



Berlin, March 22, 2023

Hamburger Bahnhof – Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart
Christina Quarles. Collapsed Time
March 24, 2023 – September 17, 2023

EXHIBITION TEXTS

What are the things that define us? Our skin color, age, sexual orientation, and body type are some of the identity markers through which we describe ourselves and are read by others. This key question underlies the paintings and drawings of LA-based artist Christina Quarles. Born into a multi-racial family in Chicago in 1985, and identifying as a queer woman, Quarles considers her art “a way to capture the experience of living in a racialized, gendered body.” The intriguing figures that Quarles paints and draws are not always easily recognizable as male or female, young or old. They defy the boundaries of identity, in seemingly moving across the painted surfaces and planes.

For her first solo museum exhibition in Germany, Christina Quarles has created a large-scale, un-stretched canvas that she placed in the first room. Wrapped around an entire wall, visitors walk through the painting which allows them to experience the act of crossing boundaries. The physical and psychological impact of confinement on the human figure is an important aspect of Quarles' practice. She has selected artworks from the collection of the National Gallery at Hamburger Bahnhof by Absalon, Vito Acconci, Stanley Broun, Daniel Buren, Annette Kelm, Nam Jun Paik, and Charlotte Posenenske. These works appear in close proximity to Quarles' paintings and drawings, and deal with similar issues of confinement in a visual and conceptual manner.

Large panels made of translucent fabric divide the exhibition rooms, revealing and obscuring the works of art behind them. Trapped within these barriers, the works, like the figures in Quarles' paintings, insist on remaining visible. They, like us, want to be seen and heard.

Christina Quarles was born into a multi-racial family, with a Black father and white mother. Due to her fair skin, she is often mis-identified as white. In her art, she explores the experience of having an identity that does not fit neatly into fixed categories. Through composition, patterned planes, and imaginative environments Quarles anchors and fragments her figures. The bodies that appear in her paintings are often contained within the limits of the canvas, or a pattern, but their confinement also propels them to connect with other figures and defy the boundaries they encounter.

The figures in Christina Quarles' paintings do not possess a fixed gender identity, age, or weight. They are seductive, yet somehow forbidding. Desire, sexuality, and gender identification are important parts of how we define ourselves, but intimacy in Quarles' work is not just about romance, it is also about family, grief, and the pain of not being seen for who you are. Her figures cannot be “read,” without the acknowledgement of these complexities.

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Christina Quarles discontinued the practice of including text on her stretched canvases following graduate school, because her painted language was often misinterpreted as a description of her images. For Quarles, painting on canvas relies on a movement that is mainly located in the scale of her shoulder span. But when she draws, she uses her “wrist scale.” The act of using a pen naturally leads her to writing. In her drawings, she translates song lyrics, phrases, and words, interpreting the text as she hears it.

Muscle memory is something that Christina Quarles uses in her painting. This means that when she starts working on a new painting, she tries to remember how her muscles usually move when her hands apply a certain shape on the canvas. When the figures start to appear, she photographs them and brings them into the computer. She then generates several patterns and planes that bisect the figures. This is how she creates new elements in the images that are not entirely based on how her hands and body move when she paints.

Now We're There (And We' Only Just Begun) is a large-scale painting installation that Christina Quarles has made especially for this exhibition. Composed of six individual canvas panels, this is the largest of four painting installations she has produced since 2016. Quarles wanted her installation to connect with the architecture of the exhibition galleries. The doorways in the wall above which her installation hangs echo the spaces of confinement and openness that appear in many of her works. This is another point of connection with other works shown in this exhibition by artists such as Vito Acconci and Absalon, from the collection of the National Gallery at Hamburger Bahnhof. The stripes that appear in the painting, as in many other works by Quarles, correspond to similar patterns that are seen in the work of other artists like Daniel Buren and Annette Kelm.

Christina Quarles and the curators of the exhibition wanted to make a strong connection between the images that appear in the artist's paintings and the physical spaces of the exhibition. To do so, they introduced an architectural component into the galleries that is made of gauze scrims, which divide the rooms into smaller segments. Gauze is a fabric that is used in theatre productions to hide and reveal actors and objects. Depending on how the light is projected on this fabric, it can be opaque or transparent. Like the lines and planes that confine, obscure, and cut through the figures in Quarles' paintings, the works of art in the exhibition appear and almost disappear behind the smoky scrims they are entrapped by.

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Absalon

1964 Aschdod, IL – 1993 Paris, FR

Solutions, 1992

video, colour, sound

7:50 Min.

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie
gift of the Friedrich Christian Flick Collection

In the video *Solutions* by Absalon, the artist appears in a white interior in which he persistently explores the possibilities of what his body can do in such a confined space. Is he incarcerated or has he intentionally retreated into self-isolation? In Quarles' paintings, too, figures often seem to struggle with components of interiors limiting the spaces they inhabit. We cannot help but wonder if they have chosen to withdraw into these spaces or were forced into a prison-like place.

Vito Acconci

1940 New York City, US – 2017 New York City, US

untitled, 1972

collage of 6 b/w photographs of a performance at documenta 5 in Kassel, 1972

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie
2002 purchased from Egidio Marzona

The figures in Quarles' paintings seem to be in constant search of a new connection to the spaces they inhabit. This series of photographs that document Vito Acconci's performance *Cross-Fronts* shown at documenta 5 in 1972, similarly reveal an exploration of the psychology of territory. A blindfolded Acconci performs a sequence of actions. The encounter with the space, which relies on senses other than vision, along with interventions from a live audience, extend the artist's comprehension of his limitations as a self-sufficient entity.

Stanley Brouwn

1935 Paramaribo, SR – 2017 Amsterdam, NL

Hotel, 1969

ballpoint pen on wood

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie
2002 purchased from Egidio Marzona

Many of the figures that we encounter in Quarles' paintings seem to be in a transitional state, both physically and temporally. They could have been part of something that has just happened or is about to occur. In conceptual artist Stanley Brouwn's early 1960s performance series "This Way Brouwn," he asked passers-by for directions that he then recorded on tape or made them draw. The hotel as a place of transit, like the former train station in which part of Hamburger Bahnhof is housed, can be seen as another condensation of this state of being in-between times and places.

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Nam June Paik

1932 Seoul, KR – 2006 Miami, US
Zen for TV, 1963/1990
TV and magnet
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie
1993 gift of Nam June Paik

Nam June Paik's Zen for TV, which he returned to and continued perfecting throughout his career, was born out of an accident when a TV set damaged during transport showed a singular, collapsed line across the center of its screen. With the TV flipped sideways, the now vertical line appears even more confined, restrained by the wide black bands that surround it on both sides. Similar to the insistence of Paik's line to escape the parameters of its container, Quarles' painted bodies are determined to resist the confines of identity and the spaces in which they exist. Paik's practice of playfully titling, such as Zen for TV, is echoed in almost all the titles chosen by Quarles for her paintings and works on paper.

Charlotte Posenenske

1930 Wiesbaden, DE – 1985 Frankfurt am Main, DE
Vier verzinkte Elemente Serie D, 1967
galvanised steel plate, 2 pieces
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie
2014 gift of Egidio Marzona

Like the sculptural oeuvre of Charlotte Posenenske, seriality and mechanization are important aspects in Christina Quarles' painting process that is based on the muscle memory acquired by drawing the human figure over and over. The work on view here by Posenenske is composed of two identical units that can be presented in any configuration. Placed next to each other, one lying on the floor and the other upright, they provide an unexpectedly body-like parallel to the isolation and intertwinement of figures that appear in many of Quarles' paintings.

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