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Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Brooklyn, New York, 2019. Photo: Kyle Dorosz

NATHANIEL MARY QUINN

Anderson Cooper spoke with the artist at his Brooklyn studio about his childhood and the visionary nature of his art.

Andy Warhol once said never trust someone with three names—John Wayne Gacy and Mark David Chapman spring to mind—but in the case of Nathaniel Mary Quinn an exception to Andy's rule must be accommodated. At first blush, it's easy to speculate that Quinn's middle name, Mary, reflects some form of gender fluidity, but then you hear his backstory and come to understand that the self-naming was actually a loving tribute: his late mother's given name was Mary, and this woman's commitment to her youngest son's welfare far surpassed standard parental obligations to border on sainthood.

Determined to keep Quinn away from the darker influences prevalent in the Robert Taylor Homes, the notorious, now demolished Chicago public housing project where he grew up, when he was in middle school Mary enrolled him in the Jesse White Tumblers athletic program, a juvenile-delinquency-prevention outreach serving inner-city kids. During his tenure as a gymnast there, the Tumblers performed at Chicago Bulls halftime shows as entertainment. Y'all ready for this! This fortuitous timing meant that the teenage Quinn was witness to the amazing feats of Michael Jordan, Scottie Pippen, and Dennis Rodman firsthand. The exposure left an indelible impression on him, seeing these basketball legends after a game glistening with sweat as they strode back to the locker room "like Greek gods come to life." The epiphany was profound: a person's circumstances at birth need not dictate the limits of what they might achieve in adulthood.

Mary Quinn died suddenly while Quinn was in his first year at Culver Military Academy, a boarding school he attended as the recipient of a full scholarship. It was only when graduation approached, and his guidance counselor asked him what name he wanted printed on his high school diploma, that this young kid with bad teeth from the Bronzeville section of the South Side decided formally how he would be addressed henceforth: Nathaniel Mary Quinn.

Anderson Cooper is the anchor of CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360°*, a global newscast that goes beyond the headlines with in-depth reporting and investigations.

In his composite portraits derived from sources both personal and found, **Nathaniel Mary Quinn** probes the relationship between visual memory and perception. Fragments of images taken from online

—Bill Powers

ANDERSON COOPER I first noticed your work on Instagram and initially thought it was collage. Then I came to your studio and was blown away to discover that it's actually charcoal, pastel, gouache, gold leaf, all these different mediums.

NATHANIEL MARY QUINN At my opening in LA last Saturday I was doing a walk-through with some collectors and one guy says, "These are really interesting collages." I had to correct him that the work is all done by hand. So yes, even in person it's not always apparent.

AC I know some artists—Adrian Ghenie, for instance—will make collages as studies for paintings.

NMQ I'll tape things up to the wall of my studio, images I'm inspired by. But my paintings come to me as visions.

AC Your work reminds me of the William Faulkner quote "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Every day I think about my own past, my childhood. I think about my dad dying and my brother dying; I carry them with me. I sense that quality in your work, the importance of reflection upon your past. It seems like you draw from the well of people you knew as a kid: family, neighbors, even the musicians and comedians who influenced you.

Nathaniel Mary Quinn, *First and Fifteenth*, 2016, black charcoal, gouache, soft pastel, and oil pastel on Coventry Vellum paper, 50 × 38 inches (127 × 96.5 cm)

NMQ Something definitely changes in you when you lose your family as a child.

AC My mom often quotes the writer Mary Gordon's remark, "A fatherless girl thinks all things possible and nothing safe." I believe that applies to boys as well; I know it resonates with me, having lost my dad young. Do you see ways that the trauma you experienced still informs your work?

NMQ It's not at the forefront of my mind. However: I definitely think those experiences, which I don't like to identify as either good or bad, impact your identity. I try to find ways to articulate visually that which is often unseen. When people watch you, Anderson Cooper, on CNN, you seem transparent, but the reality is that you're incredibly opaque, like every other human being. The transparency disallows for the investigation of your structural identity, which is what I'm after.

AC You talk about having visions. What does that actually mean? Do the paintings come to you in a flash?

NMQ Sometimes it starts with a feeling. The paintings I'm working on now are all based on people in my community, my interactions with them. People share stories with me, tell me about their lives. Some of the guys have been in jail. You need to have a high level of empathy so that you can really feel what they're conveying. For me, that's the pathway to their internalized world.

