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ARTNEWS

'Art Derives From Everything in Life': A Talk with Nathaniel Mary Quinn

By Bill Powers
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Bill Powers: Do you consider your paintings to be portraits?

Nathaniel Mary Quinn: In many respects a portrait is an attempt to duplicate a visual physicality. I'm trying to bring to the surface what I feel; it's more of a psychological excavation of the internalized world of a human being.

BP: The clothing depicted in your work often harks back to an older era. Is that intentional?

NMQ: Chicago is known for being a cold city. It's called the Windy City not only because of the harsh weather but in part because of the city's politics. I grew up there, in a very impoverished community. When you grow up poor, you make attempts to communicate to the public that you're not as poor as people may think you are. That's why you might wear a fake-fur hat or a fake-fur coat.

BP: And what's interesting about that projection to you, as an artist?

NMQ: I find that these types of figures are not normally represented in the art world because they are from the ghetto or the periphery of culture. But that doesn't mean that these people are any less important. I love the idea of putting a pimp on the walls of the Whitney. And I did it! When [collector and Whitney trustee] Beth DeWoody invited me to be a part of their annual auction, I donated a piece called Richard [2014], which was named after my brother, who was big into fashion. He went out of his way to show people that he wasn't broke. I presented him as a real gangster-like pimp.

BP: You enjoyed the subversive aspect.

NMQ: Absolutely. And I don't change who [my subjects] are. I don't try to make them more palatable to any given audience.

BP: How do you start one of your paintings?

NMQ: I normally start with the nose or the nucleus of the piece. It could be the neck or the hat. I'm looking for harmony. The composition has to be well balanced.

BP: Hailing from Illinois, were you influenced at all by the Chicago Imagists?

NMQ: I'm very much influenced by music production. I mean, obviously I'm influenced by painters as well. However, art derives from everything in life. I take walks a lot because I'm always collecting information. I live in [Brooklyn's] Bed-Stuy; I speak with many of the drug dealers, pimps, prostitutes—I have conversations with all kinds of people. They hustle. I don't judge them. I take their energy with me and figure out ways to employ it in my work. It helps me to stay connected to what I would call real life. In the same way, I know a bunch of wealthy collectors now. That energy, too, goes into my work. I like intersecting those worlds. I see them as reciprocal.

BP: Before you were supporting yourself as an artist, you worked with at-risk youth.

NMQ: Yeah, I was a counselor at this place [in downtown Manhattan] right off of Canal Street. Young kids, from 13 to 18, interfacing with the criminal justice system, many of them facing jail time.



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BP: What was your objective, working with these kids?

NMQ: I found a direct link to functional illiteracy. Many of them couldn't read or write. They knew how to navigate their limited surroundings. I taught a literacy class even though I had no training in it whatsoever. At first it was rough: kids cussing me out, threatening me.

BP: They were probably suspicious that you were trying to brainwash them or something.

NMQ: I wanted to show them a different route in life without compromising their experiences, how to translate what they'd learned into the workforce. Let's say one of the kids had been selling drugs. I'd tell him, "OK, so you know how to build a clientele, manage your money, schedule. People go to business school to acquire these skills. There's nothing wrong with your aim. There's something wrong with your target."

BP: Would you ever take them to galleries?

NMQ: All the time, because I knew they didn't feel comfortable in spaces like that. I taught them that the gallery is open to the public. You don't have to pay to walk in. Just look around. I remember I took a group to Metro Pictures one day to see a Gary Simmons show. We looked at the price list. They couldn't believe someone could sell an artwork for \$90,000. They'd never been exposed to these opportunities.

BP: But you were also teaching them how to read and write?

NMQ: We would walk by random restaurants—Subway, McDonald's, Wendy's—they knew all the places. But then we'd get back to the classroom and I'd write out the same names on the chalkboard and the kids couldn't read it. They only knew the names from the logos. They had memorized the signifiers.

But I'd also try to highlight the beauty in that, how they'd created their own language to survive. Language is just a code you have to crack in order to navigate the world. And there's a plurality in language. I'll never forget the day this kid read his first sentence. It made me cry. I hugged him and said, "Now you have something no one can steal from you: your education. That's intellectual property." So, yeah, I worked with at-risk youth for ten years.

BP: Who is an artist that has had a profound impact on you?

NMQ: I love how Caravaggio manipulated light, how he's able to place figures within darkness. Hey, Caravaggio was an at-risk youth. He'd get into duels and have beef with people.

