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Like song sampling as painting: Nathaniel Mary Quinn's puzzle-like portraits of personhood

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Nathaniel Mary Quinn, "Mend," 2018. Black charcoal, gouache, soft pastel, oil pastel, oil paint, paint stick on Coventry Vellum paper. Paper 20 inches by 20 inches. (Jeff McLane / Nathaniel Mary Quinn and M+B)

Each work in Nathaniel Mary Quinn's bracing show at M+B is keyed to a single song, but the imagery comes about through a process of sampling.

Quinn borrows, adapts, deconstructs and reconstructs to build these portraits on paper and canvas. Collages in spirit and sensibility, they involve no glue. Quinn might draw a mouth from memory, paint an eye from a photograph. His sources are as varied as his modes of rendering and his materials: charcoal, gouache, pastel, gold leaf, oil paint. Features occasionally look familiar, as if plucked from collective consciousness and re-purposed as portals to an individual soul.



"Mend" is among the many mesmerizing puzzles of personhood here. Reading from bottom to top, from the body's singularity to the mind's multiplicity, the portrait starts out with a straightforward, naturalistic rendering of a collared shirt, woven in sunset hues, from which a neck rises — and keeps rising, elongated stem to a mixed bouquet of facial features.

The level gaze of one eye, drawn in soft black charcoal, anchors the mosaic jumble. The other, narrower eye peers from beneath a brow of smeared persimmon and a tab of pink. Nose and lipstick-red mouth, succinctly defined in black outline, look like they might have come from a comic strip; they are of a larger scale than the other features and hover before them, as if on a different plane. The face is composed of scraps, mix-and-match fragments of anatomy, swatches and swipes of color.

Most of the images here are head and shoulders only, but two zoom out to encompass nearly an entire figure. In both, Quinn knits together more explicitly disjunctive parts — one arm skinny in Superman blue opposite another, beefy and bare, for instance.

Throughout the show, dark skin joins with light, and gender oscillates. Like ransom notes pieced from diverse texts, these portraits accrete and cohere synergistically, spelling out in an utterly fresh and relevant way what we know to be true: that the self is constructed, that identity is fragmented and fluid. It's a struggle to stay whole.

Quinn's intimate riffs on that struggle find their integrity through nonconformity, through blur and torque, through sensual tumult and honest contradiction.

M+B, 612 N. Almont Drive, West Hollywood. Through June 23; closed Sundays and Mondays. (310) 550-0050, www.mbart.com