

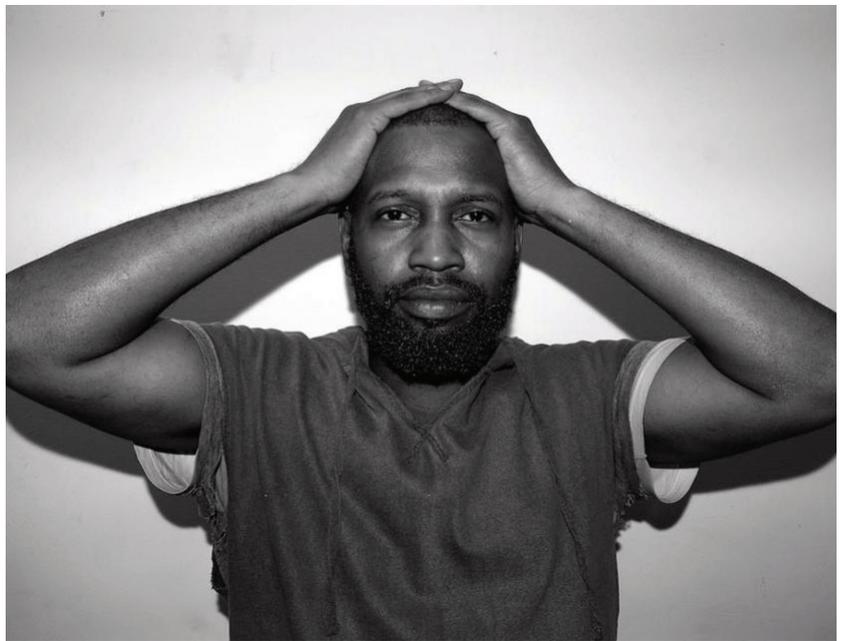
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Forbes

With A Radically Honest Painting Style, Artist Nathaniel Mary Quinn Taps Into Art Market

By Adam Lehrer
Oct. 25th, 2017

Many artists, stuck glamorizing the “starving artist” cliché they’ve been conditioned to revere, come off as uncomfortable with success or, worse, ungrateful. This is not the case with painter and contemporary artist Nathaniel Mary Quinn. In his work and his life, Quinn recognizes that every individual is comprised of a multitude of layered life experiences. Quinn, with sincerity and appreciation, sees his burgeoning art world success as a positive outcome molded of personal tragedies and triumphs, heart breaks and resolutions. “We’ve all been through hardships, and I’ve lived through poverty,” says Quinn. “But now I have the freedom to create what I want to create. It’s great.”



Artist Nathaniel Quinn

Quinn works out of the Brooklyn home he shares with his wife. Examining the environment and working method that he makes art in is almost as engaging as looking at the work itself. A convivial host and thoughtful conversationalist, Quinn and I shared his coffee and Indian brand cigarettes as he walked me through his studio and talked to me about the life that brought him here. Multiple canvases with in-progress works line his walls, all of them surrounded by litanies of photographic source material. See, Quinn uses source imagery as a means of reconstructing identities. In Quinn’s work, the subject’s face is a mélange of colors, shapes and visual cues. Quinn’s paintings acknowledge that human beings consist of contradictory emotions and experiences and his contorted subjects exude inner truths that are just not found in traditional portraiture. From his source material, Quinn fixates on a piece of an image: a piece of Kate Moss’s lips are pulled from a David Sims fashion portrait, a forehead is taken from a Roger Ballen Outland image, and a facial expression is mined from one specific fashion shoot from some old issue of Purple. Those pieces are then used to construct Quinn’s impression of the subject he’s rendering onto canvas. Quinn’s paintings will certainly dazzle those versed in the histories of art and conceptualism, but they also have a raw emotional impact that would leave an impression on even the most art tone-deaf of viewers. His work is, quite simply, some of the most innovative and emotionally profound work being done in contemporary painting.

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Nathaniel Mary Quinn 'Chad,' (2017) (on view at Kohn Gallery 'Engender' exhibition)

"I love his ability to capture the multitude of layers that make up our identities," says curator Joshua Friedman, who included a Quinn painting in an upcoming group exhibition at Kohn Gallery in Los Angeles. "Each part is different, and yet, this discord is in perfect harmony. The combination of talent and emotional complexities in Quinn's work is heartrending."

