



Where everything is interesting

Artist Spotlight: Nathaniel Mary Quinn

– by Wendy Morley –



The Bath/2015/127 cm x 110.5 cm (50" x 43.5")/black charcoal, gouache, oil paint, paint stick, oil pastel, gouache on Lenox paper

"Artist Spotlight: Nathaniel Mary Quinn." *Q Avenue*, January, 2016.

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Artist Nathaniel Mary Quinn has made a big impact in the last two years, not only for his exceptional art, but also for his exceptional story. Nathaniel grew up in the most notorious housing project in the country, the Robert Taylor homes on the south side of Chicago, surrounded by gangs and woken up by shootings. His parents were both illiterate and none of his brothers, who were all involved in drugs and alcohol, graduated from high school, yet at the age of 15 Nathaniel had received an academic scholarship to Culver Academies, a boarding school in Indiana. He had barely unpacked his bags when he heard his mother had died suddenly, and when he went home for Thanksgiving he found the door ajar and his remaining family gone. He has never seen or heard of them in the 22 years since.

While the abandonment by his family was and will always be devastating for him, ultimately he rose not only above where he had begun, but far into the stars above. After university he became a teacher for at-risk youth, but throughout it all he remained an artist. In 2013 he had an art showing that ended up changing his life, bringing his art to the attention of the world. Since then, Quinn has been on fire, with a waiting list of art collectors and galleries. Along the way, he added his mother's name "Mary" to his own. In life she was never able to see what he had accomplished, and in this way he allows her to be a part of his accomplishments. Here is a recent short interview with the talented, insightful and truly happy man.

Wendy Morley: Nathaniel, until two days ago I knew nothing about your story—I'd only seen your art, which I have an intense attraction to. I have now read a number of articles and I'm absolutely blown away by your story, of course, but more so by your openness and by the maturity of your soul. I'm a mother and very close with my boys and I just love the fact that you are bringing your mother Mary everywhere with you in your name. You really appear to be quite an extraordinary person.

First, I'd like to ask you about the change that happened with the piece you called "Charles." You needed to quickly come up with a piece for a show and created the piece that would ultimately bring you to the world. What is it about the art you were creating before that day that made it not resonate as well with people as the art you have created since?

Nathaniel Mary Quinn: For years, my approach to art making was seemingly overwhelmed with excessive thinking, of constantly purporting interpretations upon the work that I was creating.

In early 2013, I was given the opportunity to exhibit my work in the home of a woman whose son I was tutoring; in addition to being a teacher working with at-risk youth, I was also a private tutor, helping students who were experiencing academic difficulties. The mother was impressed with my work and offered to host an "artist salon" to which various people would be invited to see my work. It was my hope to present five works, but I only had four works. On the day of the artist's salon, five hours prior to the deadline of the works being delivered, I decided to pursue making the fifth work. "Artist Spotlight: Nathaniel Mary Quinn." *Q Avenue*, January, 2016.

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Due to having limited time, I knew that it would be best for me to employ dry and fast-drying materials—black charcoal, acrylic paint—if I expected to complete this particular work. There was no room for excessive thinking, for in-depth analysis of the process; I just trusted my intuition, selecting photographs that immediately resonated with me. I also had a vision of what I wanted to make, although I had no understanding or knowledge of the theoretical underpinnings of this vision.

Four hours later, the work was done: I was completely driven by my intuition and a purely visceral approach to the process at hand; for the first time in my life, I felt liberated and knew, without fail, that I had created something that was completely outside the scope of my previous studio practice. It was this sort of experience of “being present” for which I had been working, although I was uncertain as to how I would arrive to such a destination, a place from which new adventures and risks in art making would be born.

Moments following the completion of the work, I knew immediately that it was “Charles.” More accurately speaking, the work seems to have mandated to me that it was Charles, one of my four older brothers whom I have not seen for nearly twenty-three years.

WM: I understand you have found love in your life and are married now; I'm unsure if you have children. How does having this love, this family, affect your art? Does it bring more confidence? Stability? Fear?

NMQ: I love my wife very much; she is the bedrock of my life and a woman of great integrity and stability for me. Currently, she manages my studio and all of its business affairs, making certain that every entity is solid and in place. Of course, like all marriages, we have our conflicts—most of them stemming from me—but we always communicate and listen to our differences, trying more diligently to materialize more effective ways of communicating our love for each other. She certainly supports my art career, which allows me to work throughout the day, night and week on my art practice.

Also, my wife is an extremely talented actress and writer, so the new acquisition of an art career affords her the opportunity to produce projects of all kinds in accordance to her ambitions. Hence, my wife promotes the creation of my work because she understands how favorable and majestic it is for any artist to achieve such a rare and incredibly difficult dream.

