

Pilar Corrias

Starting with Gesture

Barry Schwabsky

Christina Quarles' paintings began finding their way into the public eye almost as soon as she emerged from the MFA programme at Yale University in 2016. Her first solo exhibitions took place the following year, as did important group shows including, most notably, *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* at the New Museum in New York, where I first saw her work. In 2018 came her first one-person presentation in a museum, at BAMPFA Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive, University of California, and her first European show, at Pilar Corrias, London. Since then, exhibitions have followed apace. But, perhaps because the Covid pandemic tamped down on travel for a few years, Quarles' oeuvre remains in many quarters more of a rumour than an experiential reality. That's a shame, because, even more than most, as I've come to realise, Quarles' is an art that lives in presence, not in reproduction.

It is in the first-hand experience of it that one understands why this work found such a swift uptake: Quarles came out of graduate school, a bit older than many of her peers, not simply as a promising artist, but as one with an achieved style. She formed that style through many distinct kinds of preparation, both technical and intellectual. 'I had really intensive technical training in painting and drawing,' starting at age twelve, as she has explained. 'Then I studied philosophy and went to a liberal arts college. And then I worked as a graphic designer for many years, then did film and television stuff before I went back to painting.'¹ All these diverse forms of thinking and making are incorporated into her art today. As a result, through its very contradictions and complexities, Quarles' work presents a clear and cogent proposition about what painting can be and do in the present. It is not figurative painting in the conventional sense, rather it uses the *idea* of the human body as a sort of rhetorical device; that is, these paintings are 'figurative' as that word is used in literary discussion in contrast to how it is typically used when speaking of visual art. Metaphor and metonymy are the two paradigmatic forms of figurative language, as the linguist Roman Jakobson long ago pointed out – metaphor being a trope based on resemblance or analogy, metonymy on contiguity or association. And as Jakobson also remarked, 'The alternative predominance of one or the other of these two processes is by no means confined to verbal art. The same oscillation occurs in sign systems other than language. A salient example from the history of painting is the manifestly metonymical orientation of Cubism, where the object is transformed into a set of synecdoches; the Surrealist painters responded with a patently metaphorical attitude.'² Quarles, one might say, accords equal time to both modes, to metonymy and metaphor, to the heritage of Cubism as much as that of Surrealism.

The fluidity with which Quarles' work shifts between procedures characteristic of Cubism and Surrealism perhaps reflects the fact, not necessarily evident at first glance, that her art is rooted in a somewhat later kind of painting that was likewise influenced by both those early twentieth century movements: that is, Abstract Expressionism. That might

seem a surprising statement: Quarles' paintings are filled with things that the Abstract Expressionists of seventy years ago would never have put into a painting – intricate ornamental patterns, for instance – and self-evidently produced by methods they could never even have dreamed of. She uses digital technology to elaborate certain passages within the painting that are then printed as vinyl stencils, which she fills in. Even though everything we see on Quarles' canvases is made of paint, parts of the composition always 'read' as digitally and mechanically mediated.

So why do I think that the soul of Quarles' art belongs to Abstract Expressionism? It's because of the way the paintings start: with muscular, free-hand gestural brushstrokes. In fact, I suspect that if we could see Quarles' paintings just after she'd made her first moves, we'd see something similar to the first marks laid down on canvases being worked on by Willem de Kooning or Joan Mitchell. And just as with de Kooning or Mitchell, the importance of those first brushstrokes resides in the sense of possibility they convey – far from defining a form or a subject to be completed, the unconstrained brushstroke was meant to suggest a plethora of potential forms or subjects which would be left to the painter to seek out and explore.

The Abstract Expressionists, I hasten to add, were mostly not (despite the moniker) committed to pure abstraction. That commitment would have led to something like what Frank Stella would later attempt, when he set out to rectify, as it were, the Abstract Expressionist brushstroke into a straight-edged stripe, leading his friend Carl Andre to assert, 'His stripes are the paths of brush on canvas. These paths lead only into painting.'³ The wayward brushstroke of a de Kooning or a Mitchell could easily lead into the landscape or the body, and that errancy was of the essence.

Quarles, at least so far (but she has a long career ahead of her) has never followed the path of painting nothing but painting; in accord with the de Kooning of, say, *Woman I* (1950-52), her brushstrokes lead to the body. And the body as we see it with Quarles, as with de Kooning, has nothing to do with the one predominantly found in classic European art, the tradition of the idealised nude. It is not 'the mirror of divine perfection,' 'the most complete example of the transmutation of matter into form.'⁴ For Quarles, as with de Kooning, the body is as much a site of discord, of violent impulse, as it is one of pleasure or transcendence.

