



Vision Quest

An artist channels his past through his painting

BY MIKE PEPI

"THAT'S KENNY-RAY!"

A slim man emerges from a composite of several faces sandwiched in between swathes of fur and a gray coat. This particular figure is delicately laid on a white background. He is disfigured but poised, gazing back from perfectly modeled eyes. In his painted form, Kenny-Ray is the product of a revelation by Nathaniel Mary Quinn, a Chicago-born artist working in New York. He was also, about two decades ago, Quinn's neighbor in the Robert Taylor housing projects on the South Side of Chicago. "I hadn't thought about Kenny-Ray since I was 13 years old. He was a good friend of the family, but he wasn't like most of the guys in the community, who were gangbangers or hustlers. He was a nice, wholesome guy." Kenny-Ray was fixed in Quinn's subconscious, waiting to be the subject of a practice that is obsessed with the

Monique, 2014. Charcoal, oil pastel, paint stick, and gouache on Lenox paper, 36 x 43 in.

cathartic release of images from his past.

"Most of my work comes from visions," Quinn says. "I'm just a medium through which things are passing." These are from within, pulled out by the artist's profound faith in exploration of the self. While Quinn's visions look inward to the artist's memories, they resonate with the untidiness of identity at large and have become a fruitful source of raw material. "They arise without warning—those quirky, weird situations that we cannot possibly orchestrate," he explains during a recent visit to his bedroom studio in a three-story brownstone in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. "When I receive the vision, I have no idea of its meaning. The one thing that does stay with me is this visceral impulse to make it. Once I act on that, the work tells me what it is about." Quinn grows visibly excited as he dives into his process. His

tempo quickens. "The exploration of the self is by far the most interesting subject."

His meticulous process acts as a vehicle of sorts for this rich psychohistory. In the work's final form—collage-like in appearance, but actually a flat picture plane—various plots of fabric, skin, or objects compete to constitute the identity that a viewer might ascribe to it. Quinn makes these highly personal images evocative for all audiences. Each subject has a haunting complexity, an effect that is amplified by its rendering. He assembles his patchworks in chunks, obscuring his view of the rest of the composition with heavy paper before he pulls it back to reveal the unfolding character. The separate components are rendered with an exacting degree of verisimilitude.

The artist's hyperrealist tendency is a function of both his classical training and his foundational encounters with drawing. The bulk of his works are made on paper, using a combination of gouache, oil stick, paint stick, and charcoal, materials he has long worked to master. "The sharper your skill set is, the more effective you are in communicating—but the soul has to be there," he says. "My father used to remove the erasers from pencils. He would say, 'Draw with confidence. Make use of every mark.'"

An early talent and fervor for depicting the figure stayed with him throughout his academic education and his early work. He was a standout talent in grade school, and it was his skill that produced a path out of the Robert Taylor houses and eventually to NYU for a master of fine arts. Still, it took a shift in approach over the last two years to cultivate the energy that now characterizes his efforts. "Before, I was making pieces about race relations, the critique of hip-hop culture. I thought I had to make that work because I'm a 'black artist,'" he explains. "One day I just thought to myself, you know, I don't enjoy my studio practice." He abandoned work with explicitly political overtones and transitioned to an approach that mined his past, in which memory is key. "It's about the overall atmospheric factors that play a part in one's identity. What that actually looks like, and how it affects you," he says. In this way, Quinn's work is equally about race, but the issues that come up, channeled through a deeply personal lens, are put into sharper focus. "By virtue of being an African-American," he offers, "that identity is going to bleed through my work."

Accordingly, his influences are a mix of the formally apparent and conceptually idiosyncratic. Quinn has stated an



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outright reverence for the quietly confident lines of Indian artist Tyeb Mehta, and references to Francis Bacon seem to loom over most discussions of his work. But many influences transcend fine art: the production quality of Kanye West or the fluidity of Richard Pryor and Redd Foxx. "An artist should have the same type of punch," he says. "I have a conviction about humanity, and it just so happens that I express it through my artwork."

