

Interview with Christina Quarles

I first encountered Christina's work before she graduated from Yale in 2016 through friends who were also in the MFA program. I was immediately drawn to her chimerical thesis work, which included paintings of the brightly hued and bendy figures that have become her signature. We met later in a Skype studio visit at the end of 2017, shortly after the opening of *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* at the New Museum which included a stunning suite of her recent paintings. They manifested the expressive chutzpah of feminist painter predecessors like Mary Heillman, Sue Williams, and Joan Snyder, while also addressing the experience of living in her particular body. This spring, I called Quarles again from New York to chat more about her practice and her upcoming inclusion in *Made in L.A.* at the Hammer Museum in June.

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Ashton Cooper: You'll be in *Made in L.A.* in June. What are you planning for that?

Christina Quarles: It's a piece very similar to my thesis work at Yale. When I was making that piece I was really interested in—and these are things I'm still interested in—framing devices, *trompe-l'œil* tricks, surface, and shallow thresholds of information. The piece was an illusion of painted canvases on a wall, but it was actually a giant 20 foot tall by 8 foot wide panel of canvas that had blank areas that were taped off. When I did that installation, seeing pattern in space made me realize that you can tilt something that's flat and see it in three dimensions and it is still flat and still emphasizes the surface. It took doing that installation to start doing the work that I'm doing now. So in this new installation I'm taking a patterned ground—which is this wallpaper that I'm making—and then having areas of blank canvas and negative space that can interrupt the figure.

AC: A critic in *Artforum* recently interpreted the bisection of the figures with planes as a kind of muted violence. Do you use the planes with a particular effect in mind?

CQ: With the work in general, I'm interested in depicting an experience of living in a body rather than looking at a body. I'm interested in finding different ways to explore my experience of certain identity positions that I'm familiar with. For me that's about being queer and a cisgendered woman and also about my racial identity, being somebody who is half black and half white but who looks white. When thinking about race in particular, that's where I see the planes serving a greater function for me.

I think a lot of the time we use solidarity and safe spaces to understand who we are. I've certainly been in situations, like say a space that's been carved out for black female painters, in which I feel my most white and my most other from the community. Or when I'm in a group of people,

which happens all the time in the art world, where everybody's white—that's when I feel the most like a person of color. So community and these moments that are supposed to make you feel your most whole are when I feel the most fractured. So I've been thinking about the planes as a visual way of describing that sense of place being also a site of displace.

I also think of them a lot in relation to the language that I use in the titling of the works. What I love about language is that it's this stand in for something that isn't there. In using plays on words you can have this multiple location in a single phrase and so I'm using pattern to also have that sense of a visual punning or double meaning. Like using a flower pattern that could be either something that's manufactured or something that's actually a natural occurrence of flowers in a field. I think of them as being quotations and misquotations of things that we see in our daily life.

AC: Your use of the word misquotation is interesting. In a lot of recent art, there has been a turn away from explicitly representing the marginalized body and trying to find formal methods to talk about the body without directly depicting it. This calls to mind Édouard Glissant's proposition that people of color have the "right to be opaque." It is interesting to think of misquotation in terms of an opaque reading of a symbol or a body. Does this feel related?

CQ: Yeah, for sure. I think a lot about the desires we have to be in a community. Having other people understand you is a lot of how you understand yourself. I think there is a lot of theoretical or political advantage to this notion of being an opaque person or refusing to have a stable legible self. Naming is always going to be a reductive thing. The full range of who you are actually contains so much contradiction. That's a lot of what I'm interested in, this idea of ambiguity being this point of excess. Something

that's ambiguous is illegible because it has way too much information.

From a theoretical point of view, the state of ambiguity is very appealing because it refuses ideas of essentialism or the binary, all of those boogeymen of today. I think in reality it is quite intolerable to exist in an ambiguous state for very long because there is an undercurrent of wanting to be in a community. That's the compromise that is interesting to me. I think a lot about this Joshua Gamson quote. He writes about how fixed identity positions can be used to marginalize groups of people but can also be used by marginalized groups of people to gain visibility and have a political platform on which to achieve civil rights. But I'm also interested in those times when you can exist as a fully complicated and contradictory person with another person.

