

Art in America

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Christina Quarles

MIAMI

at David Castillo

by [Wendy Vogel](#)



Christina Quarles: *Pull on Thru tha Night*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 60 by 56 inches; at David Castillo.

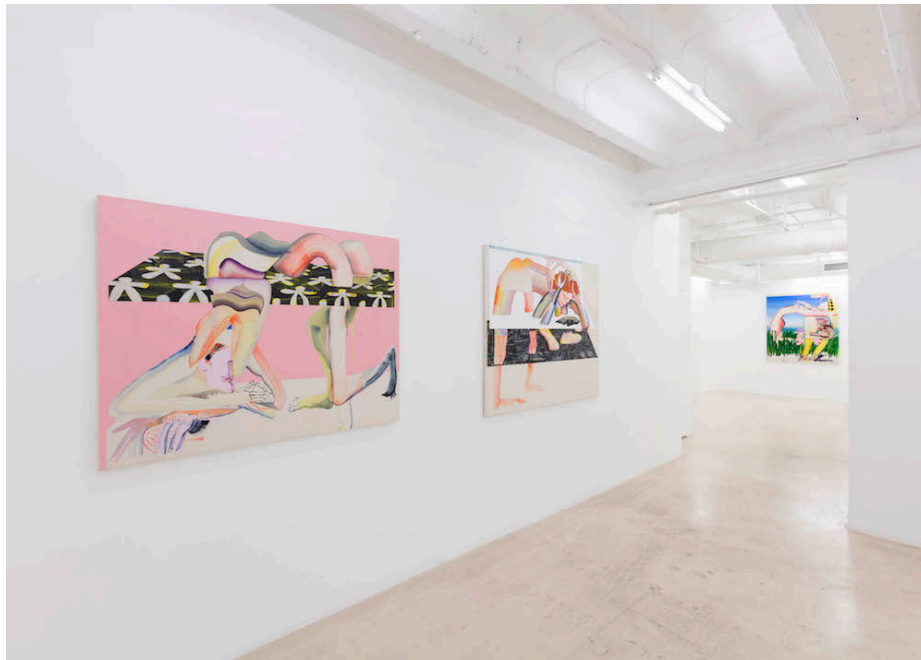
Emphatically carnal and post-Surrealist, the semi-figurative paintings of Los Angeles-based artist Christina Quarles speak to intersectional desires and anxieties. Quarles, a queer-identifying African American artist with fair skin, channels her lived experiences, including those of mistaken racial identity, into dualities and displacements in erotically charged pictures in which fantasy reigns. In the thirteen works on view in “Baby, I Want Yew to Know All tha Folks I Am” (all 2017), bodies (usually

female-of-center duos) were unrestrained by the laws of physics or the conventions of erotic coupledom. Rubbery limbs wound around each other and through physical barriers, suggesting the power of sensuality.

Quarles wields acrylic with a sense of performativity. She variously thins the paint out like watercolor, lays it down in thick impasto, or draws with it, notably in her figures’ precisely rendered fingers. Parts of her canvases remain bare, while other sections are heavily built up. Her impressive technique invites comparisons to modern masters. One critic recently likened her abstractions to those of Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning, though an

alternative legacy can be traced through female painters' inventions. Quarles dabbles in methods evoking those that radicalized the very notion of painting, like Helen Frankenthaler's pouring technique and Lynda Benglis's usage of acrylic paint as a sculptural medium. She also conjures the sci-fi tropes of proto-feminist Pop art. In bringing together these various innovations, Quarles imbues the couples she depicts with a sense of otherworldly possibility.

Previously, Quarles toyed with incorporating text into her paintings, but in the new works the imagery does the conceptual lifting on its own. In *Yer tha Sun in My Mourning Babe*, a woman whose facial expression mimics that of the figure in Munch's *Scream* lounges on a green field, with a gray-tinged ghoul wrapped around her back. The figures are bisected by a stylized, speckled plane that suggests a form of visual static that neither seems to notice. In *Flopped Over n' Bent into Two*, a hovering floral-patterned plank (perhaps a table or ironing board) slices through a pastel-colored figure with impossibly wavy limbs.



Installation view of Christina Quarles' exhibition "Baby, I Want Yew To Know All Tha Folks I Am" at David Castillo.

While Quarles's figures are often engaged in erotic acts, the pleasure in which they luxuriate is tinged with the possibility of pain. In *A Shadow of Whut I Once Was*, two female subjects embrace on a checkerboard floor

that swallows the lower one whole. *Doubled Down* illustrates a similar entanglement. Here, a standing, naked woman appears to be pulled down to the depths of hell by a lover who is submerged in a razor-thin, liquidlike plane composed of oil-slick black, purple, and green smears. In the even more macabre *Pull on Thru tha Night*, two subjects are framed by a starry sky. One of them, bent at the waist, appears to be carrying a lumpy, hastily articulated body on its back while itself being supported by the other figure, who sits cross-legged, her breast leaking a droplet of blood.

Just a year out of graduate school, Quarles has attracted attention for her fresh take on historical painterly traditions. But it is her unflinching depictions of intertwined queer sensuality and female abjection that distinguish her as a painter of our moment, in which a gulf still separates female reality from feminist ideals.