The themes of abandonment, death, and loss permeate his visions, a reflection of his upbringing in a notoriously violent section of Chicago. In the provocatively titled "Black Jesus" series, completed for Rawson Projects in February, Quinn turned the Lower East Side space into a partial reconstruction of his mother's living room. The front of the gallery featured a domestic setting complete with a television playing one of the two videos made for the show—a mix of archival footage of housing projects, scenes of urban violence, and gospel music. In the back, Quinn projected a short film, *When Sunday Come: Memory*. It shows a woman entering a tenement bedroom to pray over her child: "Please, in the name of Jesus, watch over my baby boy / When I am dead and gon'...."

The entire ensemble harks back to the Christian faith that sustained his early childhood. "I just didn't feel like the Jesus hanging on my wall had what it took to deliver me from the evils that my mother wanted to protect me from," he recalls. In the center of the dark gallery hung Quinn's *Black Jesus*, dimly illuminated by votive candles. "I painted the Jesus that



FROM LEFT:
Nathaniel Mary
Quinn, 2015.

Black Jesus,
2015. Charcoal,
gouache, oil
pastel, oil paint,
and paint stick
on Coventry
vellum paper,
74¼ x 44 in.

I thought would be strong enough to get me and my mom through the projects.” Quinn’s *Black Jesus* is conspicuously well endowed, with a gold chain and boxing gloves. “He is confronting you. He is not going to wait passively.” He stands on holy ground, and has the cloven hooves of a sheep. Even with the biblical iconography, it’s far from the meek Christ who would turn the other cheek.

While working on *Black Jesus* he received the vision for *Junebug*, an erstwhile uncle channeled into a painting that he will show at Chicago’s Rhona Hoffman Gallery. Everything Quinn knows about Junebug is from his mother’s secondhand stories. He wore inexplicably dapper clothes and possessed a quick temper and a loud personality, traits that Quinn integrates using specific iconographic choices. For *Junebug*, the defining feature is a bull nose complete with a



FROM LEFT:
Kenny-Ray, 2013.
Charcoal and
gouache on
Lenox paper,
50 x 38 in.

*King Kong Ain't
Got Nothing
on Me*, 2013.
Charcoal,
gouache, and
oil pastel
on Coventry
vellum paper,
86½ x 61½ in.

massive gold ring, a signifier of his uncle’s material wealth and bombastic nature.

These days, Quinn is working on several pieces at once, a production schedule dictated by the fickle nature of his chief source of inspiration as much as by a recent uptick in his exhibition schedule. In September he will have his solo show at Rhona Hoffman, followed by outings at Luce Gallery in Turin, Italy, and M+B gallery in Los Angeles. During our last visit, he was in the midst of producing a series of works on paper for Rhona Hoffman.



These new pieces represent a seamless transition from his first solo exhibition in London, where Pace Gallery mounted “Past/Present,” featuring several new works on paper from 2014. In *Motorcycle Pig*, 2014, a massive green arm swings down from the torso. The charged figure is punctuated by a precise rendering of materials ranging from fur to metal armor, ornamentation atop an already unreal composite of signs from Quinn’s visions. Gorilla feet terminate the hairy legs that emerge from what appears to be an armored breastplate colored teal. Here, the irregular patchwork of facial elements typical of the artist’s figures is dominated by a hog’s snout. The entire conglomeration sits beside a vintage motorcycle.

While such works represent the bulk of his recent output, it is of little interest to Quinn why certain visions manifest themselves as, say, a work on paper or a video, lending a degree of psychologically indebted chance to the future of his practice. “To explore this world,” he says, “you have to have a sort of blind faith.” The images he sees are fleeting and spontaneous—“I never write them down. But I never forget them,” he says. The work’s function can’t be determined either. To assume such an intent would contradict Quinn’s belief in the messy, indeterminate nature of identity. “There is a real sense of freedom when you lose self-control. Once you give something a label, then you stop exploring it because you already think you know what it is.” MP