But I am getting ahead of myself. I wanted to stay with Quarles' brushstroke in its moment of potentiality, before its eventual, if uneasy, incorporation into an image of a body. It's both hard to stay there and not. Hard, because the evocation of bodies, however fragmented and recombined à la Cubist metonymy, or warped and distended via Surrealist metaphor, is so insistent in Quarles' art; and not so hard, because the non-descriptive, non-signifying brushmark is never *entirely* subsumed or synthesised into the metamorphic body imagery. There's good reason for that incomplete subsumption, for those brushstrokes were not made with any particular part of the anatomy in mind – or if they were,

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that mind may have changed – what might have started out as a leg may have turned out to be a back, a shoulder could end up as a knee. There is a fundamental impulse to move paint across a surface, as an expression of the body through which this impulse travels; one that does not necessarily need to picture a body. Call that impulse the *abstract*. ‘I start from this place of abstraction,’ Quarles has said, ‘and then pull it into an image, and then pull apart that image again.’⁵

What starts as abstraction in Quarles’ work always retains something of its abstractness; a resistance to the desire, on the part of both the artist and the beholder, to bend the mark toward the purpose of image-making. It’s this resistance, however, that makes the paintings so pleasurable to be with – and resistance becomes a medium for ludic mischief, as she explains: ‘I like to play with the desire I think we all have to complete the image and, whenever possible, to complete it as a figure, or to imagine a face where there is none’ – pareidolia as method.⁶

Can the figures in Quarles’ paintings ever really be completed? It seems not. Or else they become too complete – excessive. One might have enough legs to be an insect. Selves split apart like prokaryotes. Is that a group of people, or a single person in Muybridge-esque motion? This endless mutability of forms poses a hard question: What’s the end point of the process? When is work on the painting done?

The answer may be surprising: When the maker arrives at a kind of objectivity, when she can see it as if from the outside. A painting is finished when the artist finds their exit. As de Kooning’s close friend Edwin Denby recorded in one of his sonnets, ‘When he’s painted himself out of it / De Kooning says his picture’s finished.’⁷ Likewise for Quarles, ‘the painting is done when I can actively look at it for a long time and never arrive at an area where I feel I need to fix a problem as a maker, where I can stay active as a looker.’⁸ I think that’s why the third stage in Quarles’ process, following the gestural stage and the figurative stage, is what I’d call the framing stage, which deduces for these hybrid personages the stylised and equally non-self-congruent spaces that they must populate. Figure precedes ground, and it is the latter which feels its way, uncertainly, slipping and sliding in a sort of slapstick Cartesianism, toward an adequate support for bodies. We will probably never be able to see this sequence of adjustments – body to body, space to body, body to space, body to body again – from a place of comfort, but we can see it with lucidity.

The plane of representation is not so much a window as a door, through which the painter may exit and the beholder may enter the picture. The artist closes the door at the end of a long process; the viewer opens it to begin one. Reversing the artist’s course, the viewer returns to subjectivity, from space to figure to gesture – a return that can only take place in real space and time, and not in the virtual realm of reproduction, where the door remains shut.

- 1 ‘Art in Conversation: Christina Quarles with Lee Ann Norman’, *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 2022, available at brooklynrail.org/2022/09/art/Christina-Quarles-with-Lee-Ann-Norman (last accessed 9 September 2023).
- 2 Roman Jakobson, ‘Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,’ *Selected Writings, Vol. II: Word and Language*, The Hague: Mouton, 1971, p. 257.
- 3 Carl Andre quoted in *Frank Stella, The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II, 1959*, available at moma.org/collection/works/80316 (last accessed 9 September 2023).
- 4 Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972, pp. 275, 309.
- 5 ‘Intimacy, Unknowing and Discovery: David J. Getsy in conversation with Christina Quarles,’ in Andrew Bonacina (ed.), *Christina Quarles*, Wakefield: Hepworth Wakefield, 2019, p. 34.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Edwin Denby, *Dance Writings and Poetry*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988, p. 23.
- 8 Robert Enright, ‘Quarles Sum: Christina Quarles Makes Painting Add Up,’ *Border Crossings*, vol. 42, no. 1, August 2023, p. 138.

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