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ARTSLANT! Los Angeles

Piecing It All Together: Nathaniel Mary Quinn Transfigures a Shattered World

By Sola Agustsson

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Nathaniel Mary Quinn's fragmented portraits recall his childhood growing up in the Robert Taylor Homes, a notorious housing project in Chicago. His new series Highlights, now on view at M+B in Los Angeles, features highly personal works that reflect on his upbringing and the people he knew who were able to escape the violence and poverty so many experienced in the now demolished project.

Though his pieces resemble collages, they are in fact improvised paintings. Quinn does not do initial sketches of his works, preferring to paint using a process of free association based on internal visions and emotions that arise when thinking about a particular subject matter. He uses combinations of charcoal, pastel, gouache, and oil paint on vellum to create a pastiched style that is truly his own.

The abstract, distorted figures encompass both grotesque and innocent imagery reflecting many facets of the human experience. The works are intimate and embracing of binaries: good and bad, male and female, past and present. Quinn's work gives reverence to all aspects of the individual experience. "The journey of those living in difficult communities like that of The Robert Taylor Homes is reflected in all of humanity. No human is impervious to pain and loss, to despair and grief, to suffering and longing. Such a disposition does not exist, and all experiences are, indeed, relative to one's own unique set of circumstances," the artist told me.

Quinn was the youngest of five brothers born to illiterate parents. His father provided for the family with gambling earnings from pool halls. His brothers were all high school dropouts, many of who succumbed to addiction and alcoholism. Quinn, a precocious artist, received a scholarship in eighth grade to a prestigious boarding academy in Indiana. His mother, who was crippled from two strokes, died soon after he left, and when Quinn returned home from school one Thanksgiving, he found his entire family had abandoned him. He was 15 then, and he hasn't talked to his family in the two decades since. He says he believes now their abandonment may have been a blessing in disguise. After graduating high school, Quinn received a BFA from Wabash College and an MFA from New York University. He now lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

The specter of childhood runs through Quinn's work, with cartoon fragments spliced into many of his pieces. Quinn first began making art by copying comic books in his youth. He infuses superhero illustrations into his portraits because he thinks people he knew who were able to escape the projects are superheroes in their own right, saying:



Highlights
Nathaniel Mary Quinn
M+B

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One's escape from a community akin to the Robert Taylor Homes is predicated on a mutant-like feat, where the psychological barrier and its very purpose were deconstructed and, somehow, rebuilt. The shapes and forms in my work, the works' marriage of that which is beautiful and that which is grotesque, of a Frankenstein-like framework of cut parts and components by means of intense rendering and painting, all give rise to the journey of such a difficult, yet necessary, human transformation.

One subject who made it out of the housing projects cycle is "Rosey," a nickname for the artist's best friend, who won a scholarship to the same boarding school he attended. "It was rather strange meeting a chap like Rosy; most of the boys in the Robert Taylor Homes were incredibly tough and, at times, rather dangerous, although, obviously, they were not born this way: the interlacing factors of the community were efficient enough to bring about a certain conditioning that made empty the sanctity of life and optimistic prospects of one's future. Rosy never succumbed to such conditioning, which could, perhaps, be attributed to a collective set of influences: the love, compassion, and discipline of his mother," Quinn said of his friend. Rosy now enjoys a successful career in the Midwest.

Though these portraits are singular depictions of people Quinn knows personally, they relate to larger universal themes of human resiliency. The collagist structure conveys the fragmentation inherent in an individual's collective experiences. Influenced by Cubism, Francis Bacon, and Neo Rauch, Quinn is drawn to artists who meld seemingly disparate elements into a cohesive whole.

"My aim is to, firstly, create, but to also reflect human capacity for all that exists," says the artist. "The various structures in my work—the layering of shapes and forms, of color and tone, of lines and that which may be described as decorative—are reflections of the complexity of human existence, of presenting such reflections on the same plane, all at once, to be fully embraced by the viewer, and by which the viewer will be confronted."

—Sola Agustsson

Sola Agustsson is a writer based in Los Angeles. She studied at UC Berkeley and has contributed to *Bullett*, *Flaunt*, *The Huffington Post*, *Alternet*, *Artlog*, *Konch*, and *Whitewall Magazine*.



Nathaniel Mary Quinn
Antoine Jackson, 2016
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Nathaniel Mary Quinn
Rosey, 2016
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