



Duplicating, doubling, dividing: of sequences, images, utterances,  
“subjects.” Representation of the other of the projects of the one.  
Which he/she brings to light by displacing them.<sup>1</sup> –Luce Irigaray

In her intoxicating acrylic paintings, Christina Quarles (born 1985) tussles with culturally prescribed identities and probes those margins where meaning remains unfixed, illegible, and something composed in order to question. Quarles’s predominately female figures (although gender is mutable in her compositions) inhabit a world defined by their multiple positions and perspectives. About her work, she has stated, “As a queer, cis woman who is black but is often mistaken as white, I engage with the world from a position that is multiply situated.” Informed primarily by her own subjective experience in the world, her paintings manifest a prevailing sense of ambiguity, particularly in relation to race, gender, and human relationships.

**MATRIX 271** includes a selection of six paintings made over the past year or two, in addition to three new ones made for this exhibition. The works present bodies in a state of flux or transformation—nothing appears clear and everything is fluid. Quarles frequently arranges her subjects in space defining them in relation to the frame or edge of the canvas. Thus, the bodies are set in dynamic tension with their aesthetic inscription.

Often, she complicates the sense of internal space with floating horizontal planes, or perpendicular screens receding in space that the figures dive through or navigate around. As both technological signifiers and spatial dividers, these mimetic barriers exist for the bodies to resist, push up against, and flow through. Such is the case in *Moon (Lez Go Out N’ Feel Tha Nite)* (2017), where a lunar landscape rests within the composition. The stark outline of this moonlit scene and the sense in which it appears suspended in space suggests it could be a window, a virtual representation, or even a two-dimensional image hanging on the wall that the figures contemplate. Through these planar forms Quarles draws an analogy between painting and the lived body that exists in a socialized environment, where the divisions that serve to situate the bodies within the canvas double as social constructs—such as race—that pressurize and restrain the sense of being within one’s environment. Quarles compresses, stretches, or even multiplies her figures to defy the viewer’s attempts to fix them in time and place—they are invariably polymorphous. These are allegorical portraits of living in a body, rather than of specific bodies.

The jumbled, intertwined figures in Quarles’s paintings further double as signifiers for queer female sexuality, as many of them depict diverse amorous interludes. There are both implied and overt instances of eroticism in paintings such as in *June Gloom* (2017). In this work a strip of blue painter’s tape (painted, not actual) bisects the composition. Passing through this horizon line are two figures: one crouches down on her knees and slips her arm around the other, pulling her close, yet their faces are only intimated in profile, the second figure’s form implied through a few watery vertical and diagonal lines. As one critic has noted, “While Quarles’s figures are often engaged in erotic acts, the pleasure in which they luxuriate is tinged with the possibility of pain.”<sup>2</sup> This is evident in *Only Right Twice a Day* (2017), where one figure, with a monstrous shape of a head, seems to hold the other, who floats in a pool of striped pattern which itself seems suspended above the ground. Is

this recumbent subject alive or dead, floating or drowning? This scene could be either menacing or endearing, and what is actually transpiring is left up to the viewer’s imagination.

In *Small Offerings* (2017), a woman with long, perfectly combed brown hair rests her elbows on a table with her hands clasped beneath her chin, a sun radiating in the distance. Beneath the table (again defined by painted blue tape) another figure, vaguely defined, reaches out in an act of flirtation, laying a bouquet of flowers at the feet of her object of affection. Flowers are common motifs within Quarles’s paintings; as tropes of both domesticity and femininity, they are ripe for destabilizing. Quarles paints the bouquet of daisies with a glossy acrylic medium that gives the appearance of collage. As a result, the flowers appear to levitate off the surface of the canvas. Painted more solidly than her aqueous figures, the flowers provide an anchoring device for the figures. Hands and feet tend to be some of the most prominent and highly defined features of Quarles’s subjects, as seen in the foot on the left of the crouching figure in the foreground, which roots the body in space just along the bottom edge of the canvas. The artist explains this is because hands and feet are the parts of our body we know the most objectively from our own lived experience in the world, whereas the rest of our bodies are less impartially observed. The depiction of the right and left feet of this figure also illustrates the extent to which Quarles utilizes various painterly techniques throughout a given work, switching between abstraction and figuration: the left is defined with impasto and naturalistic features such as toenails, whereas the right is merely suggested through a transparent wash that visibly drips off the edge of the canvas.

As in many of her other paintings, both figures in *Small Offerings* seem to simultaneously inhabit interior and exterior space, making it difficult to demarcate their positions in space. This simultaneity, of being both inside and outside, prevents the viewer from pinpointing Quarles’s figures spatially, while also recalling painterly devices developed by the Cubists and Futurists. The figures inhabit multiple positions and states of being, as in *...Tha Color of Tha Sky (Magic Hour)* (2017), where four bodies bend and compress around each other in a particularly complex entanglement. The two figures on the right seem to inhabit an exterior landscape in a grassy pasture with a glowing setting sun, whereas the two on the left appear to occupy an interior space set in contrast to the aperture on the right. The division between interior and exterior space in this painting does not preclude interaction, however, as all four bodies push up against and meld into each other, seemingly occupying the same space: backs press up against one another and liquid limbs stretch out and reach around, across, and under others. The figures, especially the two on the right, are emphatically difficult to distinguish from one another, further throwing the subjects’ sense of autonomy into question. Is the tangle of limbs a representation of different individuals, or the same body shown in motion or different states of being and dress? This conundrum is at the very center of these paintings.

