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Home Bittersweet Home: Nathaniel Mary Quinn

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Nathaniel Mary Quinn, *Terry*, 2016

“So much of my work is about personal identity and the factors that construct it, like family, history, unique experiences,” says painter Nathaniel Mary Quinn. “The bedrock of that for me was where I grew up in Chicago, in the Robert Taylor homes.”

Home has long been a place of tension for the artist. The infamous housing project in which he was raised on the Windy City’s south side was devastated by gang violence and drug addiction. His parents were illiterate and his four older brothers were street hustlers and addicts. His mother passed away when he was 15, after which point his family dispersed: He returned from school one day to find his childhood home deserted. Despite the upset in his life, Quinn went on to finish school, eventually pursuing an MFA at New York University; he hasn’t seen his brothers since 1992.

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The artist became well known for his assemblage portraiture in 2014 after New York's Pace Gallery hosted the first solo show of his work. Using a wide array of materials—charcoal, oil paint, paint stick, gouache, cardboard—he creates semi-abstract figures that are a mixture of family portraits, people he sees in his everyday life, and magazine advertisements. His latest body of work, “St. Marks,” explores the characters of his new neighborhood, Brooklyn's Crown Heights, where the artist and his wife bought a home last year. “I'm living in this community that's on the cusp of being subdued by gentrification: New businesses are moving in, property values are going up, it's getting safer. That's all good,” Quinn explains. “But there's an ongoing elimination of what used to be here. There's a loss.”

The “St. Marks” series captures the faces that populate the place the artist now calls home. “I talk to the guys on my street, they show up in my work. They're street hustlers, they sell drugs, they've done jail time. I'm from a place where people like them surrounded me. It feels like home to me!” But these works also represent the anxiety Quinn feels as a new homeowner in a rapidly changing neighborhood. “I never tell any of them what I do. Being an artist is hard to explain. Like, how am I home in the middle of the day on a Wednesday but can afford this house?”

“I don't want them to see me as different from them. I'm a black man in a predominantly black community, but I've been rendered white by my economic situation.”

Quinn is preparing for a solo show at New York's Half Gallery this spring. The space's domestic setting, in the Upper East Side apartment of its owner, allows Quinn to continue exploring the meaning of “home,” both through a continuation of his “St. Marks” series and new works about his mother. “The loss of my family, the memories of them, and maybe even fantasies of what our home life could have been are things I'm still working through.”