AC In some ways your method is similar to what a reporter does, speaking to people, trying to understand how they see the world around them.

sources, fashion magazines, and family photographs come together to form hybrid faces and figures that are at once Dadaesque and adamantly realist, evoking the intimacy and intensity of a face-to-face encounter. *Photo: Kyle Dorosz*

NMQ At Frieze New York 2018 I showed a new painting called *Preciate It, Unk!* [2018], about a young guy, maybe twenty-five years old, from the neighborhood. We were talking out on the street one day. His cousin had died recently. Now this kid is a gang member, eager to retaliate. I talked to him about his pain and the sense of abandonment he felt by his friends. After a while he started crying. This whole conversation was right outside of my house. I got the sense this kid was grappling with the struggle he found himself in, to break free from his old behaviors. I reminded him that he has a young daughter in school and a new job, good stuff. I was trying to help prevent something violent from happening. At the end of our talk he said, "You like an uncle for me. Is it okay if I call you Unk?" I said sure and we parted ways with a hug and a goodbye of "Appreciate it, Unk!" I was surprised by how open and vulnerable he was with me, probably because he felt safe. So yeah, my portraits are really an attempt to record that which is not seen.

AC There was an artist named Howard Finster who I remember going down to see outside Atlanta in my early twenties. He turned his home and property into what he called Paradise Garden. He talked about having visions as well, though his were more of a religious nature.

NMQ I'll get a vision of a completed work, I'll see it in front of me. Or it's a series of images that build up in my mind.

AC But you also use source material, so in the visions are there sometimes elements of a picture you've already seen?

NMQ It could be. Normally the vision happens first and then I'll do research to find those components. I'll look for the gorilla's arm, or the man's torso, or the woman's boots, or the black hat. It's not a religious thing, although I do believe that as an artist I am merely a messenger and it's my duty to bring these works to life. That's why my studio practice has to be as intuitive as the visions themselves.

AC The very first work you made in this style was a painting called *Charles* [2013], but it came from being on deadline, right? I believe the backstory is that the mother of a student of yours was having a show in her home and you'd been invited to participate. They asked for five works to exhibit but you only had four works prepared, so you found yourself with only a few hours to complete the last piece.

NMQ Yeah, I only had five hours to do it. The way I used to make paintings before that, I tended to overintellectualize things. In this instance I didn't have the luxury of time so I picked five photographs that resonated with me and I put up the drawing paper. I didn't even think I'd be able to finish the work; I limited myself to the eyes, nose, lips, and a fur hat. I used construction paper to isolate areas, to cover up the sections I'd completed. It was very much a faith-based endeavor. Once I'd finished the painting, I removed the top layer of paper and boom, there was my brother Charles staring back at me.

Nathaniel Mary Quinn, *Sinking*, 2019, oil paint, paint stick, oil pastel, and gouache on linen canvas over wood panel, 36 × 36 inches (91.4 × 91.4 cm)

AC And you knew right away that it was your brother? How did you know?

NMQ The piece always tells me who it is. Something about the smirk, the way he was smiling, I knew it was Charles. Now remember, I hadn't seen my brother since I was fifteen. It's amazing the memories lodged in the depths of your subconscious.

AC For people who don't know, you grew up in the Robert Taylor Homes on the South Side of Chicago. They've since been torn down, but it was a tough place to grow up, to say the least.

NMQ It was a violent community, impoverished, perhaps 100 percent black.

AC Another world from the Chicago most tourists experience.

NMQ Completely different. A world where gangs and drugs were the norm. Rape. Fights after school.

AC So how did you start making art?

NMQ I remember drawing on the walls of the apartment and my mom would spank me for it. Then one day Charles—now this is according to what he explained to me later on—told my mother to stop spanking me and look at what I was doing.

AC Who recognized that talent? Because for high school you got a scholarship to a military academy, starting in ninth grade.

NMQ My father was my first art teacher. Here was a man who could not read or write, by the way, but every weekend he would sit me at the kitchen table and we would draw together. He would rip up shopping bags to use as drawing paper. Then we'd take out comic books and try to draw the characters for ourselves. My father was the person who taught me "Your arm is your tool. Don't draw with your wrist. Use the whole arm." I think he saw some innate ability in me and was doing his best to hone it. He would break the erasers off the ends of my pencils and say, "Every mark you make, you will make it count."

