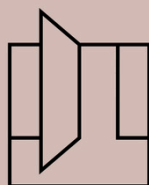


MAY 21 – AUGUST 23, 2026

A Love Letter

**NATHANIEL  
MARY  
QUINN**

To My Mother



National  
Public Housing  
Museum

Labels to be read  
counterclockwise.

# **Nathaniel Mary**

## **Quinn:**

### **A Love Letter to My Mother**

Nathaniel Mary Quinn's collage-like composite portraits use his "paint-drawing" technique to represent richly complex portraits of people he has met throughout his life, including powerful Black women and community members bent on survival. Tender remembrances of Quinn's mother's death, followed by the separation from his family in the Robert Taylor Homes, are profound compositional touchstones.

This place and period of time retain powerful significance in Quinn's acts of creation, a site for making art, a place of pain, inspiration, invention, and experimentation.

Quinn's first solo museum show in Chicago challenges myths, explores the relationship between identity, place, memory, and perception, and demonstrates how unflinching truths experienced through artistic innovation can help to illuminate the beauty of existence.

We invite you to have a face to face encounter with humanity in all of its complexity and contradictions.

Lead support for this exhibition and related programming is provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art. Additional support is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, Illinois Arts Council, and Gagosian. Special thanks to Rhona Hoffman for her support in making this exhibit possible.

# Junebug

2015

Black charcoal, gouache, soft pastel, oil pastel, oil paint, paint stick, acrylic silver leaf on Coventry vellum Paper

Collection of Dan Berger

“A faint but enduring memory: my mother carrying me to visit a relative—an aunt, I believe. The living room of the house was full—cousins and others—held together by the quiet ease of familiarity. Among them stood Junebug. He bore, almost to the point of caricature, the look of a street hustler—deliberate, composed, and alert to attention—dressed in a gleaming black leather jacket over a crisp white collared shirt, sharply pressed trousers, polished shoes, a brimmed hat, and, resting at his chest, a thin gold chain. By all appearances, he had money.

To me, he registered as formidable—  
somewhat coarse, almost bull-like in his  
bearing. He spoke loudly, with the force  
of a man issuing commands from the  
deck of a ship unsettled by turbulent  
waters.”

-Nathaniel Mary Quinn

# Erica with the Pearl Earring

2015

Black charcoal, gouache, soft pastel, oil pastel, oil paint, paint stick, silver oil pastel on Coventry vellum paper

Collection of Rhona Hoffman

“I hold deep reverence for Johannes Vermeer, one of the most admired painters of the Dutch Baroque. Born in 1632 in the Netherlands, he stands alongside Frans Hals and Rembrandt van Rijn, towering figures whose contributions to painting remain unsurpassed. Critics often describe Vermeer as a “master of light,” known for his quiet, luminous depictions of middle-class interior life. He died in 1675 at the age of forty-three. If translated across disciplines, his sensibility might resonate with Kendrick Lamar or Phillip Seymour Hoffman—artists of precision, depth, and psychological acuity.

Among his most enduring works is *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. In my work, *Erica with the Pearl Earring*, I draw upon this image to preserve a memory. Growing up in the Robert Taylor Homes of Chicago, I was close to the Easton family, particularly Ruby, the eldest sister. Her younger sister, Erica, remained distinct in my memory—marked by a quiet innocence, seemingly untouched by the dangers that surrounded her.

Years later, that memory returned with clarity. Erica's presence carried the same quiet magnitude I had come to recognize in Vermeer's figure. My work is an ode: an effort to elevate a girl from the margins of society into the space of reverence historically reserved for subjects of European painting. Unlike Vermeer's figure—often understood as imagined, though sometimes linked to his daughter—Erica was real. She lived next door, on the sixth floor of the Robert Taylor Homes.”

-Nathaniel Mary Quinn

Ahhhhh

2017

Black charcoal, gouache, soft pastel, oil  
pastel, acrylic gold powder on  
Coventry vellum paper

Collection of Booth School of Business,  
University of Chicago

# Lights Out

2019

Oil paint, paint stick, oil pastel, soft pastel, gouache on Linen Canvas stretched over wood panel

Collection of Vlad Torgovnik

# JB and Bobby

2018

Black charcoal, gouache, soft pastel, oil  
pastel, paint stick on Coventry vellum  
Paper

Collection of The Art Institute of Chicago

“JB and Bobby were among the first neighbors I met when Donna and I moved into our first home on St. Marks Avenue in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. I had never imagined becoming a homeowner; for Donna, raised in London within a culture where ownership felt attainable, it did not seem beyond reach. I wept the first night I entered the house to sweep and clean. A modest wood-frame structure—far removed from the brownstones of film and television—it might have appeared unremarkable. To us, it was a gem.

From this house, on this block, my relationship with JB and Bobby took shape. Both men had histories entangled with the criminal justice system and moved within an underground economy. My upbringing in the Robert Taylor Homes of Chicago afforded me a certain fluency: I knew how to speak with them without judgment or condescension, to extend respect, to meet them as equals. They regarded me, without pretense, as a “square,” and took to me nonetheless.

I never spoke of my career; it would have introduced unnecessary tension and heightened awareness of economic difference.

They became close to me—brotherly in their presence. In the summer months, I watched them move through the street in polished cars, music spilling into the air, calling out to friends—and rivals alike—with a force that claimed the block as their own.”

-Nathaniel Mary Quinn

Please rest and reflect in Nathaniel Mary Quinn's reimagined childhood living room, drawn from his family's apartment in the Robert Taylor Homes.

This living room was Quinn's "first studio." There, with his mother's encouragement, Quinn covered the walls with his childhood sketches. To create fresh canvases for her son, Mary Quinn would wash away the drawings, and Quinn would begin anew.

Please listen to an album or read a book that engages with the history of Robert Taylor Homes. These works provide a social context for Nathaniel Mary Quinn's personal history, which is a foundational aspect of his practice.

The collection includes works that explore the influence of black feminism, the impact of policing and violence on communities of color, the power of organizing and community to fight for self determination and freedom, the trauma of systemic poverty, and the radical imagination and resilience of public housing residents.

Join us in this space for informal conversations, listening sessions, answers to specific questions about public housing, and more with residents, scholars, and housing activists. See our website for upcoming events.

This reading room is made possible by the Department of History at Loyola University Chicago in honor of Professor Brad Hunt.

# I Wish A Muthafucka Would

2017

Black charcoal, gouache, soft pastel, oil  
pastel, acrylic gold powder on  
Coventry vellum paper

Collection of Dr. Charles Boyd

# Charles Re-Visited

2015

Black charcoal, gouache, soft pastel, oil pastel, paint stick on Coventry vellum paper

Collection of Helyn Goldenberg and Michael Alper

“Charles marks a pivotal breakthrough in my practice, establishing the visual language that has come to define it: fractured parts assembled into a cohesive whole, where the abject and the beautiful converge. At its core is an ongoing meditation on my mother’s disabled body—the first form I understood as sublime, perfect, because she was my mother.

I made Charles at thirty-six, at the outset of my career, a work on paper in black charcoal and acrylic. By then, I had neither seen nor heard from my family since the age of fifteen.

As my work began to circulate, I maintained a now-defunct website that listed my phone number. One day, my brother, Charles, called. We spoke at length, though the details remain private.

What remained was his refusal—or inability—to accept any measure of responsibility for the rupture that defined my adolescence and shaped the emotional and psychological course of my life.

Hence, Charles Re-Visited.”

-Nathaniel Mary Quinn

# Hard To Believe She's a Mom, Now

2020

Black charcoal, gouache, soft pastel, oil  
pastel, oil paint, paint stick on Arches  
paper

Collection of Nancy Magoon

# One Eye Open

2020

Soft pastel, gouache, black charcoal on  
Coventry vellum paper

Collection of Nick Cave and Robert  
Faust

# Fixin' to Eat

2017

Black charcoal, gouache, soft pastel, oil pastel, oil paint, paint stick, acrylic gold powder on Coventry vellum paper

Collection of Barbara Ruben

“My parents were illiterate, and my mother’s disability prevented her from sustaining steady work, leaving my father as the sole provider—a role he carried with quiet dignity. He worked as a cook at a time when formal training was not required, moving between restaurant kitchens where the pay was modest. What he could not earn, he supplemented in pool halls. On rare occasions, with what he brought home—both wages and remnants from the kitchen—he prepared home-cooked meals.

“C’mo’, boy, we fixin’ to eat,” he would call out. He stood at the stove in a stained apron, pots of collard greens and carrots simmering, crispy fried chicken in pans, cornbread set out to cool. I sat at the small, unsteady table—propped, it seemed, by milk crates, although the table probably had legs—on a worn wooden chair with a torn plastic-covered, floral cushion. He placed the plate before me and watched me eat, his face lit with profound pride—satisfaction in the simple, hard-won act of feeding his son.”

-Nathaniel Mary Quinn.

Nathaniel Mary Quinn: A Love Letter to My Mother was curated by Dr. Lisa Yun Lee with the labor and love of many who made this exhibition possible. Thank you to Alex Orfirer Maher, jellystone robinson, Vuk Vuković, Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Donna Augustin-Quinn, Larry Gagosian, Aaron Baldinger, Emily Cooper, Ashley Stewart Rödder, Heather Radke, Kyle Schlie, Chicago Painters (Oscar Rodriguez, Alejandra Lopez, Ariel Rodriguez, Daniel Martinez), Rhona Hoffman, Robert Smith III, Dr. Brad Hunt, Ron Carter, Liú Chen, Larry Turner, LaTanya Turner Taylor, Landon Turner, Tiff Beatty, Colleen McGaughey, Tessa Jagger, Angel Chavez, CJ Lind, Moira Pujols, Kevin Brosnan, Eric Watts, Mark Pascale, James Rondeau, Dr. Charles Boyd, Nick Cave, Bob Faust, Helyn Goldenberg, Michael Alper, Vlad Torgovnik, Nancy Magoon, Barbara Ruben, Dan Berger, and Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago. Exhibition design by HOUR Studio (Michael Savona, Tobey Albright, Mollie Edgar).