I feel the most comfortable whenever she is with me; I normally never attend meetings or dinners without her, and I prefer that she is present during studio visits. Many people in the art world know my wife and normally must go through her in some way, shape, or form. Without her, I firmly believe that my art career would be hideously compromised to a point that would have been utterly laughable.

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WM: What was it that brought you to the place you received that scholarship, that you escaped the path so many around you (including your brothers) were following?

NMQ: During those years, Ms. Hunter, who was the assistant principal of the public school that I attended during my childhood, introduced me to a brochure that boasted an image of well-groomed grass on a stunning, private, high school campus and students wearing uniforms, which was, for me, an entirely foreign image. My public school was surrounded by notorious public tenement housing, gang violence and all sorts of criminal activity. Nonetheless, based upon my academic performance, Ms. Hunter believed that I could be accepted into Culver Academies. A few weeks later we drove to Indiana, which is where Culver is based, and, shortly upon my arrival, I took the school's admission's exam. After being back home for two or three weeks, I received mail from Culver Academies. Indeed, and surprisingly so, this was my acceptance letter, which stated that I had been awarded a four-year, tuition-waived scholarship to attend Culver Academies. This became my escape from poverty.

WM: Believe it or not, when I read about what happened to you at the age of 15 when you came back home my first thought was how terrible and emotionally devastating, but it also may in the end have been this man's deliverance. I read in the great article by C. Zawadi Morris that you have come to that same conclusion, but I really want to know how? What is it within you that allowed you to not only move beyond the pain (not that it will ever disappear) but also recognize that out of the ashes rose the beautiful phoenix?

NMQ: For many years, I was fully governed by the pain associated with the loss of my family, with not having any means of gaining or sustaining contact with them. After meeting my wife, she encouraged me to seek out counseling services; I complied with her encouragement and found therapy to be unspeakably helpful and rather liberating in a more humanistic way.

After so many years I had defined myself as a victim, as someone who could not gain control over his life. Years of therapy and intense amounts of self-evaluation and ruthlessly honest criticism helped me to accept another story: instead of being a victim, I thought and felt it more powerful to be victorious; instead of being the victim of abandonment, I was, and continue to be, the recipient of God's glory and deliverance and I was delivered, without fail, from what could have been my most solid demise.

While the volume of the pain continues to be present—no human is free from such inevitable pain, and no human will escape such a guaranteed loss—it is not as loud as it may have been many years ago. It is all caught up in my art practice, in my life of being present, of being free, of exploring and fully accepting an internalized world absent of judgment, personal taste, and interpretation.

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The experiences of “that Quinn” gave rise to the tools that I currently use today as an artist, a husband and a human being. Yet the past is only as powerful and potent as one’s emotional attachment to it. Hence, on many levels, its existence is today an illusion, although our minds and bodies carry the weight of all that we endured and enjoyed.

WM: Do you see how your art is evolving? I understand you are inspired by watching hip-hop artists work. Could you ever see yourself creating a multimedia installation with these artists, for example?

NMQ: I am always aiming to push myself as an artist because I have an insatiable appetite for searching for correlations and relationships between opposing entities. All is connected; all is inextricably tied to all. Discovering the factors that create such unions are of great interest to me, and it is through such exploration that I will find growth and evolution.

I have done installation projects already and look forward to creating more projects of the sort, but I have not given much thought to hip-hop artists with whom I would like to collaborate on such a project, outside of a select few. It would be great to collaborate with D’Angelo, Perhaps that is a bit far-fetched. But, you never know, right?

WM: What would you tell every child who dreams of being an artist?

NMQ: Work extraordinarily hard and work toward being great. Never make excuses, not even on the basis of race, religion or any other socio-political issue.

Never work for financial gain because money is not happiness; happiness is happiness.

Greatness is not measured by material possessions but by your willingness and courage to finish the race without giving up.

Never work to please other people; such a feat is impossible; only work to satisfy any question or concern that lives within you. There will always be failures and shortcomings; hence, choosing to be an artist is also choosing to fail, to fall, to being rejected, to being the subject of laughter and ridicule, and to being turned away.

Choosing to be an artist is choosing to meet and to interact with people who will not believe in the prospects of your career. However, while you will have, without question, more failures than successes, your successes will, indeed, outweigh your failures.

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Just remember this: most people who express what may be your inability to achieve your dream of becoming an artist are normally people who have, themselves, never achieved their dreams.

Nathaniel Mary Quinn is showing at Albertz Benda's Like-ness exhibition in New York City from January 14 through Feb 13, 2016.

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