized?

NMQ: Lesson number one: always say "thank you" and "I'm sorry". Those are two of the most powerful statements that you can use in any field, particularly in the art world, because people help you. I'm in a binary position: on one hand I could say, "My work is so good that people just want to buy it." But on the other hand I can say, "The work only sells because the market decided to support it." So I tend to go with the latter of the two because art is very subjective. You don't know if what you're making is particularly strong, but somehow you hit a nerve or a collector who will support it. A lot of artists are exceptional, but the market doesn't support their work for some reason. So when you get opportunities, say thank you. Show gratitude.

Another thing is being very disciplined. I have a nice, tight schedule. Don't forget to live a bit and be completely transparent with people. Under-promise, over-deliver. That's how I live. And it's okay to say no. Just be genuine. Show love to other people. Support and celebrate other artists, curators and directors. Those are some of the lessons I've learned and have been very effective for me.

DW: What are some of the challenges you're looking forward to overcoming as an artist?

NMQ: I just want to make better work. I don't feel like my work is good enough. Every waking moment I have a real anxiety about that. Everything I make is an inspiration for making really good work, but I haven't achieved that yet. There's no way. I can feel it in my gut. I'm getting there, but I want to be able to achieve it before I die. If I could just make one good piece in my lifetime, I would be a happy man. That's more than money, more than fame. The money thing is cool, but it doesn't affect me. When I come to my studio, I still feel like the same insecure guy. Fear is personified in my studio practice every day. And you know what the fear says? "I don't think I can render that jacket. I don't know if I'm good enough." Every day.

DW: It's good to hear someone talk about vulnerabilities in such an honest, forthright way. I sense that in your work, that you're channeling that vulnerability. There's a sensitivity to your work that I don't find with a lot of other artists. You're not simply painting someone as they appear in a photograph, or as they wish to appear.

NMQ: Right, I'm painting what's real, and what is oftentimes real is the unseen. You can buy a new car and think, "I see it physically in front of me: a brand new car." But the car doesn't symbolize what's really happening. What's really happening is that you just spent a lot of money with the hope of enhancing your self-esteem. Or I can say that I just bought a house—you see it here, physically. What's really real, though, is I just found a way to solidify the roof over my head because I'm afraid of being homeless. That's the truth. So I'm interested in painting the truth. Not what I see, but what I don't see. In order for me to see that, I have to feel it. I have to get into harmony with you. That tends to be the reason why people from my past are my best subjects, my best models, because I spent time with these people. I know them. I have a linked fate with them.

DW: In your work, you're depicting people who are both alive and passed away, but I don't get the sense that you're treating the living any differently than you're treating the dead.

NMQ: That's right—we're already dead now. That's just nature. The earth produces plants, animals and humans. We all go through this cycle. My mom passed away when I was 15 years old. Until this day, when I think about my mother the feeling that comes over me is the same feeling I had when she was alive. She seems very real to me. And here's the thing: nobody's higher than another person. That's why I love charcoal so much. I feel like I am one with that material. We're all from the same origin, from the earth. And the conclusion you come to is twofold: on one hand, I ain't shit. I am no better than a tree or a roach. But at the same time, I'm very special because there's only one Nate Quinn. God saw fit to give me life, but I'm just like anybody else.

DW: To me, a fantastic artist is someone who reminds us of our connectedness to the rest of the world and also of our littleness. Only certain people are open to being reminded of their smallness.

NMQ: The one beautiful thing we all possess is imagination. That is a tool given to humans by the universe, a tool that will allow us to envision for ourselves the kind of future that we can achieve. Some may argue that this is a Westernized ideology, that this kind of talk doesn't happen in third world countries. I get it. I can't quite dispute that, but I went to Belize for the first time and saw little children playing with dirt. Happy, man. I saw kids happily playing with dirt. I've seen kids in America with much more who were far less happy. Those children decided to use the most powerful piece of technology, their imagination and create for themselves a different reality. Beautiful. They were playing with nothing. I will never forget that. Imagination is not tactile, but it impacts you. And then you work toward it. Via faith, belief and hope, you just keep working toward it.