

Nathaniel Mary Quinn

A Love Letter to My Mother

May 21 — Aug 23, 2026 | National Public Housing Museum, Chicago, IL, US

Nathaniel Mary Quinn, an internationally acclaimed Chicago-born artist whose first canvases were the walls of his family's apartment in the Robert Taylor Homes, is returning home for his first solo museum exhibition in the city. The National Public Housing Museum, recently named by USA Today as one of the best new museums in the country, today announced it will present 'Nathaniel Mary Quinn: A Love Letter to My Mother', on view May 21–August 23, 2026.

Throughout the exhibition, visitors are invited to consider humanity in all of its complexity by processing our lived experiences through a lens of artistic innovation. Alongside 10 of the artist's works on canvas and paper, 'Nathaniel Mary Quinn: A Love Letter to My Mother' includes a Robert Taylor Homes living room designed from memory to conjure the artist's family apartment circa 1984, and an adjoining reading room and resource area offering books, images and historical materials related to the Robert Taylor Homes. There will also be special office hours throughout the run of the exhibition where visitors can meet with public housing residents and scholars for civic conversations.

Anchored by the recreated living room, the exhibition explores Quinn's formative years growing up in public housing, which he describes as "my first studio." There, with his mother's encouragement, he covered the walls of their family apartment with his childhood sketches. To create fresh canvases for her son, she would wash away the drawings, and Quinn would begin anew.

"Nathaniel Mary Quinn's works demand that we pay attention and stay curious about people who are too often relegated to the margins. Quinn's references span the breadth of art history and popular culture, along with his own vivid memories of life in the Robert Taylor Homes," said Dr. Lisa Yun Lee, Executive Director and Chief Curator of the National Public Housing Museum. "We are honored to host his first museum exhibition in Chicago as part of our commitment to the power of place and memory, and amplifying the stories of public housing residents, past, present and future."

"Everything I make begins in that room—with my mother, with those walls, with the quiet insistence that I could imagine something beyond them, and, one day, empathize deeply enough to see another person fully—beyond what we think we know. In this sense, the work is not about where I come from, but about the mercy and grace of God, who carried me beyond the far reaches of my imagination. What began in a small living room has become an endless space—one I am still learning to navigate through my art practice and my relationship with the Most High," said Nathaniel Mary Quinn.

Today, in his collage-like composite portraits, integrated with his "paint-drawing" technique, and derived from both personal and found sources, Quinn probes the relationship between visual memory and perception, exploring the rainbow-like spectrum of humanity. While Quinn's practice is diverse in its exploration of various subject matter, tender remembrances of his mother's death and his separation from his family remain a compositional touchstone in his works that feature richly complex portraits of people met throughout his life, including powerful Black women and community members bent on survival. Fragments of images drawn from online sources, fashion magazines, seventeenth-century portraiture, and photographs come together to form hybrid faces and figures that evoke the intimacy and intensity of a face-to-face encounter.

Nathaniel Mary Quinn was born in 1977 in Chicago and lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He received an MFA from New York University in 2002 and an honorary doctorate from Wabash College in 2023. His work is held in major institutional collections, including the Brooklyn Museum; Whitney Museum of American Art; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Art Institute of Chicago; Hammer Museum; Museo Jumex; and Centre Pompidou. His practice operates within a framework of visual metaphor, using recognizable forms to reveal aspects of character and human experience.