

# Picking up the pieces

*From loss and abandonment in the Chicago projects, artist Nathaniel Mary Quinn has carved a blockbusting career creating fragmentary images of a former life*

A few years ago, at the age of 37, I had my first major solo exhibition, *Past/Present*, at Pace London. I was flown over from New York before the opening and given a suite at a private members' club – a personal assistant on hand to cater to my every need. Collectors came to see my works and toast me with champagne. It would have been surreal for any emerging artist but, for me, it defied belief.

As a child in the early 1980s, I lived with my family in public tenement housing on Chicago's South Side – notorious for its poverty and gang violence. Life was difficult, to say the least. My mother was partially disabled after enduring two strokes and was on welfare, while my father would do shifts in different restaurants, then gamble the money at local pool halls to try and make enough to support us. Both were illiterate. My four older brothers were dropouts, hustling or messing around with drugs and alcohol instead of going to work or school.

When I was five, I began to scribble on the walls of our apartment whenever I could. My mother, Mary, would shout at me, until my brother Charles pointed out that I was actually pretty good. After that, she encouraged me to draw, cleaning the marks off the paint without a word. Soon, news spread throughout the projects that I had a gift. Gang members would offer me protection in exchange for putting them in one of my comic strips, and on nights when the electricity was shut off, my brother Richard and I would draw in the Yellow Pages for hours on end by candlelight. It was the only paper I had.

In the eighth grade, an assistant principal helped me get a scholarship to a private boarding school a few hours away in rural Indiana. It was strange, being transported into a world of manicured lawns, crisply pressed uniforms and rich students from all over America – but I was ecstatic to be away from the projects. Yet, about a month into the school year, my life was torn apart. I will never forget the call: my father told me that my mother had died in the night, probably of another stroke, although nobody was entirely certain what had happened.

The second I got off the phone I lost all control. I flipped over a table and started punching the wall, devastated and furious with the injustice of it all.



Suddenly, I was back in Chicago with my family – sitting in church at my mother's funeral before going up to view her body. It was only when I stroked her ice-cold forehead that I realised she was truly gone. Back at school, I became fully aware of the gulf between myself and the other students. They were sympathetic but could never understand what I had been through. I began counting the days until Thanksgiving when I could go home again.

Finally, the holiday came around and I caught a bus back to the South Side. In the dark November evening, I climbed the stairs to our apartment only to find the door ajar. Inside, all of the furniture was gone. There were a few articles of clothing strewn across the floor and bottles of Coke in the kitchen – odd relics of our life there – but no trace of my father or brothers. When I knocked on the door of our elderly neighbour, Diane, she told me they had left weeks earlier. My family had abandoned me – scattered by poverty, addiction and grief. I was 15 years old.

That night I slept in the vestibule of a townhouse on the other side of the city – the safest place that came to mind – before spending the rest of the holiday trying to contact my father and brothers without success. I realised I had a choice. I could either stay in the projects by myself and die young, or I could go back to school and fight for my life. Education became my means of survival; I had to maintain my scholarship in order to have a roof over my head and three meals a day. During the holidays, I relied on the generosity of friends' parents who would invite me to their homes on the East Coast or in the south. Grief was the constant background noise to whatever success I achieved.

Against the odds, I managed to graduate with honours. A few months before, I added "Mary" to my name. My mother had never had an education, so this meant she would have her name on every diploma I received. I earned my Bachelor's degree from Wabash College and my Master of Fine Art from New York University before finally moving to Brooklyn, where I worked as a professor, tutor and mentor to at-risk youth for 10 years. At night, though, I locked myself away in my studio to draw and paint. My canvases focused on the politics of race in America – work I felt I was supposed to create as an African-American man from Chicago, rather

than ones that truly resonated with me – yet, no matter how many paintings I made, I still felt empty.

It was only when I met my now-wife that my situation began to change. For as long as I could remember, I had carried myself as a victim of my family's abandonment. Therapy helped me to see that if my father and brothers had been at home that Thanksgiving, I might have stayed on the South Side and become accustomed to a life of poverty. My art began to change, too. While preparing for an exhibition at one of my students' mother's brownstones, I had a vision of a face – and my need to recreate it on paper was almost visceral. I understood that I had to reduce it to its key elements: eyes, nose and mouth. Trusting my intuition, I pulled fragments from different visual sources – a fashion magazine, Google images, my own photo albums – copying each piece by hand. When I stepped back from the canvas, I was stunned. It was a Frankenstein-like portrait of my brother Charles.

At last I had discovered a way to harness my experiences – taking disparate fragments of the world around me and transforming them into portraits of the faces I had known. Visions kept coming to me – of my family and people from our old community; gang members, childhood friends and street hustlers. It was around this time, when I started to become well known, that I heard from Charles for the first – and last – time. He told me that my oldest brother was still heavily abusing drugs; the next one down was living on the streets, a homeless alcoholic; while Richard had died of complications related to Aids. Charles was living somewhere outside of Chicago in a housing project, working part-time at a Subway restaurant, raising a young daughter, managing, I presume, to scrape by. It reaffirmed what I already felt, that what I had imagined was my tragedy may have been my salvation. I have no relationship with my surviving brothers now – some wounds never quite heal – but the memory of them, of where I'm from and the people that I stand for, is with me constantly.

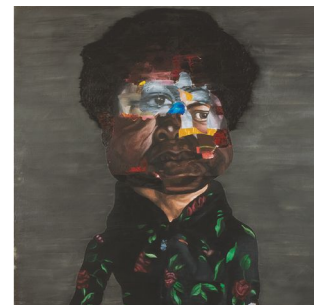
Not long ago I had to select a piece for the Whitney Museum of American Art Auction Party, and chose a portrait of Richard in a fur coat looking every bit the South Side gangster. That night, surrounded by the elite of the international



*Buck Nasty: Player Haters Ball (2017), left, and Preciate it, Unk! (2018), below, both by Nathaniel Mary Quinn*



*Of his 2013 work, Irene, Quinn says it shows "the incredible and horrific transformational impact of drug addiction upon a mother and neighbour". Below: Pool Hall (2017), a portrait of the artist's father*



art scene, I thought of the days when he had helped me turn our apartment into my first sketchpad and wondered if anybody at a glittering Manhattan party would care about a portrait of a street hustler. It became one of the highest-selling pieces of the evening – taken home by one of the world's most formidable collectors. About a year later, the Whitney Museum bought my *Class of '92* for its collection. When I saw it on the gallery walls and read my name intertwined with my mother's, it finally hit me. I was where I was supposed to be at last, and, in my own way, I had brought my family with me. ■

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