

Fractured past

Nathaniel Mary Quinn on This Is Life at MMoCA

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Quinn's "Big Bertha," 2015.

If life truly informs art, then Nathaniel Mary Quinn's grotesque collage-style portraits offer the perfect perspective on his fractured past.

The youngest of five boys, Quinn grew up in the Robert Taylor Homes, the South Side Chicago housing project notorious for gangs, drugs and its nickname, "The Hole." He showed an early talent for art, and area gangs offered "protection" if Quinn would draw them into his comic strips. His mother was partially disabled from two strokes and his father worked several restaurant shifts, but often gambled his earnings away in local pool halls attempting to boost the family's income. Both parents were illiterate.

At age 15, Quinn earned a scholarship to the prestigious Culver Academies in rural Indiana, whose alumni includes New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner, actor Hal Holbrook and country singer Dierks Bentley. One month into his schooling Quinn's mother died, and he incorporated her name, Mary, into his own. When he came home for Thanksgiving that year, he discovered his father and brothers had vacated the family apartment. He hasn't seen or heard from them since.

Despite the rocky beginnings, Quinn, 41, went on to earn a master's degree in fine arts in painting from New York University and now lives in Brooklyn with his wife. He's had major shows in London, New York, Los Angeles and Turin, Italy, and has sold his art to celebrities, including Elton John and Anderson Cooper, and to the Whitney Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago.

Quinn emailed with *Isthmus* about *This Is Life*, a exhibit of his mixed-media works that opens at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art on Dec. 1.

How did your early life affect your art?

The experiences and realities of my childhood lent themselves to the pictorial language evident in my work — the disjointed, geometric shapes forming the basis of my compositions, the ripping and pulling, the attempt to create harmony among a mass of disjointed and asymmetrical shapes that normally or traditionally don't fit neatly or seamlessly together.

Who are the people you paint?

In earlier works, they were people with whom I was raised. However, I also make works about ideas, belief systems and, more importantly, ways of being. Perhaps it's more accurate to state that I try to visually articulate energy, the essence of being present, the relationship to another human being, and the exploration of the spectrum of humanity.

Can you analyze one of the works that will be on display at MMoCA?

In "Grown Little Girl," it was my intention to visually express the disposition that impacted me each time I saw the subject walking down the street in my Chicago neighborhood. Her body language was strongly reminiscent of the residents of her neighborhood — the weight of having to grow up fast, of having to carry the emotional responsibility normally reserved for young adults, the manner in which she viewed the world, the psychic armor that she has to wear. Her eyes depict that weight, while her face acts as a tomb designed to protect the totality of her fragility.

Your work is sometimes described as Cubism. Is that accurate?

Cubism emphasizes flat, two-dimensional surfaces and planes where traditional techniques are rejected, where many different perspectives are presented at once, and where the use of geometric shapes, interlocking planes, and collage is fervently key. I am engaged in a technique that I call "Illuminationism," which gives rise to the myriad perspectives of human identity, whereby means of self-hiding will lead to the "illumination" of the subject's essence in the artist's work.

Is there personal catharsis in your work?

My style continuously evolves, shifting and changing in order to meet a more sustainable truth about relationships, about the exploration of humanity, about empathy and intuition. I have been moving into a more abstract field of creation, of being present and fulfilled by my relationship (with the subject) instead of categorizing it in order to feel comfortable and safe. To be in the space of not knowing is true freedom.