I TRY TO FIND WAYS TO ARTICULATE VISUALLY THAT WHICH IS OFTEN UNSEEN.

Nathaniel Mary Quinn

AC I used to collect comic books as a kid. In fact, I used to sell them at comic book conventions.

NMQ I remember drawing Cloak and Dagger, Wolverine . . .

AC I loved the X-Men. And I think it's interesting how often comic books show up in contemporary art to this day. I was recently at Mark Bradford's show in LA and he's been incorporating them into his paintings since 2007, I believe.

NMQ The comic books allowed us to live vicariously through these characters. As I grew older, I learned how comic books were also commentary on social constructs. The X-Men are mutants, and mutants—in my opinion—are black folks, a minority that the world is trying to clamp down on. The X-Men used to be called the *Uncanny* X-Men—what a great use of language there. And Magneto was the personification of Malcolm X, while Dr. Xavier was the personification of Dr. Martin Luther King.

AC I'm pretty sure the Black Panther comic even predated the formation of the Black Panthers as an organization. If we can get back to your own story for a moment, at fifteen years old you go away to this boarding school in Indiana, and how long was it before your mother died?

NMQ My mother died during my first semester at Culver Military Academy, toward the end of September 1992. I was playing intramural football when the news came. I remember my dorm counselor, Mr. Klindinen, told me I had a phone call from my dad. I knew instinctually that my mom had passed. I just felt it.

AC Were you able to go home for the funeral?

NMQ Yes, I went home that night. Miss Pilcher and Miss Jackson were two teachers of mine who came to the campus to bring me back to Chicago. I went to the service and there was my mother lying in a casket. I couldn't deal with the reality of her being dead—I was heavy laden with pain—so I convinced myself as I left the church that my mom had gone on vacation.

AC That allowed you to carry on?

NMQ To remain sane, yes. Then shortly after that I went home for Thanksgiving break and found that my dad and my brothers had moved out of our apartment without telling me.

AC The door was ajar and no forwarding information was given. No note?

NMQ The apartment was empty except for some articles of clothing on the floor and maybe half a loaf of bread in the fridge. I went to my neighbor Diane—who I later made a piece about—and I asked her, "Diane, what happened to my family?" And she said, "Oh, they didn't tell you, baby? They left two weeks ago." And that was it.

AC And they never reached out to you?

Nathaniel Mary Quinn, *Big Rabbit, Little Rabbit*, 2017, charcoal, soft pastel, oil pastel, paint stick, and acrylic silver powder on paper, 72 × 56 inches (182.9 × 142.2 cm)

NMQ Tumbleweeds. Nothing.

AC What did you do in that circumstance?

NMQ First, I ended up despising poverty. I hated being poor. I knew I was poor and I hated it. Second, from as far back as I can recall, I always felt different from my peers. I felt like I was special for some reason. I just believed that. I was on a different path. These projects would not be the final chapter for me.

AC Which is pretty remarkable, because a lot of people have no idea who they are at fifteen.

NMQ I used to look at Sears Tower and I'd say to myself, "Someday I'm gonna make it there." Maybe it was a survival mechanism, but I just thought, "Someday I'm gonna make it to the top."

AC You survived the ultimate abandonment. But now I've heard you say that your feelings about that experience have changed.

NMQ After grad school, I met [my future wife] Donna in 2010. We started dating and before that I'd always thought of myself as a victim. It's a feeling that terrorizes you and takes stock of your soul. It bankrupted me. I ruined all my romantic relationships—nice women, too. I never believed that anybody would stay with me; hey, my own family abandoned me. It even changed the way I looked at myself physically. As a child, you don't have the language to abstract yourself from that abandonment, you only have a literal read on the situation. I thought my dad and my brothers left me because I wasn't good enough. I was ugly and not worthy of love. High school became my refuge—I recognized that a good GPA was essential for my survival. It was either succeed academically or end up homeless.

AC Did you tell the other students at the military school what had happened to you?

NMQ Oh yeah, everybody knew at Culver. But then I realized that was a futile pursuit, because most of these kids were from rich families; my story felt to them like a movie script, they couldn't relate. So I stopped talking about it. I was looking for a comfort that I could not find. Every Sunday at school we'd have a parade. I was in the marching band. After the parade I would go sit on the golf mound and listen to my Walkman. I'd play that Al Green song "How Can You Mend a Broken Heart?" over and over again to unburden myself. I'd think about my mom. That was how I grieved, every Sunday for four years.

