

**Artnews** : 'Breaking the Canon': Artists and Curators Address Brooklyn Museum's History with African-American Art', by Andrew Russeth, May 31, 2019

## 'Breaking the Canon': Artists and Curators Address Brooklyn Museum's History with African-American Art

**W**hen Linda Goode Bryant was planning to open Just Above Midtown, her storied gallery, in 1974, the artist Romare Bearden told her, “Linda, to start a gallery you’re going to have to have \$50,000.”

“That was an absurdity!” she said of that number, while onstage at the Brooklyn Museum on Thursday night. Her response back then: “Well, I don’t have \$50,000, so we’re going to have to start it on whatever I can get.” That turned out to be a \$2,000 loan from Citibank.

Bryant made it work, though, and what transpired is now the stuff of legend. During its 12 years in operation, the gallery on 57th Street in Manhattan became a vital laboratory for venturesome African-American artists and other artists of color, including David Hammons, Senga Nengudi, Lorraine O'Grady, and others. In 2022, the Museum of Modern Art will dedicate a show to *Just Above Midtown*, the next in a handful of exhibitions that have looked at the legacy of that seminal space and the artists it fostered.



Nathaniel Mary Quinn, *Big Rabbit, Little Rabbit*, 2017.

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Bryant was present, imparting history and inspiration and dishing stories, as part of the latest event in the Brooklyn Museum's regular series "Breaking the Canon," which addresses the institution's collecting of African-American art. This one was loosely focused on pre-1945 art in the field, and had a crisp tripartite format, pairing each of three black artists with a different curator—in Bryant's case, Catherine Morris, senior curator of the museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art—for short talks on their practices, art history, and quite a bit more.

As rain poured outside, an ebullient Nathaniel Mary Quinn kicked off the affair with Eugenie Tsai, the Brooklyn Museum's senior curator of contemporary art, discussing his work *Big Rabbit, Little Rabbit* (2017), which just entered the museum's collection. It's a fantastical, fractured double portrait of his father holding the artist as a child on his lap. The high-heeled shoes the older man appears to be wearing, Quinn said, are a reference to his mother being the family's primary breadwinner.

"Everything first begins with a vision that comes to me," Quinn said. "Every work I make starts like that, with a vision. There's no overthinking." He said he wants "to explore the very essence of humanity in my work and make reflections of who we really are—not on the outside but on the inside." Asked about inspirations, he listed Neo Rauch, Adrian Ghenie, Kerry James Marshall, Liu Xiaodong, and Lucian Freud (who "paints flesh onto canvas"). He also praised the Brooklyn Museum's 1941 Jacob Lawrence gouache of two men sitting in a bar, for being able to capture its subjects, and the feel of the Depression, "by means of the most minimalistic forms."

Quinn, who is 41, recently started working with Gagosian, and Tsai asked what he has planned for his gallery show in Beverly Hills in September. “I’m being honest—here’s the truth,” he said. “It’s how I really feel, and I’m just going to say it. I look forward to making the best possible show that I can make, and I know that I am going to fail *miserably*.”

“I seriously doubt that,” Tsai said, to laughter from the crowd.

“But you try because you hope to someday make a good work,” Quinn continued, “and on a scale of 1 to 10—10 being perfect, 1 being horrific—it has to be like a 7 for the work to leave the studio, and it’s always a 6.8, 6.9.” (Regrettably, as he said this, I could not get a good look at the face of the Gagosian director I spotted in the crowd.) Quinn said he openly risks failure—he even welcomes it. “This is what you have to do if you ever expect to make at least one good piece. You have to give up everything.”