

REGEN PROJECTS

Bowie, Summer. "Singing the Body Electric: An Interview of Painter Christina Quarles."
Autre Magazine Vol. 2, issue 8 (2019) pp. 132 – 137 [ill.]

AUTRE

SINGING THE BODY ELECTRIC

An Interview of Painter Christina Quarles

text by Summer Bowie, portrait by Mathilde Huron, styled by 69

It's astounding to reflect upon the myriad ways that we fragment our identities. Like psychic chameleons we seamlessly transition between our roles as lovers, clients, and casual acquaintances. In Christina Quarles's paintings, we see gestural figures in motion, occupying multiple realms simultaneously, sharing their individual experiences with one another in states of ultimate vulnerability. They relate to one another in ways that feel emotionally familiar, yet physically unattainable. Reflecting her experience as a queer, multiracial woman, Quarles draws lines with her paintbrushes on raw canvas, honing an assertion that can only come from years of closely studying the figure. She depicts moments of self-examination, a psychic identity that lives in the body; a body constantly sending signals to the brain to relay its multitude of concurrent states. We dissect and deconstruct ourselves, convinced that our contradictions make for an untenable, incomplete human being. All of this is constantly going down under the surface while we carry on with the banality of our daily lives. I sat down with Quarles in her LA studio to discuss *But I Woke Jus' Tha Same*, her recent solo exhibition at Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

REGEN PROJECTS



REGEN PROJECTS

Summer Bowie Since we have you styled in 69 for the day, I thought I'd start by mentioning that you were pictured wearing 69 while talking to Brad Pitt at the opening of your recent solo exhibition at Regen Projects, which became so much fodder for press and tabloids.

Christina Quarles (laughs)

That was so funny.

SB Does it feel strange when those random moments become very public?

CQ I grew up in LA, so I'm used to being around people in film and television. My family all moved out here from the Midwest to work in film and television, so I'm kind of not that fazed by celebrity. It was funny because you can really tell that the entire world is looking at you when you're talking to somebody like Brad Pitt. I've been having a few studio visits with people who make their living as actors. It's interesting, since so much of my work is about the normal experience of living in your body: having that experience of not really knowing what you look like. So then, talking to people whose profession is based on having people look at them, it's been an interesting thought experiment.

SB Speaking of Los Angeles, was this your first solo show in LA, over at Regen Projects? Have you been waiting for the right moment to present your paintings?

CQ My first solo project here was at Skibum Macarthur, with Kibum Kim. I reinstalled a piece that was my thesis work in graduate school. That work really informed and inspired the work that I did for *Made in LA* (2018). Although, this was definitely the first time that I really presented a body of paintings in Los Angeles. So, it was important to take my time with figuring

out galleries to work with, and to make sure that it was a good fit.

SB Does it feel nice to be finally really thrusting your work out there, or is there a sense of unease at all?

CQ I definitely am happy that I waited awhile before putting the work out there, because I never really felt my work was in a place where I wanted it to be. I spent about seven years between undergrad and grad school trying out different jobs. I was a graphic designer for a while and I worked at *Sesame Street*.

SB What were you doing at *Sesame Street*?

CQ I was an executive assistant in the international department. I was also a project coordinator for the productions in India and Northern Ireland, because they do completely unique *Sesame Streets* in different parts of the world.

SB Wow, I had no idea.

CQ In Northern Ireland they all live in a tree and it's called *Sesame Tree*. Big Bird is known as being too American, so India has a Big Bear instead.

SB Do you feel like any of the work that you did at *Sesame Street*, or as a graphic designer, has informed your practice at all?

CQ I would say most of the experiences that have informed my practice are gender and sexuality, race and things that really come from my own lived experiences. In undergrad, I got a philosophy degree and was very involved in a critical race theory dissertation. A lot of my practice was born out of my undergraduate research, as well as ongoing daily experiences. Although, my work as a graphic designer has really informed the way that I make these paintings, because I use Adobe Illustrator a lot when making this work.

SB When assessing the figurative side of your work, there have been comparisons to Arshile Gorky and to Willem de Kooning. When it comes to your application of paint, this sort of courageous improvisation, there's been comparisons to Helen Frankenthaler and Linda Bengalis. Do you consider these people artistic influences?

CQ When I was at Yale, Rob Storr gave this graduation speech where he said something like, "None of you will ever be folk artists again." Basically, he was saying, "You guys are all well-educated artists now because you went to a prestigious art school and got a master's degree." So, I definitely have had a lot of art historical influence, but I also spent a lot of grad school feeling self-conscious about how limited my knowledge of art history was. It took me awhile to really gain confidence in the references I did have, and the canon I was reaching into. I'm interested in referencing the advertisement that was lifted from historical reference, then taking the reference that's about three iterations down; having that more mass cultural influence. I do also have this art historical knowledge, but I would say that the way I approach a canvas really comes from a more physical place.

SB You have a very particular approach to fragmentation. Do you look at the world through this fragmented lens?

