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CHICAGO READER

Nathaniel Mary Quinn's portraits recreate the grotesque specters of the Robert Taylor Homes A series of large-scale abstracts bring the past vividly to life.

By Annette Elliot
October 13, 2015

Nathaniel Mary Quinn remembers drawing the fluid black outline of a cowboy on the drab walls of the apartment in the Robert Taylor Homes where he lived as a child. In the concrete public housing high-rise, adventures came to life, carefully copied from the pages of his favorite comic books. His father, an illiterate gambler from Mississippi, taught him how to draw on brown paper bags from the neighborhood grocery store.

"He would tell me to draw from my shoulder," Quinn recalls. "He would take the erasers off the pencils and tell me never to erase. Every mark has meaning. If you make a mistake, make use of that mistake and turn it into something that can work for you."

In a series of large-scale abstract portraits currently on view at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, the artist captures grotesque specters from his past in black charcoal, oil pastel, gouache and acrylic gold leaf. Disfigured and distorted faces stare mournfully out at the viewer. Cursed by unsettling metamorphoses, whether a prominent pig snout or the flaring nostrils of an enraged bull, the characters simultaneously repel and attract.

Memories from the artist's past continue to haunt him. "Walking down the street, I get a vision. I never write them down because I never forget them. My visions are often memories I continue to hold on to, the manifestation of an indelible mark made on me by certain experiences."

Quinn was the youngest of five boys. His mother, crippled after suffering two strokes, managed to support her family with disability checks from the government. He remembers the constant struggle to pay the bills. "I imagine the rent was maybe 50 dollars a month, and the people who lived in the projects struggled to pull together 50 dollars each month." In the winter, the family would often turn on the oven to heat the apartment to avoid paying the electric bill.

Quinn paints figments of memory, both real and unreal. Like a surgeon, he meticulously constructs the fractured geometry of the face with charcoal, construction paper, tape and an X-Acto knife. "We are all trying to keep it together. We fight to convince spectators of what appears to be a seamless existence, but inside is tension, rupture and things that don't quite fit. That is the raw you. I want to paint that."

In Ms. Lykes, a portrait of one of Quinn's grammar school teachers, a sour-looking woman sits with her hands demurely crossed in her lap. She wears a delicate satin blouse embroidered with crimson flowers. Her face is ripped open by a large snout, her eyes cast askew. Quinn has not forgotten Ms. Lykes or the hurt she inflicted when she discouraged him from applying to Culver Academies, a private boarding school in Indiana.

"I recall Ms. Lykes, in particular, remarking 'You jus' gonna go to DuSable High School like the rest of dem niggahs.' DuSable High School was never considered a particularly good high school—or even a safe one for that matter. It was seen as the school for the 'project kids,' the poor kids who did not have a future. Ms. Lykes certainly could not see, or refused to envision, that I might be admitted into a fancy boarding school for rich kids."

Today he lives in Brooklyn, in a small two-bedroom apartment in Bedford Stuyvesant. Brown paper covers the walls on which he draws a delicate outline of a face. He often paints for 48 hours without sleep to keep up with the demand for his work. In his paintings he returns to his childhood apartment, or what he remembers of it, the articles of clothing scattered on the floor, a half-eaten loaf of bread, and a two-liter Royal Crown Cola.



Ms. Lykes, 2015
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