AC: Like on an intimate scale?

CQ: Yeah, moments of intimacy. I think of it as being in the round. We operate as these flat, two-dimensional faces that don't have bodies. It is interesting, these moments when we get to be in the round and know our fronts and our backs and all of the crazy messiness of being in a body. Those moments of intimacy are not always pleasant per se. It could be love or sex or it could also be moments of sickness or violence. Those are moments when you can be a fully realized complex person in a social situation.

AC: So when the work contains two figures, is it about acts of intimacy or pleasure? Even while the figures are ambiguous, it's interesting to think about the way you deploy markers in the paintings. Quite frequently the figures have boobs, for instance. Do you ever think of them as two women together?

CQ: I often see them as being definitively one person or as being more of a movement like one or more people



Christina Quarles, *E'reything (Will Be All Right) Everything* (2018).
Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 40 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist
and Pilar Corrias, London.
Photo: Andrea Rossetti.



Christina Quarles, *Plaid About Yew* (2018).
Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 40 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist
and Pilar Corrias, London.
Photo: Andrea Rossetti.

moving through time and space. Often if you were to add up the amount of torsos or legs or hands, it doesn't quite ever add up to a definitive number of people. There's always a little more or a little less of one body part. Even if it is with two bodies, I'll see it as being an interaction with shadow or reflection. That's the way that I see it. It's interesting the amount of work the viewer will do to connect the dots, which I find really interesting in relation to my own daily experience and the body that I was born into. I'll often find that people will ignore certain very present facts just to come to a more comfortable conclusion about who I am.

As far as the markers of gender, that's another thing. Like I will almost always have boobs in the work. I like them because they are such a bodily thing; they're such a marker of weight and of gravity. I'll start off with a lot of body parts that I will eventually connect or leave disconnected. I take figure drawing classes all the time so I'm pulling from things I've seen in real life—like, oh yeah, that was that funny bony butt that one male model had or the rib cage that old man had. I see the gender and the references for different body parts moving just as much as the different painting techniques will change throughout the body.

AC: What does it mean to you to use a mix of techniques?

CQ: My background was in drawing before I went to grad school. It took me a long time to figure out how to change the scale and the impact of those drawings. At Yale, I had a studio visit with Rochelle Feinstein and she was like, "You know you should really try drawing with a brush." I was really reluctant, but I did it and of course it was amazing. It made me realize that I could do the gestural line drawings I was doing, but by changing the tool, I suddenly had this wide variety of what a line could be. These different paint techniques also emphasize that it is just paint on canvas. I'm

always interested in reminding the viewer that it is just a constructed visual space.

AC: Which artworks are major touchstones for you?

CQ: I find a lot of inspiration from language particularly—a combination of high and low language. I love Audre Lorde's work, but I also really like Kanye West lyrics. I'm not super into looking at paintings as much anymore because I find the need to pick them apart and look into how they're made. I still do really love gargantuan figures like David Hockney or Georgia O'Keeffe or Kerry James Marshall. I like to put little misquotes of them into the work. Also, I love living in Los Angeles because there are so many little homemade storefront signs or weird little dollar stores and tchotkes. I love looking at things like that rather than going to galleries lately.

Ashton Cooper is a Brooklyn-based independent writer and curator. She has organized exhibitions at MacCarone, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, the Leslie-Lohman Museum Project Space, Larrie, the Knockdown Center (all in New York), and Cooper Cole (in Toronto). Her recent writing has appeared in *Mousse*, *ArtReview*, and the *Brooklyn Rail*.

Christina Quarles was born in Chicago, IL and raised in Los Angeles, CA, where she currently lives with her wife. She received an MFA in painting from the Yale School of Art and a BA in philosophy and studio arts from Hampshire College (2007). She has had recent exhibitions at the New Museum, the Studio Museum, and the Rubell Family Collection, among other spaces.



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Christina Quarles, *Small Offerings* (2017).
Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and
David Castillo Gallery, Miami.