CQ I think a lot about fragmentation in representing the figures in my work. It's the sense of fragmentation that you feel when you look at your own body—it exists as these parts that you're more or less aware of—and the disadvantage you have of knowing yourself in fragmentation.

And of knowing all the different contradictions and idiosyncrasies of your own self. It's about seeing everybody else as these complete, fully-formed people that make sense, and look completely whole, and then seeing yourself as a fragmented kind of mess.

SB There's also this interesting obfuscation between sex and sexuality that's constantly being represented, as well as notions of casual nudity versus romantic nudity.

CQ Having moments of intimacy with other people, whether that's an intimate moment related to love, or even violence, hunger, or sickness—these intimate moments are ways that you can know somebody in their complications, and fragmentations, and compartmentalized selves. It comes from this idea that was drilled into me when I was in high school from a figure drawing teacher. Basically, if you draw a line and it's not the correct line—maybe you realize that you've positioned the leg in the wrong place. If you erase that line, you're gonna reinforce the mistake. So, he taught us to just draw the leg next to the leg that you did in error. It was a sort of moving forward from your mistakes, rather than fixating on them, because that would reinforce the muscle memory of the error. It's a nice poetic parallel to being in your body and living in the world; you're kind of working with what you've got.

SB Do you feel like there are these blurred lines between intimacy, and casual nudity, or general vulnerability in your own life?

CQ Yeah, definitely. I always get a little annoyed when my work is framed as being overtly sexual. One

REGEN PROJECTS



"Wrapped Up, Nasty," 2019, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 42 x 1 1/2 inches © Christina Quarles. Courtesy: Regen Projects, Los Angeles

REGEN PROJECTS



"Bless tha Nightrigale," 2019, Acrylic on canvas, 77 x 90 x 2 inches © Christina Quarles, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles

REGEN PROJECTS

of the things I like playing with, that can end up biting me in the ass later, is the expectation that you want to have when you look at an image, and the way that the world will complete an image that isn't there. My worst-case scenario is that somebody is able to passively consume an image of a queer body, or of a female body. I want to encourage an active looking and questioning. It's a different thing when you acknowledge it as a queer relationship.

^{SB} You did this group show at the New Museum called *Trigger: Gender as a Tool or a Weapon*. Do you feel like you represent gender as a tool or a weapon in your work, and can you explain the difference?

^{CQ} When I think about that phrase, one of the quotes that I will often repeat is this queer theory quote from Joshua Gamson that says, "Fixed identity categories are both the basis for oppression and the basis for political power." That was written in the early '90s, so it was this moment of thinking about how inclusive queerness should be in order to still have a community that had enough in common to make advancements in policy change. I think of that a lot with identity positions, and with gender too: how it can be used as a tool, or as a platform from which to seek equality, or to advocate for how you see yourself, but also how that can be used as a weapon against you to restrict, or limit the potential.

^{SB} I want to talk about your use of slang and word play, and how that relates to the visual fragmentation. Are they analogues to one another, and how do they work together?

^{CQ} Yeah, I used to use language directly in the

paintings. Now, I'll write next to the paintings on pieces of paper, and then I'll usually incorporate it into the title. I really have always been drawn to phonetic language. I'm interested in the utterance of language, and how there could be punning and double meaning in language. When I took the language out of the paintings, that was when I started really developing the patterns. I started looking for patterns that could have the same sort of visual punning and multiple locations, like a field of flowers that's a pattern on a bedspread, or a field of flowers in nature. In the titles, and the drawings, there's still certainly this use of slang and common expressions, or pop music lyrics. I just find the idea of things that get stuck in your head, or repeated in your head, as being an interesting anchor for the work. And they kind of invoke a mood. I love the word 'morning,' and how much that's used in pop music, but then misspelling it to be like grieving gives it this double location of language.

^{SB} Speaking of dualities, making art always has this other side to it: the art market. How do you feel towards that side of things?

^{CQ} I think it can be really challenging as an artist. I need to hire a studio manager that can deal with the market side of things. That said, it's something you should be aware of as an artist, because it is a reality of what you do. I also think it's important to not have it completely take over, because it's not what got me into making the work. I think it can be challenging as a painter, because you still want to be a part of conversations with institutions and curators,

but it can be easy to become seen as a market artist that then shouldn't be a part of the conversation.

^{SB} Sure. When somebody like Jeffrey Deitch says that you're "The greatest artist in America right now," do you feel like it challenges your sense of self in any way?

^{CQ} I don't know. I have a lot of people in my world that are helpful in grounding me and reminding me that I'm just the same old person I always have been. You have to take it with a grain of salt because the art world is so fickle, and it has such a short-term memory. I've had enough experience to know that things go through cycles, and to not rely too heavily on any one thing at any one time. I don't think I could do this at all if I didn't really love making the paintings. I find that to be the most rewarding part of the process.

end



"Oh Baby," 2019, ink on paper, 15 5/8 x 21 5/8 inches © Christina Quarles, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles