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The Interview: Nathaniel Mary Quinn

By Jesc Bunyard
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Nathaniel Mary Quinn is known for producing large-scale paper works, which explore the construction of identity through complex assemblages and collages. Situated somewhere between abstraction and figuration, Quinn's practice is influenced by memory and an urge to work. The figures are often a mixture between the grotesque, often due to the collage process, and the serene. We meet Nathaniel Mary Quinn to find out more about his practice and his upcoming exhibition at PACE London.

You describe your subjects as 'hybrid creatures'; can you explain a little more about this?

My subjects are just an amalgamation of images that I cull from various resources, memories, and visions. In the most uncertain way, I put them together – the images, photographs, memories, visions – and they appear to be “hybrid creatures” representing much of what I experienced during my upbringing in Chicago as well as what I experience today.



You have a lot of different influences within your work, not all of them happy. How do you use these memories within your work?

Well, I don't exactly use my memories in a way that is intentional; I believe that making an intentional use of such memories would be rather pretentious and dishonest. One is not usually certain of one's memories because one's memory tends to be rather inaccurate; this is so because most people employ an unconscious means by which to illuminate their memories. My process is predicated on random “visions” or feelings that I receive and feel. I never know the meaning of such visions; I never know the premise of my feelings; I always know, without any ounce of hesitation, that I possess a visceral response to my visions and must create them. I never make preliminary sketches; I do not excessively plan in preparation for making the work. I just find images that come close to reconciling the components of my visions and, from start to finish, use the images as a collective resource for completing the pieces, making all of my marks and edits on the surface of the paper. The path from start to finish is never clear, but my faith in the end result is relentlessly clear. Nonetheless, during the process of creating, the work begins to reveal to me what I continue to endure and withstand. Fractured and cohesive memories from my childhood and early years in Chicago – matters I have not thought about in years – begin to collect in my mind, and it becomes relentlessly clear what the work is about. More accurately speaking, it becomes clear that the work is a direct reflection of the pain, loss, happiness, and happiness that I continue to endure, negotiate, and enjoy.

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Is your work completely taken from personal memories, or do you work from other sources as well?

I work from photographs a great deal, but my work is a reflection of my personal memories. I do not think of a memory and decide to make a work about it. I receive a vision that initially possesses no immediate meaning or understanding; yet, I am overcome with this insatiable urge to make a work that reflects the vision, to actually draw and paint the vision. The visions are not crystal clear, but the emotional resonance between the vision and I is extremely palpable. I begin the process of making the work; I use photographs as source material for making the work; the process of making the work reveals that I am re-creating a memory based on real life experiences. For example, the work in the show, "Diane," began as a vision. For some reason, I saw this vision of a woman with big, black hair and luscious red lips, holding a rose in her hand, along with having flowers in her hair. While I did not know the meaning of this vision – I could not understand my sincere, unwarranted commitment to this vision – I, without doubt, had to make a piece to reflect it.

You mix a lot of media, such as charcoal and gouache. Can you explain a little about your process?

I use black charcoal – and many different grains of black charcoal to achieve a certain effect – gouache, paint-stick, oil paint, and oil pastel on paper. My process is similar to sculpture; I construct my subjects; I use many materials because such is necessary for the construction of my subjects. Basically, I use whatever necessary to create my work. An incredible amount of work goes into creating my pieces because I have a high level of integrity about my work and I never compromise anything. Never. I work from 10:00am until 3:00am or 4:00am every day. A short day for me is working from 10:00am until 12:30am or 1:00am. I take three to four short breaks – fifteen minutes or so per break – then, back to work.

Your works recall the photcollage pieces by John Stezaker, is this a conscious influence?

I love John Stezaker's work, but his work is not a conscious influence. There appears to be a formal underpinning to his process; my process of the breaking and splitting and re-structuring of the faces and the figure is directly related to my experience of being abandoned by my family, which required a great deal of re-structuring in my life. I am much better these days. The volume of my pain in relation to losing my family is extremely low, but the pain is still there, and it expresses itself in many different ways. I never felt as though I had a great deal of stability in my life in regards to my relationships with people. It is difficult for me to form secure connections with people; I do not know what it is like to be a member of a family; I yearn for acceptance by other people; I am quite insecure at times; I am completely comfortable in being alone because I feel the safest when I am alone. My work is influenced by much of this, which is realistically related to my humanity.

