



Nathaniel Quinn's This is Life: How mistakes become an opportunity for creative solutions

With work in The Art Institute of Chicago, artist elaborated on creative processes behind portraits

by JOEY BOYD · Dec 4, 2018



Seventeen portraits are on display around the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art for nationally renowned artist Nathaniel Mary Quinn's first solo exhibition, "Nathaniel Mary Quinn: This is Life."

After the audience had time to walk around the gallery taking in the sights and hors d'oeuvres — Quinn delivered a talk in a packed lecture hall to address the creative process behind a select few of his pieces.

It would be easy at first glance to mistake Quinn's work as a collage with many different shapes and textures making up each portrait. At the beginning of his talk, however, he emphasized that he uses charcoal, oil paint and various pastels to achieve a certain effect. While his work looks as though it springs off the paper, Quinn asserts that "it is a part of it."

To make works so detailed that they can be misconstrued for entirely different forms of art takes a certain level of meticulousness. This behavior was instilled in Quinn from a young age.

"My father ripped off all the erasers on my pencils," Quinn said. "Each mistake became an opportunity for a creative solution."

Since each of Quinn's portraits come from such a personal place, they all have special anecdotes attached — the kinds friends and family tell one another.

"Humor in the work, I think that's important," Quinn said.

Quinn balances humor with sincerity when speaking about his artwork, giving way to a genuine persona, not the stereotypically pretentious air so commonly assigned to artists. Quinn and his art are uniquely presented, a fact he seems to embrace.

“I have no interest in painting the physical representation of who you are,” Quinn said. “There’s nothing real there, what’s real is the essence of who you are.”

Quinn likens his work to shining a light on who we are as human beings. He coined the term “Luminism” to describe this method. He compares his method to placing a light behind something and it becomes easier to see the inside of the object.

Quinn aims to show “the multiplicity of one’s identity, the internalized work of a human being.” He said his portraits take a subject and “shine a light on the inner workings.”

His interest in Luminism is clearly derived from his views on life. During his question and answer session, an audience member asked whether the race of the people in his portraits had anything to do with the messages behind them. Quinn asserted that it did not, stating that looking at someone’s internal makeup is a flaw in itself.

“[It] goes against a presumption of hate and prejudice. I can meet you, I just met you tonight, but I love you anyway,” Quinn explained.