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AnOther^{Magazine}

An Unusual Artist: Nathaniel Mary Quinn

We take a look at Nathaniel Mary Quinn's new exhibition Past/Present at Pace London

By Max Fletcher
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Who? Nathaniel Mary Quinn is a Brooklyn-based artist who has become known for his work in collage and mixed media. Born in 1977 in Chicago, Quinn's childhood was very difficult – his mother died when he was young, and he was later abandoned by his father and brother. His desire to explore issues relating to his fraught personal history informs much of his art. As a consequence, his work can be quite shocking, but it retains a sense of grace and aesthetic accomplishment, which, Quinn says, is the result of his efforts to avoid excessive introspection.

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What? Pace London are exhibiting a new collection of Quinn's work in his solo exhibition Past/Present. These new works see Quinn working in a manner not dissimilar to synthetic cubism, combining images from multiple sources (ranging from family photographs to cuttings from articles and advertisements) in order to create large-scale images of grotesque figures, which he refers to as 'hybrid creatures'.



Why? In this exhibition, Quinn furthers his exploration of issues relating to contemporary identity. Although his works are very personal, they are also deeply in touch with trends in public life and are especially concerned, in their use of pop cultural imagery, with changes in the modern media landscape. His creation of fragmented and often schizophrenic feeling collages is in part a reflection of a culture at odds with itself, unable to assemble the noise and confusion of its media into any kind of unity. But despite the deep sense of anxiety that informs them, Quinn stays level headed enough to render the images with astonishing technical skill and dexterity.

Past/Present is at Pace London from September 5 to October 4.

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Yet the New York art scene is a world away from where Mr Quinn, 37, grew up. He was raised in the poverty-stricken projects, the equivalent of UK housing estates, on the south side of Chicago, buildings which have subsequently been torn down.

“Where I lived was populated by gang violence, I grew up seeing shootings and killings. Everyone living there was a witness to poverty and crime. You knew at a young age you could be killed,” he said.

Growing up, conditions were hard, with the lights constantly being disconnected, and his family turning on the oven to heat the apartment.

He managed to avoid joining a gang, although most of his friends did. He was known instead for his art, something he had done since a small child.

“I’ve been making art my entire life,” Mr Quinn said. He learnt to draw by copying comic books and he became known as an artist in the neighbourhood.

“I’ve always wanted to be an artist; there was never any question about that in my life. All my friends knew me as an artist. I was challenged to art duels by other kids.”

He secured a scholarship to a prestigious private college Culver Military Academy in Indiana at the age of 15, which would prove his way out of the projects. “I woke up there and heard birds singing, and I knew I was in a different land altogether; I was accustomed to waking up to gunshots.”

Yet his mother died a month after he joined Culver, and then weeks after that he returned home to find his father and four brothers had left. He has not seen them in the 22 years since. “My life since that was not good. I was drinking a lot and in constant distress and pain,” he said.

After high school, college and then graduate school he worked as a substitute teacher and then taught at-risk youth in the criminal justice system.

Less than a year ago his art career took an “upward swing,” when he started painting about issues from his upbringing and his family history and he could give up his day job. “I find making art now thrilling. It used to feel like a job, but now it feels fun and challenging.”

He added: “The whole thing about the buzz is surreal. It feels like I’m getting a gain in my life that is equivalent to all I have lost in my life. I’ve lost my entire family, my sense of belonging. Now I feel God is giving it to me back tenfold.”



'Diane, 2014' by Nathaniel Mary Quinn
(Damian Griffiths)

Past/Present opened in Pace London, the UK arm of one of New York's most prestigious galleries, on Friday.