You blur the lines between abstract and figurative, which recalls the paintings of Francis Bacon. There is also a shared element of the grotesque. Has Bacon been an influence in your practice?

Francis Bacon has always been an influence in my work. His paintings are free and liberating; it appears that his work is not bound to the conventions of painting. Rather, it appears that Bacon was investigating his personal identity and humanity, his existence and emotional bandwidth. So, it appears that the grotesque is quite beautiful; yet, most people invest a great deal of energy in avoiding the grotesque, especially that which rests within themselves. The so-called grotesque nature in the loss of my family now functions as the fuel of my artistic production. The grotesque disposition of poverty, gang shootings, drug trafficking, and my direct and indirect affiliation with such conditions now function as a subconscious gateway into worlds that provide the visions for my work. My humanity is the result of the grotesque, along with experiences of happiness, achievement, and progress. As a human being, I am beautiful because of such experiences, both the grotesque and the aesthetically pleasing and acceptable. So, I possess the courage to embrace it, to share it with the world. I believe that Francis Bacon did this as well, along with Lucien Freud, and artists like Adrian Ghenie, Li Songsong, and Neo Rauch also, I believe, operate in this similar vain, which is why I find an incredible amount of freedom in their work.

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Your works are beautifully grotesque. Do you consciously aim to blur the boundaries between aesthetically pleasing and the surreal?

I do not consciously blur the lines between the grotesque and the beautiful. I try to be conscious about making work that is a reflection of me, and since I am a combination of all that is grotesque and beautiful, my work would reflect such, but an incredible amount of courage is required for such an outcome. It would be more accurate to state that I aim to embrace the truth of my shortcomings, beauty, downfalls, achievement, and everything else that contributes to my existence as a human being. To embrace the contractual agreement of life – during the unconscious moment of being born into the world and signing the contractual agreement of your imminent death with your first gasp of air – is a courageous effort, and I maintain to adhere to such courageous effort throughout my career as an artist. Therefore, I embrace with pride and joy the synthesis of my good and my bad. I don't exactly attempt to make something that is aesthetically pleasing; I don't know what may be aesthetically pleasing to the eye of another. I just attempt to make work that is honest. Being honest is being aesthetically pleasing; it may hurt and cause some sense of jarring, but it's authentic.

One of my favourite works in the exhibition is 'Diane'. Can you explain more about this work?

"Diane," like all of my work, began as a vision. For some reason, I saw this vision of a woman with big, black hair and luscious red lips, holding a rose in her hand, along with having flowers in her hair. While I did not know the meaning of this vision – I could not understand my sincere, unwarranted commitment to it – I, without hesitation, had to make a piece to reflect it. As I was making the work, it all made sense to me: upon coming home for Thanksgiving break and finding my apartment empty and my family gone, never to see them again, my next door neighbor, after asking her for further details, informed me that my family had made their departure two weeks prior to my arrival. She was stunned that nobody updated me about this matter. I now remember her having big, black hair; she kept fake roses and other flowers in her apartment, which always had a dim light, like an urban cave; she always wore a pink or light blue house robe. More importantly, her public personae was harsh; however, in her private life – sometimes, she would come to our family's apartment to give us food, like bread, sugar, and butter; the extension of generosity was common practice amongst families in the Robert Taylor Homes, the tenement housing projects where I grew up – she was quite open about her vulnerable disposition, her severe lack of money and resources, her sadness, her exhaustion. Even as a child, I knew that she was filled with trouble. And she was as gentle as conceivably possible in the face of my abandonment, although she could not help me; she had to bear witness to my journey into a troubling darkness due to her severe inability to provide resources for my temporary survival. Yet, she was a rose during one of my darkest hours. Her name was Diane.

What other works are you showing at PACE London?

I am exhibiting thirteen works in the show; the show is a one-person exhibition, my first show with the gallery. Some of the highlights in the show are "King Kong Ain't Got Nothing On Me," "Ms. Chairs," "Chainsaw Master," "LaLa," "Slim," "Motorcycle Pig," "Monique," and, of course, "Diane."

What's next for you?

I anticipate having works in the Frieze London Art Fair with Pace Gallery this upcoming October.

Nathaniel Mary Quinn: Past/Present will run from 5th September till October 4th at Pace London, Lexington Street

