

CURA.



CHRISTINA QUARLES  
IN CONVERSATION WITH  
CLAUDIA MATTOS

Claudia Mattos: Ambiguity is central to your overall practice. What brought you to it? And can you speak about its place within your work?

Christina Quarles: I've confronted ambiguity from an early age, specifically in regard to my racial identity. My mom is white and my dad is black, but rather than having any singular "mixed race" experience, I've had a set of experiences specific to a racial identity that is multiply fixed in both black and white identities. With painting, I am able to express ambiguity in a way that allows for both contradiction and unity. The figures I paint are the sum of multiple—sometimes disparate—parts, rendered across multiple modes of representation or in signifiers of gender, race, and place. Using a visual language to express ambiguity allows people to position themselves within a space they may not feel is theirs to explore. I think all of us have experienced a complexity of self that cannot be contained by simplified identity positions. My hope is that these paintings can be a refuge for those who experience ambiguity on a daily basis and a revelation of ambiguity for those who have never had cause to question their identity position.



Our Eyes Our Open/Are Eyes Are Open, 2017 Collection: Larry Gagosian, NY Photo: Christian Hernandez Courtesy: David Castillo Gallery

CM: The figures you represent bring to question the classifications we impose upon bodies. Can you speak about this undecidability of identity and form in your work?

CQ: Themes of boundary and edge are present throughout my work. The composition of the figures in my paintings is determined by the edge of the frame which—like the edge of the body—is a limitation that is simultaneously arbitrary and defined. I am interested in the paradox brought forth by Joshua Gamson, which asserts that fixed categories of identity can be used to marginalize people; but they can also be used by the marginalized to gain visibility and political power. Many of us are aware that the classification of bodies can be a source of violence, and certainly my work aims to question the roots of these categories and destabilize them. However, while I am a champion of ambiguity, I find that its pitfalls lie in our deep desire to be recognized and seen, to be part of a community, and to utilize this community to achieve change.

CM: Your work has been described stylistically in terms of Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning. Is this history important to your practice?

CQ: History is always important, and ignoring its influence only enables it to have greater power. Certainly, I see my work as being situated in a long tradition of figurative painting, but as a queer woman of color I also see my use of figurative painting to be fundamentally different from that of my predecessors. I see painting as analogous to the way I understand the body, often functioning under the deception that each exists independent of a social history. Within my works, I refer to the constructs of painting—from the exposure of raw canvas to *trompe l'œil* elements, or a range of rendering techniques—as a way to underscore the constructs of race and gender.