Quinn has an astounding story. It is a story that no doubt will be retold in every profile that will ever be written on him, but it's also a story that is unavoidably important to the development of Quinn as an artist and as a man. Quinn was born the youngest of five boys in the South Side of Chicago. Specifically, his family lived in the Robert Taylor Homes, then one of the most notorious housing projects in the country. In ninth grade, Quinn, a gifted student, received an academic scholarship to attend the prestigious Culver Academies boarding school in Indiana. A month into school, his dad called. His mother had died, his dad said. Upon returning to his family in Chicago, he found the family door ajar. His father and four brothers were gone. He hasn't seen them since.

That was 22 years ago (though one brother, Charles, contacted Quinn after Quinn told his story on noted DJs Charlamagne The God and Andrew Schulz's Brilliant Idiots podcast). "Over time, I came to terms with it," says Quinn. "I went to therapy for years to deal with the pain of that loss. It was... extremely painful."

Art and therapy have shifted Quinn's perspective towards the abandonment by his family. He spent vacations with friends from boarding school and would know the kindness of both black and white families. "In Chicago, my friends were hustlers, gangsters, killers," he says. "But now at school, I'm meeting upper middle class black kids. They speak well, they're excited about learning. So slowly I've been able to realize that by being abandoned, I was actually delivered. From poverty. From alcoholism."

It would take some time, however, for Quinn to achieve this clarity about his life and to apply that same clarity to his work. After receiving his MFA from NYU in 2002, Quinn would become a professional artist. He started selling paintings while working as an educator, teaching art to under-privileged youths. He admits now though that, as a black artist, he felt pressure to make art that directly addressed the racial politics of America. "In 2004, Kehinde Wiley takes off. Mickalene Thomas was this growing sensation in the art world. Wangechi Mutu was right after that," says Quinn. "They're beautiful artists, and a great deal of their content relates to specific aspects of black culture. I thought, 'I'm black, I should make work that explores ideas of race in America or mainstream culture or hip-hop culture.'" I worked like that for 10 years. But I never felt entirely fulfilled. I felt 85 percent, and I wanted to feel 100 percent."

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In 2013, Quinn was offered the opportunity to show work by the mother of one of his students at the family's brownstone. After promising five works, he only had four to give her. He had to create fast. Without the time to make a sketch, he decided to deep dig into his psyche and soul and expel it onto a canvas. In one session, he discovered the power of art making as a spiritual catharsis. He ended up painting a distorted human face with different elements of human features colliding together as a cubist melange. Then he realized he recognized the mouth of the face. It was his bother Charles, now a painting called Charles. That was the moment his work shifted. Nathaniel Mary Quinn was not going to be a strictly political painter, he was going to be a humanistic painter. Because in humanism comes the entire spectrum of human suffering and joy, politics and systemic oppression, psychology and sociology.

Quinn's paintings look beneath the surface exterior to address the humanity and inner worlds of their subjects. "I realized that what I was feeling was not because I'm black. It's because I'm a human being," says Quinn. "Happiness, grief, joy. This is life. I get these visions, and then I get a visceral response to create it. When something is really important to you, it rolls off the shores of your sub-conscious."

Quinn emphasizes the importance of the artist making the work that best exemplifies who the artist is. His art obsessions consist predominantly of painters who manipulated light to expose hidden truths in their subjects: Rembrandt, Diego Velázquez, Caravaggio, and John Currin all come up during art-related conversation. Quinn and I also shared an impassioned conversation concerning the importance of Francis Bacon. Bacon, according to Quinn, was an artist who created a visual world based on his own experience, and is a template for any artist who looks outward to examine inward and create a radically new aesthetic from that approach (an approach that Quinn undeniably has embraced). "Bacon grew up in the 1940s," he says. "He lived through a war-torn Europe. Death was everywhere. The historical context [for his work] was there. It's almost like a Buddhist approach. Instead of escaping the pain you run to it and embrace it and find the harmony in it."