BP: When I interviewed John Currin last year, he told a story about Caravaggio and Guido Reni almost getting into a fistfight about who invented raking light.

NMQ: See! Caravaggio was a ruffian, but also a very talented painter. John Currin is also an influence, and Lucian Freud and Jim Dine. I love Jim Dine's drawings of tools and the way he renders a necktie. He knows how to control the weight of a line.

BP: Marlene Dumas says that to draw something is to show its resistance.

NMQ: Often you add weight to a line in order to show tension. Look at a painting like John Currin's Big Hands [2010] and you see how he's captured the weight of her shoulders. Currin understands fragility and tension.

BP: Can we talk about the emotional presence in your paintings?

NMQ: I believe in life you are an amalgam of numerous experiences. You are built from a history of joy, sadness, ups, and downs. I'm trying to articulate the essence of that. All of that added up together is nothing more than a forest that stands in front of the truth. So I'm walking through the forest trying to get there. Subjective perception is simply allegiance—unknowingly—to your own ego. And your ego disallows you from seeing the collective interdependence of all people.

BP: You said that you get visions sometimes.

NMQ: I get visions almost every day. The vision is a picture of a whole image. I never write them down. And I never forget them. Every piece I've made was born from a vision. I'm talking about the style of work I make now. Earlier on I was obsessive, trying to make intellectual connections and show theoretical underpinnings behind the work. It was tiring and laborious. I didn't want to live my life that way. I wanted to be free. I went to therapy for four years to deal with the loss of my mother, the loss of my family. What was that pain about? The detachment does something to you.

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BP: For people who don't know your personal history, you had a pretty traumatic family experience in high school.

NMQ: My mom passed away when I was a freshman in high school, my first month at boarding school. I went back to Chicago for the services and then returned to school. Thanksgiving came around and when I went home to see my family, the apartment was empty. My four older brothers and my dad had left without notifying me as to where they were going.

BP: So you never saw them again?

NMQ: Only last year did one of my brothers, Charles, finally contact me after hearing this podcast I did. He didn't know what happened to our father. I learned that my brother Richard had died of AIDS and that my other brother was a full-blown alcoholic living on the streets. I asked Charles a lot of questions. I told him that I forgave him, but I don't think we can ever have a relationship again. Not after that kind of rupture. Listen, I was very lucky as a kid. I was showered with love. My mom used to pray over me, pray over my body. She would ask God to watch over me after she was dead and gone. To this day, I believe that my mother conspires for my success. Whatever happens to me in life, things always seem to work out.

BP: You have a new piece called Ethan [2016], where the body originated from an image of Ai Weiwei.

NMQ: It's not about his biography at all. I like how you can see time and gravity on his body, a body you imagine was once strong. The real Ethan was a tough guy I knew from Chicago. We lived in the same project building. He was nice to me, but you didn't want to get on his bad side. He was very burdened by his circumstances. Ethan had a sad disposition. He was a tumbler, like me. I did gymnastics for 13 years. So Ethan and I would do back flips together. I was always a better tumbler than he was, which may be why I won his admiration. Ethan was sort of a protector for me.

BP: Were you a tough guy?

NMQ: Not really. But you had to be tough in that community. You couldn't let anyone take you short. I was in this group called the Jesse White Tumblers. Jesse White is the Illinois Secretary of State who started this program to get kids off the street. Most of my teammates were from the projects—primarily the Cabrini-Green projects—and some of them were superbly dangerous. We used to perform at the Chicago Bulls halftime shows. I even got to meet Michael Jordan.

BP: While Jordan was still in the NBA?

NMQ: Yeah, man. Our locker rooms were right next to the players'. We'd come out into the hallway to stretch, and out would roll Michael Jordan, Scottie Pippen, Dennis Rodman. I was five feet away from Michael Jordan! I had never seen a physical specimen like that. The guy was beautiful. He was built like a machine. A lot of kids in the projects would try to get on the tumbling team. You got paid. They'd travel us around. We'd sign autographs. My mom first put me onto tumbling. She brought me to Mr. McClain, our grammar-school gym teacher, and said, "I want you to watch over my baby so he doesn't get caught up in these streets." Eventually I became the team captain.

Nathaniel Mary Quinn's work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Pace Gallery in London and the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts in Brooklyn. He is represented by Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago, Litvak Contemporary in Tel Aviv, and M+B gallery in Los Angeles, where his latest solo show runs from May 13 through June 25. Watch Bill Powers interview Nathaniel Mary Quinn at Frieze New York [here](#).