ALMINE RECH

Nathaniel Mary Quinn
In The Valley

June 04 — June 20, 2021

Almine Rech's second exhibition devoted to Nathaniel Mary Quinn—titled 'In the Valley,' and set to take place in Aspen, Colorado—shows that the American painter thinks in painting, that his engagement with the world is pictorial. Yet, you will often hear people speaking of his oeuvre in terms of collages, surrogate paintings, whose raison d'être would supposedly be imbued with Cubist pioneers' insertion of paper cuts from the everyday into canvases. That perception is surface. It is hindered by the restrictive equation of collage with papier collé, as explored by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. It is thus solely founded on the apparent fragmentation of the figure into a myriad of strictly heterogeneous and external elements. But when facing a painting by Quinn, we behold a nascent, complex, and diverse homogeneity.

The superficial comparison between collages and Quinn's paintings nonetheless hints at something deeper: painting's enduring network of relationships between the parts and the whole. For example, an epitome of the synergies between these two poles could be found in the theory of peripeteia, as conceptualized by the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture after Poussin's works. So, is a painting by Quinn a synthetic patchwork made of discrete singular moments? Or, is it an organic fresco made of the same plural moment?

The answer is, most probably, the latter. For Quinn acknowledges that postwar French structuralism forms the basis of how he ties the parts together into a cohesive whole, preserving their local identity. Claude Lévi-Strauss comes here as a fruitful nexus. Within the French anthropologist's framework, Quinn's paintings could be conceptually regarded as collages, for the whole they engender unites the parts they are made of, thickens their meaning, without jeopardizing their integrity. We could also think of Quinn's emphasis on the parts' interconnectivity through Lévi-Strauss's account of the interrelationships between the Salish Swaihwe and Kwakiutl Dzonokwa masks: 'they are parts of a system within which they transform each other.' As such, the impulse of Quinn's paintings resonates with Max Ernst's aesthetic, though the reciprocity between the parts in the German artist's work is predicated on its seeming uncanniness and the Surrealist revelation of chance's beauty (think of Ernst's reference to Comte de Lautréamont's line from Les Chants de Maldoror—'as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table'). Quinn, as for him, sings an ode to the world's beauty as he sees it. Hence, the question is: How does he transform what he describes as his visions, which we could read as his ideas (in the classical sense of the word), into paintings?

Let us first look at the extent to which Quinn's practice differs from the one of so-called collage artists. The photographs and cuts from journals that he spreads across his studio's walls nurture the visions that precede his paintings. However, these images are not readymades-to-be: Quinn does not literally transpose them into his paintings, an attitude that runs counter to the very ethos of collage. Rather, what draws Quinn to these images is their metaphorical and pictorial quality, their empathic correspondences and affinities (we could even be tempted to say: these images' Pathosformel) with the things that he eventually depicts.

Here, we have an instance of a deeper bond between Francis Bacon's work and Quinn's—a more direct one being their twisted figures and use of pastel, as exemplified in Tennessee, 2021, or The Gray, 2021. When Nathaniel Mary Quinn says he desires to paint faces' dimples like the folds formed by a jacket's sleeves (a motif that echoes both Renaissance draperies and Quinn's interest in Giovanni Battista Moroni's oeuvre), we inevitably think of Francis Bacon, who told David Sylvester he 'always hoped [...] to be able to paint the mouth like Monet painted a sunset.' When Nathaniel Mary Quinn says he endeavors to replicate the texture of people's skin as perceived up close, we inevitably think of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who compared the latter and the surface of the moon; we inevitably think of Willem de Kooning, for whom 'flesh is the reason oil paint was invented.'

Each part of the portraits he makes encloses an epiphany. Each part proceeds from an

64 rue de Turenne, 75003 Paris
18 avenue de Matignon, 75008 Paris
contact.paris@alminerech.com
-
Abdijstraat 20 rue de l'Abbaye
Brussel 1050 Bruxelles
contact.brussels@alminerech.com
-
Grosvenor Hill, Broadbent House
W1K 3JH London
contact.london@alminerech.com
-
39 East 78th Street
New York, NY 10075
contact.newyork@alminerech.com
-
27 Huqiu Road, 2nd Floor
200002 Shanghai China
contact.shanghai@alminerech.com
-

ALMINE RECH

intense process of close looking and a search of equivalences. Each part's pictorial peak stems from a metaphor. Quinn's paintings are plural moments of homogeneous nature: the parts' harmony and intensity double the whole's, the whole's harmony and intensity double the parts'. Similarly, the parts are not connected to each other because of arbitrariness, but rather because of necessity (a word we could understand in the light of Wassily Kandinsky's thinking). The parts call out for each other as Quinn paints them. They moreover presuppose the material that best expresses their inner qualities (be it oil painting, gouache, soft pastel, oil pastel, black charcoal, and so forth). Such a sheer variety of textures, which coexist on the same plane, keeps flatness away and horizontalizes the traditional hierarchy of materials. The textural interplays entail a push–pull effect reminiscent of Cubism's investigation on the sculptural, and their lightness of touch results from Quinn's striving for great fluidity, fluency, and proficiency within his own idiom, a pursuit that he compares with the one of the athlete. His approach yields a harmonious heterogeneity, which we can see in the contrast between the Rembrandtesque fur coat and the flower-patterned top in Holding On, 2021. This is one reason why all of his works—including the ones on paper (take, for example, Taking a Walk, 2021, or In the Valley, 2021)—are actually paintings: they all emulate the idea of painting. To return to the parts' integrity, Quinn preserves it because he paints them as if each was the beginning or the start of his paintings. Hence, his mind—not what appears on the surface of the canvas or the paper as he works—orchestrates the logic that weaves the parts. That dimension is all the more tangible as he uses construction paper not only to not alter the parts he has already made, but also to forget about what has come into being—an aspect that parallels Lévi-Strauss's concept of bricolage. The product of Quinn's process thus culminates in what he calls trompe l'œils. Maybe we shall say: lyrical trompe l'œils, for what you see is poetically more than what you see.

—Théo de Luca, Author, Yale University

64 rue de Turenne, 75003 Paris
18 avenue de Matignon, 75008 Paris
contact.paris@alminerech.com
-
Abdijstraat 20 rue de l'Abbaye
Brussel 1050 Bruxelles
contact.brussels@alminerech.com
-
Grosvenor Hill, Broadbent House
W1K 3JH London
contact.london@alminerech.com
-
39 East 78th Street
New York, NY 10075
contact.newyork@alminerech.com
-
27 Huqiu Road, 2nd Floor
200002 Shanghai China
contact.shanghai@alminerech.com
-