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Quinn’s recent work is full of deeply personal impressions of the people he’s stored in his memory (it should also be noted that he’s developed a virtuosic painting style to apply these images to canvas in which he matches oil to soft pastels to avoid the scattered images bleeding into one another, which is why the paintings look like collage from a distance). He’s developed a painting style that fascinatingly uses his own comprehension of humanity and various personas to unearth deep-seated truths about the people that populate the paintings. There is no truer art than art that addresses the artist’s own psychology, and Quinn’s humanitarian approach deeply resonates in this era of casual bigotry, accountability-free cruelty, and alternative facts. These paintings inherently address that no one human is any one thing, but a confused mishmash of experiences and personality traits. We are all different, which also makes us the same, Quinn’s paintings suggest. “All people are an amalgam of different experiences,” he says. “I’m trying to explore the complexity of humanity. Not just portraits. The entire fabric of experience that makes this person who they are.”



(Nathaniel Mary Quinn, 'Diane,' (2014

Since his artistic and personal breakthrough, Quinn’s career has soared. He got signed to the prestigious Chicago gallery Rhona Hoffman in 2014 (also the purveyor of humanistic art works by the likes of Deana Lawson, Derrick Adams, and Nancy Spero) and has had two solo exhibitions at that gallery. Earlier this year, Bill Powers’ Half Gallery provided Quinn with his first New York solo show. Quinn's smaller paintings are selling upwards of \$10,000, and collectors are apparently ravenous for the purity in these paintings, and the show sold out before it even had an opening. "People are hungry for emotional and nostalgic work, especially right now in a political climate where we have a leader who renders us confused and frustrated," says Half Gallery director Erin Goldberger. "His work is extremely truthful and non-fictionalized. We can feel many things by looking at art work, but specifically Nathaniel opens up his palms to us and says “Here is my story; what is yours?”.“

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Almine Rech added Quinn to its Projects Page on its website, selling his work but allowing him freedom to go to another major gallery if he so chooses. And finally, he has joined alongside artists like Marilyn Minter, the late Jimmy DeSana, and Laurie Simmons on the prestigious roster of Salon 94. Salon 94 owner Jeanne Greenberg, known for her ability to identify artists that are doing something truly new, immediately found beauty in what Quinn is doing. “While I was installing at the ADA, Rhona Hoffman was putting up his show. She had a work of his leaning against the wall,” says Greenberg. “It floored me. I am not someone who is immediately seduced by ability. That’s not what gets me. What seizes me is something deeper. Something with heart or an emotional component. Nathaniel has all the craft and ability. but at that moment, it was the portrait's pathos that caught my eye.”

Quinn is on the Salon 94 schedule for the Fall but his signing has not been formally announced yet. In the meantime, Quinn will be showing work at the aforementioned Kohn Gallery show entitled Engender, curated by Friedman, alongside fellow rising artists like Tschabalala Self and veterans like Nicole Eisenman.

Quinn’s recent success, to me, draws attention to a cultural hunger for art work that finds our humanity. With a president that draws lines between “them” and “us,” there is a great need for art work that looks beyond over-wrought conceptual concepts and seeks a greater truth. Surrealism was in reaction to authoritarianism, and artists like Hans Bellmer made work that dealt with their own desires and personas as a way of holding on to what made them individuals in the face of systemic oppression of those individualities. Quinn's work blocks out the noise, the terror, and the despair, and addresses the entirety of human beings as well as his own perceptions of those human beings. His paintings emanate the intelligence, warmth and deep empathy that can only be born of real, hard experience. That experience has also made Quinn admirably aware of his good fortunes, and he’s thrilled that people are taking an interest in his vision. Somewhere our conversation turned to Kara Walker’s recent exhibition at Sikkema Jenkins and specifically the show’s press release in which Walker lamented having to fulfill cultural expectations as a “black female artist.” Quinn understands her position, but still views his new success as a position from where he can inspire another scared 14 year-old-boy to think big for himself. “I want kids to know black is beautiful,” he says. But he also doesn’t ever want to narrow the focus of his far-reaching humanistic work. He knows that others have sacrificed their lives for him to have the opportunity he has today: “Too many people have died for me to have this privilege for me to not take it.”