Throughout her work, Quarles explores the history and techniques of painting. Her use of gestural brushwork often conjures the paintings of Abstract Expressionists such as Willem de Kooning or Helen Frankenthaler, yet Quarles complicates this kind of easy assessment by abutting gestural marks with others that she masks out and tactilely defines. Style in her canvases may vary as much as technique: exposed raw canvas can be seen next to trompe l’oeil effects that appear next to

## Christina Quarles

MATRIX 271 SEPTEMBER 19–NOVEMBER 18, 2018

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM • PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE



## Checklist

*June Gloom*  
2017

Acrylic on canvas  
50 × 56 in.  
Collection of Jill Soloway

*Moon (Lez Go Out N' Feel Tha Nite)*  
2017

Acrylic on canvas  
50 × 40 in.  
Collection of Jorge Garcia

*Only Right Twice a Day*  
2017

Acrylic on canvas  
60 × 72 in.  
Collection of Edward Lee

*Our Eyes Our Open/  
Are Eyes Are Open*

2017  
Acrylic on canvas  
50 × 42 in.  
Private collection

*Small Offerings*

2017  
Acrylic on canvas  
48 × 60 in.  
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum  
and Pacific Film Archive, purchase made  
possible through a gift of an anonymous donor

*...Tha Color of Tha Sky (Magic Hour)*  
2017

Acrylic on canvas  
55 × 88 in.  
Courtesy of Rubell Family Collection, Miami

*We All We Are*

2018  
Acrylic on canvas  
60 × 48 in.  
Courtesy of the artist; Regen Projects,  
Los Angeles; and Pilar Corrias, London

*Din't Any Body Tell 'er  
(Din't Any Body See?)*

2018  
Acrylic on canvas  
55 × 62 in.  
Courtesy of the artist; Regen Projects,  
Los Angeles; and Pilar Corrias, London

*Are Hands, Are Tied  
(Our Hands, We Tried)*

2018  
Acrylic on canvas  
62 × 55 in.  
Courtesy of the artist; Regen Projects,  
Los Angeles; and Pilar Corrias, London



thin washes. In this sense, Quarles also plays with illusionistic devices that reveal themselves as such. “The different languages of rendering techniques and the material of paint exist in harmony and discord,” she has remarked, “coalescing in the illusion of a body in space and, simultaneously, the revelation of illusion as such.”<sup>3</sup> In this sense, Quarles is not only conceptually adept with her subject matter, but she is technically adept with her medium, knowingly deploying its historical markers and the expectations they activate.

Apsara DiQuinzio

CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART  
AND PHYLLIS C. WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR

## NOTES

- 1 Luce Irigaray, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985): pp. 15-16.
- 2 Wendy Vogel, review, “Christina Quarles: Miami,” *Art in America*, March 1, 2018. <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/christina-quarles/>
- 3 Email correspondence with the author.

CHRISTINA QUARLES / MATRIX 271 IS ORGANIZED BY APSARA DIQUINZIO, CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHYLLIS C. WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR, WITH MATTHEW COLEMAN, CURATORIAL ASSISTANT. THE MATRIX PROGRAM IS MADE POSSIBLE BY A GENEROUS ENDOWMENT GIFT FROM PHYLLIS C. WATTIS AND THE CONTINUED SUPPORT OF THE BAMPFA TRUSTEES. ADDITIONAL SUPPORT IS PROVIDED BY HOTEL SHATTUCK PLAZA.



## Biography

Born in 1985 in Chicago and raised in Los Angeles, Christina Quarles received her BA from Hampshire College in 2007 and her MFA from Yale University in 2016. Quarles has been featured recently in several notable museum exhibitions, including *Made in L.A. 2018* at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* at the New Museum, New York; and *Fictions* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. She has had solo and two-person exhibitions at Pilar Corrias Gallery, London; David Castillo Gallery, Miami; and Skibum MacArthur, Los Angeles. Additionally, she has shown work in group exhibitions at Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco; Cooper Cole Gallery, Toronto; Gagolian Gallery, Miami; Rubell Family Collection, Miami; Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles; and LAXART, Los Angeles, among others. The artist was a participant at the Skowhegan School for Painting and Sculpture in 2016 and was a 2017 resident at the Fountainhead Residency in Miami. She has been the recipient of several awards and grants including the Rema Hort Mann Emerging Artist Grant and the Robert Schoelkopf Fellowship at Yale University. *Christina Quarles / MATRIX 271* is her first solo museum exhibition. Quarles lives and works in Los Angeles; she is represented by Regen Projects, Los Angeles; and Pilar Corrias, London.

## Artist's Talk

Thursday , September 20, 6 p.m.

### FRONT

*Small Offerings*, 2017  
Photo: Jonathan Bloom.

### BACK

*...Tha Color of Tha Sky (Magic Hour)*, 2017

### LEFT

*June Gloom*, 2017

### ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT

*Only Right Twice a Day*, 2017

*Moon (Lez Go Out N' Feel Tha Nite)*, 2017

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