

ANTIBODIES

Fractured yet tender, CHRISTINA QUARLES's paintings don't just digest art history's bodies, they tweak, fold, and reinvent them for a time when the body is ever more fraught

by
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ONLY RIGHT TWICE
 A DAY, 2017
 Acrylic on canvas, 152 x 183 cm



There's so much time now," Christina Quarles says, "but it's difficult to focus." Los Angeles has been on lockdown for four weeks, and Donald Trump has just declared a national emergency. It is 9 a.m. on the West Coast. Quarles prefers sticking to FaceTime audio calls. She thinks it's better to just talk. Her tone makes it clear she wants this conversation to stick to her work—no digressions. Somehow it feels wrong to ask how she's doing, how she feels about the fact that her large solo shows, planned for April at the MCA Chicago and the South London Gallery, have now been postponed indefinitely.

We talk about her painting—fragmented bodies morphing into each other, hugging, fucking, caressing. These creatures appear feminine but are actually in transit between genders, between states. Collapsing and at the same time unfolding like transparent skins, you can look right into them. These see-through spirit containers with their sausage-like protrusions can present themselves almost pornographically, their buttocks spread, looking like they've emerged from the existential hell of Francis Bacon's postwar work. They form abstract yet biomorphic architectures—gates, doors, handles, tables—merging with surfaces and ornaments, becoming at once sexist tools (like the female bodies positioned by 1960s British pop artist Allen Jones) and self-possessed performers, entirely in command of themselves.

It looks like the 35-year-old Quarles is on her way to becoming the poster girl for a new kind of queer figurative art. Even her graduation exhibition at Yale was closely followed by the art business. In 2017, she took part in *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon*, a show at New York's New Museum that almost all critics found toothless. But many celebrated Quarles's paintings, including the great Peter Schjeldahl. He compared her to Willem de Kooning, "who fractured Picassoesque figuration on the way to physically engaging abstraction."

Christina Quarles

He saw Quarles "playing that process in reverse, adapting abstract aesthetics to carnal representation." But Quarles is also making a further move. Using abstract strategies, she's positing a carnal representation that radically questions gender and race norms.

Her early canonization was followed by important gallery shows and group exhibitions, such as 2018's *Made in LA* at the Hammer Museum and *Kiss My Genders* at the Hayward Gallery in London. In 2019, she had her first solo

exhibition at a European museum, the Hepworth Wakefield, parallel to a show of early works by David Hockney and his teacher Alan Davie, and she referred to these in newer works. "Copulation at its frutiest," said Adrian Searle, the *Guardian's* chief art critic.

However queer her work is, it's clear that Quarles, a lesbian woman, is citing the canon of great white male painters. Yet she's also digesting them, using them as a feeding ground for something completely different.

WE GUNNA SPITE OUR NOSES RIGHT
OFFA OUR FACES, 2017
Acrylic on canvas, 152 × 122 cm





CHRISTINA QUARLES in her studio,
photographed by AUBREY MAYER

Born to a white mother and Black father, Quarles feels anything but “white.” She explains, “Oftentimes my sense of self either exceeds or contradicts the possibility of legibility.” And clear legibility is exactly what she wants to prevent in her painting, and in her own commentary on her work.

Quarles is married to a filmmaker. Her parents moved from Chicago to LA for the film industry, and she grew up in the world of entertainment,

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eventually working as a graphic designer and project coordinator of international productions for *Sesame Street*. She has been drawing bodies since she was 12. At Yale University, she took countless courses in which she was taught art history, institutional criticism, and critical theory. She is thus not only a professional artist, but also a professional in communication.

Her language, however, feels friendly and rather non-committal, very academic, a bit like she’s putting up a wall for protection. Quarles clearly does not want to speak directly about her experiences, her identity—her paintings do that. They are like filters through which physical and visual memories are passed, leaving a kind of essence on the canvas: “I do a lot of figure drawing, and I will often work with live models as a way to build up this muscle memory of drawing the figure. But then when I go to the canvas, there’s no reference material around me,” she explains. “I am just looking ahead, at the painting and what is actually happening in front of me. But at the same time, what happens in front of me is this result, of sorts, of everything that has come before, which includes art history and every drawing class I’ve had, every critic I’ve had, every book I’ve read and every museum show I’ve ever been to.”

The canon of the Western, patriarchal history of painting, Quarles says, is dispersed through mass and pop culture. Even someone who has never learned any of it is familiar with it through the power of advertising: “You still have the rules of these legible images hardwired into the culture that you’re brought up into.” It is exactly this inescapable familiarity that Quarles so radically questions. Again and again, she interrupts the painterly process, designing ornamental surfaces, floral patterns, and wave structures on the computer, then transferring them to canvas by hand. She slices and layers her figures, surrounding them with stage sets, screens, or digital layers from Photoshop.

“I am really interested in describing what it is to be within a racialized body or gendered body, rather than what it is to look at a racialized or gendered body”

It's not about looking at the queer female body, but about how this normative view is experienced—as a kind of captivity: “I am really interested in describing what it is to be within a racialized body or gendered body, rather than what it is to look at a racialized or gendered body,” Quarles says. “My work is about experiencing that constant fragmentation and miscommunication that occurs when you are within your own body.” In response to this gaze, Quarles's painting develops a virtuoso abundance of painterly strategies, styles, and identities. Her bodies are full of psychological depth and at

the same time truly and completely flat, foldable like cardboard displays.

Her pictures are almost painfully intimate and yet always subdued by formal decisions, or pushed closer to the pornographic. Quarles's painting can be seen as reflecting art history from Mannerism to modernity, all the way to the digital present—the macho genius cult of abstract expressionism as well as the feminist avant-garde, or Maria Lassnig's “body awareness” pictures. Here, painting can be a queer manifesto at one moment, and in the next merely material, the figures perhaps only excuses to experiment with density and emptiness, affect and deliberation. Paradoxically, Quarles's bodies, in all their self-determination and complete loss, represent the crisis of the digitized, globalized 21st century, in which our identity is being radically renegotiated.

The Covid-19 pandemic is only increasing that pressure. It is also surfacing the barely latent racism and immense social inequality in the tragically divided United States. The media is reporting the disproportionately high death toll in Black communities caused by preexisting health conditions, poverty, and poor medical care and nutrition. The way the dominant social group sees the Other, and determines their identity, can mean life or death for that person. This, too, is becoming painfully clear now.



E'REYTHING (WILL BE ALL RIGHT)
EVERYTHING, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 127 × 102 cm