AC Of your four brothers, Charles did eventually contact you?

NMQ Fast-forward twenty years later, my career starts to have some traction and I'm a guest on this podcast called *The Brilliant Idiots*. [The rapper and producer] Swizz Beatz had come to my studio and hooked me up with Charlamagne, the host of the show. Apparently my brother Charles heard it and reached out to me.

Nathaniel Mary Quinn, *Duckworth*, 2018, oil paint, paint stick, oil pastel, and gouache on linen, 36 × 36 inches (91.4 × 91.4 cm)

AC I can't even imagine what that conversation was like?

NMQ I was happy to hear from him. He was excited that I knew Charlamagne, but then asked, "Why you telling all these people we abandoned you?" That comment let me know right away, this is not going to go well. I didn't curse him out or anything, but I definitely was not interested in reforming a relationship.

AC What was his excuse for them leaving you to fend for yourself?

NMQ According to him, once my mother died, because she was the breadwinner of our family, there was no more money coming in. Charles and my other brothers and my dad all went their separate ways after that. But I asked him, "Did you not know I was coming home for Thanksgiving break? What happened?!"

AC Also, they knew where you were living at school. You were the one with a fixed address. They could have reached out to you.

NMQ He just couldn't own up to it. He couldn't accept the responsibility. This conversation was about thirty minutes total. He was living in Springfield, Illinois, at the time. He said he had a little girl, which I congratulated him on. I told him that I forgave him, and then I explained that this was the last time he'd ever hear from me. I hung up the phone and that was it. I thought they were dead anyway.

AC That abandonment changed the course of your life, but it may also have saved your life.

NMQ I went into therapy for four or five years—learned how to be introspective—and that's when it dawned on me that had I gone back to the Robert Taylor Homes, I might have followed the same path my brothers fell prey to. Perhaps, in fact, I was delivered from my own destruction? God, or the universe, set in motion a series of events that gave me all these experiences I can now use in my work.

AC You had already made the *Charles* painting before he called you?

NMQ That's right. I had already presented my first solo show with Pace London in 2014. Prior to making that *Charles* portrait, though, my work was focused on the black experience and race relations.

AC Did you feel a certain pressure early on as a black artist?

NMQ Of course, because my peers—Kehinde Wiley, Mickalene Thomas, all these artists of color—were making work about being black in America. I saw painters making critiques of hip-hop culture or black culture, and I thought, "Huh, maybe that's what I should do? To get some recognition?" And I did try it, but somehow that wasn't fulfilling or didn't feel real to me. I didn't know why. But then I went into therapy and it became more clear. I think a lot of my work still deals with social issues, but through more of a personal filter.

AC Can you think of one painting in particular?

NMQ I painted *The Making of Super Nigga* [2015] after the Trayvon Martin shooting and all the other unarmed black men killed by cops. I thought, "Wow, this is all being driven by fear." The cops were trying to become superniggas to kill niggas, which is why I painted the Superman S on the figure's chest. You are becoming the embodiment of that thing which you fear. In order to kill the "dangerous men" you have to yourself become a killing machine. And you have the law behind you! Eric Garner, who was choked to death in Staten Island selling cigarettes a few years ago? I consider that a snuff film that was shown on national TV.

AC Your mother's name was Mary, which you took as your own middle name after she died.

NMQ Because my mother never had an education. She never had a high school diploma or a college degree or a graduate degree from New York University. It was important for me to take her with me. I sign the back of each work "Nathaniel Mary Quinn. Love Mom. Jesus," and three hearts: a heart for me, a heart for my mom, and a heart for God. Every painting I make is dedicated to the memory of my mother. And now everybody has to say her name.

Artwork © Nathaniel Mary Quinn

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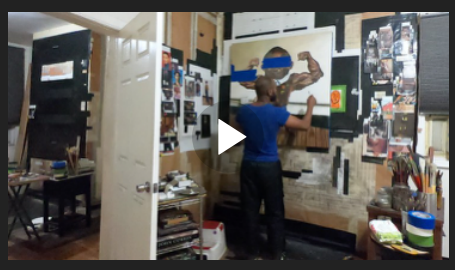

NATHANIEL MARY QUINN

A statement from the artist.

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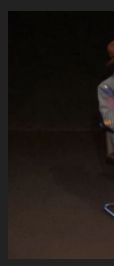

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