



THE PRELUDE ISSUE: 20th Anniversary Volume One

CHRISTINA QUARLES. "FELL TO THE EARTH (FELT TO PIECES)" (2017). ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. 50" X 52". COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. PHOTO: IAN MORRISON.

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CHRISTINA QUARLES

Sitting on sun-bleached furniture in the backyard of Christina Quarles' LA home, I try to resist the affection of her extroverted cats as I ask her about her journey into her creative practice. "As a kid, it was just my mom and I. She was working in Hollywood as a writer and producer, so I feel like art classes were one of the cheaper child care options," she laughs. Quarles is an engaging storyteller—she speaks openly and confidently, never diluting her words with 'ums' and 'likes' as she unravels her autobiography through anecdote. "Due to a clerical error, I was put in the adult figure drawing class when I was 12, so I've had 21 years of experience drawing from nude models." Those proverbial ten thousand hours of practice have made her more than fluent in the language of the human figure.

After graduating from Hampshire College in 2007, Quarles moved to New York City where she worked as an executive assistant for the international department of *Sesame Street*. Responding to my wide-eyed excitement, she clarifies that, "It was a super corporate job even though it was *Sesame Street*." When the recession hit in 2008, there was a huge company wide layoff on Sesame Street—Muppets excluded, she assures me. With her heart more invested in pursuing art than corporate gigs, Quarles was more than happy to take a severance package and use the money to move back to LA with her partner. Following a stint as a graphic designer, Quarles was accepted in the prestigious Yale graduate painting program where she was able to crystallize her voice as an artist.



CHRISTINA QUARLES. "ONLY TWICE A DAY" (2017). ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. 60 X 72 IN.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, PILAR CORRIAS GALLERY, LONDON, AND DAVID CASTILLO
GALLERY, MIAMI.

“Draw with a brush,” was the piece of advice given by her Yale instructor Rochelle Feinstein. It’s advice that Quarles says, “opened up my whole practice from a technical point of view.” From an illustrative background, Quarles approaches painting with bold strokes and confident line-making that manifests a figure from just a few gestures on raw canvas. She employs quick-drying acrylic because it gives her more flexibility to move between watery translucent layers and thick, “plasticity” impasto. As a self-described “cyclone in the studio,” her workspace perfectly reflects the organized chaos of a creative mind.

It took a few years of rigorous soul-searching and experimentation before Quarles felt confident in her artistic practice. “It was like sitting down to draw an apple, and after hours of rendering you step back and realize you’ve drawn a Ferrari!” Yale’s intensive academic environment pushed Christina to the limits of her creative comfort zone. “When I started Yale I was super self-conscious because I felt like everyone else was so knowledgeable about the art world. It took a year for me to start to realize that I wasn’t stupid... I was just pulling from a different canon.” Christina describes her canon as a “combination of high and low.” For example, “growing up next to LACMA was amazing, but my cousins also gave me all his old *MAD* magazines as a kid which are all still in my studio’s bathroom.” From fine art to cartoons—Audre Lorde to Chance the Rapper—there is no hierarchy when it comes to what has inspired her.



CHRISTINA QUARLES. "WE GUNNA SPITE OUR NOSES RIGHT OFFA OUR FACES" (2017). ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. 50 X 48 IN. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, PILAR CORRIAS GALLERY, LONDON, AND DAVID CASTILLO GALLERY, MIAMI.

Although abstract, Quarles' work is deeply personal. The discordant figures in her work evolve from her kaleidoscopic sense of self as a mixed race, queer-identifying woman. "My father is black and my mother is white. I legibly look white, especially to white people." As someone whose identity is often misinterpreted in social spaces, Quarles is fascinated with the multiple identities that arise in the liminal space between self and other. "Being from mixed raced or of a certain gender or sexuality is a place of multiplicity—a potential that acknowledges a system that potentially leads to oppression but also freedom from that system because it points out structural flaws within it." Evolving from her studies in Critical Race Theory, Quarles' visual language expresses the collapsing and contradicting definitions that can exist simultaneously within a single identity. "I try to separate out the ideas of the 'vague' and the 'ambiguous.'" She explains how identity is thematically woven into her canvases, "The 'vague' lacks comprehension because it lacks information and with the 'ambiguous', there's so much information that it starts to contradict itself and fall apart."

