



Nathaniel Mary Quinn, *Drum Horse*, 2019. Photo: Craig Smith

In stirring portrait paintings that merge beauty with the grotesque and empathy with obfuscation, contemporary artist Nathaniel Mary Quinn assembles art historical, pop cultural, photographic, and biographical reference to form the combinatory bodies and physiognomies, or facial characteristics, of his subjects, which are compiled from layers of disjointed brushstrokes and part-images. Resisting traditional methods of naturalism, whereby artists have sought to render more cohesive or realistic likenesses, Quinn builds his compositions from an accumulation of source images, fragmenting and reassembling anatomical details, clothing, and accessories. Despite these competing and overlapping elements, each of his subjects is ultimately humanized; they often gaze, with piercing eyes, through the painterly mask imposed on them. Quinn was raised in the South Side of Chicago in a community that struggled with traumas resulting from structural racism and poverty. Inspired by vivid memories or intuitive visions, the artist considers his practice an act of healing, and a reflection on universal experiences of transformation, grief, and love.

Divided into three interlocked compositional registers, *Drum Horse* (2019) is subtly demonstrative of Quinn's interest in Surrealist techniques such as the Exquisite Corpse—a game where artists collaborate to create a disjointed figure by drawing on the concealed folds of a shared sheet of paper. While typically generating humorous and monstrous creatures, the game is meant to reveal the true nature of each artist's creative subconscious. In Quinn's painting, a uniformed Black figure looks towards us with a slightly withdrawn or suspicious gaze; his body gradually transforms into that of a marching band musician with the legs of a Drum Horse—a breed that is well-adapted to carry the heavy weight of instruments, endure long processional parades, and succumb easily to the steering of handlers. Through this subtle act of transfiguration, Quinn draws parallels, perhaps, between the subjugation and physical toil that has historically burdened Black men, and American values of patriotic conformity, allegiance to hierarchy, and deference to political authority.

-Dr. Allison K. Young, Assistant Professor of Art History  
Louisiana State University