

# ELLE

## NATHANIEL MARY QUINN

By Jennifer Krasinski  
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## NATHANIEL MARY QUINN

*This Brooklyn-based painter juxtaposes diverse fragments of pop-culture imagery to create powerful figures and faces.*

BY JENNIFER KRASINSKI

Her hair is jet-black and wild, dissolving into a foggy gray background, and her face is composed—or is it decomposed?—to appear more a puzzle than a person: a man's sharp eye and bulbous nose; an ape's mouth; a carved cheekbone and full lips. Her polka-dot blouse is cut away to reveal a woman's bare back. This is *Elaina*, one of the vivid and troubling figures with which painter Nathaniel Mary Quinn has made his name.

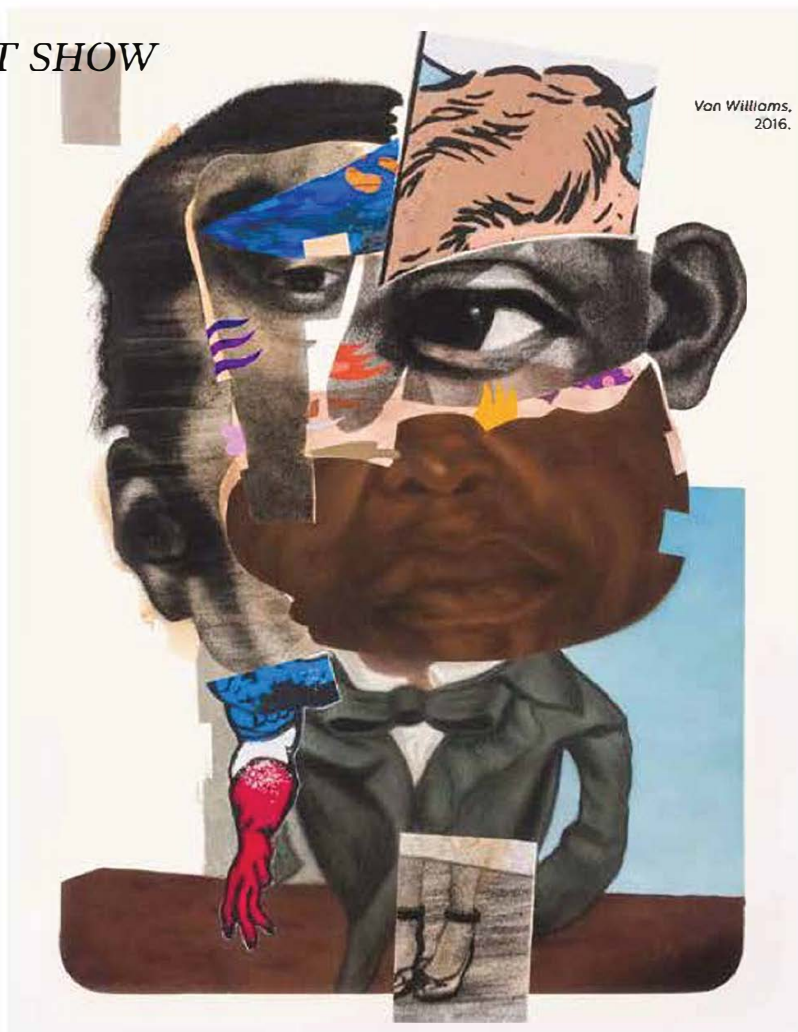
On first sight, Quinn's works appear collaged, assembled in part with bits of photographs and magazine clippings and interrupted by colorful, abstract brushstrokes daubed here and there. A closer look

reveals that, in fact, every element in the work has been painted or drawn by the artist's own hand with hyperrealist precision in a variety of media: charcoal, soft and oil pastels, gouache, and paint stick.

"I don't paint portraits," Quinn says, standing in his studio at his home in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. "I paint what is not seen. I paint the internalized world of a human being." His compositions mirror the complexity of the human psyche: a fractured, yet somehow seamless, whole. The tricorn hat and eagle's beak of *Lamont*; the scarlet fez and comic-book cutout of *Zechariah*; the mismatched side-eyes of *Rosey*—his characters are multifaceted concoctions. If there >

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## ART SHOW



Van Williams,  
2016.



Sister Odell,  
2014.

is any truth to identity, these figures seem to imply, it's how constructed it is.

"What's behind the work is something that's very passionate, very real, and very visceral," says Dexter Wimberly, curator and executive director of Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art, who gave Quinn an exhibition at Brooklyn's Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts in 2013. He also notes that the figures Quinn conjures are often based on people he knows, or once knew. "He's pulling from his background, his history, where he grew up, and really using the work as a way to tell those stories."

Born in 1977, Quinn was raised in the Robert Taylor housing projects on Chicago's South Side, a community plagued by poverty and violence. "I'm from a place where most of my friends were drug dealers," he says. Although his parents couldn't read or write, they always supported and encouraged their son's preternatural gifts for art.

When he was very young, his mother would let him scribble on the walls of their apartment, then wipe them clean so he could do it again. His father put together a makeshift studio for him in the kitchen pantry. Every Saturday, he would draw with his son, coaching him, telling him to keep his hand loose



Kenwood, 2016.

and free, and to use every gesture. "Never erase," Quinn recalls him saying, "Every mark you make is there for a reason."

Quinn's mother died when he was a teenager; he added her name, Mary, to his own to honor her. Soon after, when the 15-year-old was away at boarding school, his father and brothers moved out of the family apartment without telling him where they went. Quinn came home to find the door ajar—and has never reconnected with them since. Initially traumatized, he has said that he now accepts their abandonment as a sort of deliverance from the lives of hardship that other members of his family have led. He went on to study art at Wabash College in Indiana and New York University, but he still refers to his father as "the best teacher I ever had."

Those lessons in trusting his own hand and gut stayed with him. "Everything I make comes from visions," Quinn says. "I never make preliminary sketches." When he begins a new painting, he doesn't know who he's bringing to life until, at some point, the painting tells him. Perhaps it's this fluid relationship with his own subconscious that gives his paintings something of the embattled gravity of the Surrealists' "exquisite corpses" and the montaged physiques of Dadaist Hannah Höch's absurd characters.

Quinn's most recent figures weren't born of the past. Rather, his mind's eye has refocused on the present. This November, at the Luce Gallery in Turin, Italy, he will exhibit new paintings propelled by a vision of the people who live in his neighborhood. "Every piece is going to be a reflection of this current world—a world that will cease to exist two or three years from now simply because of gentrification," Quinn says of the changes he sees. "I want to record it." ■