Through her dynamic reimagining of the human form, Quarles' work articulates the uncanny and abstractly sensual interiority of the human experience. Her figures bend impossibly, reacting to the confining edge of the canvas. Physically unable to stand up within the pictorial space, their contortions create an electric tension as they respond to the gravitational shifts within their world. Her paintings evoke the sense of proprioception, that sixth sense that tells us where our bodies are in space. In addition to the identity politics imbued in her paintings, her work aims to communicate the universal sensation of living in a body. "I am fascinated by this idea of a pre-social understanding of yourself. I think a lot about how I don't really know how my own face looks outside of mediated appearance like a mirror, or video, or photography. That's why there is a greater articulation in the hands and feet, because I can see my hands and feet interacting with the world."



CHRISTINA QUARLES. "GROUNDED BY THE SIDE OF YEW" (2017). ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. 55 X 86 IN. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, PILAR CORRIAS GALLERY, LONDON, AND DAVID CASTILLO GALLERY, MIAMI.

Her work is distinctly human, but the figures lack any definite gender, race, or characterization that would anchor them in reality. Quarles explains, “I definitely don’t see them as portraits of any one individual but rather as portraits of being an individual.” The bodies in the work are collaged from different forms she’s encountered in her 21 years of figure drawing: “...that’s the weird nose that that old guy had, and those are the floppy boobs from that lady, and here’s the forearm of that young male model.... almost every figure will have boobs but that’s mostly because I think of them as such an ‘on the nose’ way of depicting weight, gravity, and fleshiness.” In the case of her work, boobs described as “on the nose” is as astute a literal description as it is a figurative one.

In the infamously patriarchal sphere of the art world, Quarles has noticed that there are distinctly different demands placed upon male and female painters when asked about their work. “I recognize that straight white male painters don’t talk about identity and don’t get asked about their identity with their work,” she tells me. “It’s not so much that I want to talk less about my identity in my work, I just want them to be asked more about how being white or male affects their painting.” It is undeniably true that so often with white, cis-male artists, the public doesn’t demand that their work be legible in terms of their identity. I take a moment to imagine the comedic absurdity of an interviewer asking Jackson Pollock how his “whiteness” is reflected in his “Splatter Painting Number 31.” Quarles continues, “I think that women and people of color and queer people get asked less about how formal elements get integrated into their work, and about how so-called ‘universal truths’ are conveyed. I think the problem lies in where those two things get divided.”

After throwing around some jokes about the male artist “god complex,” we discuss her upcoming shows in LA, London, and the Bay Area. Represented by David Castillo Gallery in Miami, and Pilar Corrias Gallery in London, Quarles is currently amassing work for her most ambitious project to date: a full-room installation for the Hammer Museums’ upcoming exposition *Made in L.A. 2018*. Quarles shows me one out of five 16’ panels that she is prepping for next month. The canvases are so large that she works on them horizontally in order to fit them on the wall of her studio. She shows me a graphic rendering of the installation: multiple canvases combined into a single work of art that spans a 22’ wide wall, and wraps around the adjacent sides of the room. Her expertly rendered figures appear almost animated by her *tromp l’oeil* technique. “When it’s installed it’s going to feel like walking into my own mind.”

When *Made in L.A. 2018* opens in June, we will all get a glimpse into the imaginative landscape of ‘Christina’s World’—one that strays about as far as you can get from Andrew Wyeth’s. This summer, the Hammer Museum provides an opportunity to wander amidst Quarles’ unique manifestation of identity: one characterized by the vague, the ambiguous, and the infinite space that lies between.



CHRISTINA QUARLES. "MEET IN THA MIDDLE" (2018). ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. 60 X 48 IN. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, PILAR CORRIAS GALLERY, LONDON, AND DAVID CASTILLO GALLERY, MIAMI.

Written by Andie Eisen